

Firebrand 31

Chapter 31: Taking Matters into Small Hands

Taking Matters into Small Hands

Martel left Maximilian's room in defeat. He could not rouse the mageknight. He went to his own room and sat down on his bed, thinking about his options. He could try to persuade the guards on his own, though the actors made that seem unlikely. Or he would have to free Regnar on his own. Lying back in his bed, Martel closed his eyes, thinking. He could scare street children or bullies with his magic, but hardened criminals? Doubtful. It would only work if he snuck his way in and out, avoiding a fight altogether.

Yawning, Martel became aware of feeling drowsy. The hour was late. His anxious energy from racing over here had gone, replaced by disappointment that he could not rouse Maximilian. He simply felt tired.

~

Martel woke by the ringing of the bell. It took him a moment to collect his thoughts. He lay on his bed in his clothes from yesterday. From his window, he saw twilight outside. It was morning. The bell that just rung had to be the first of the day.

He had fallen asleep. Regnar. The street children. His plan. Stars, he had messed up.

Martel jumped out of bed. He ran upstairs to reach Maximilian's room. The door unlocked, he barged in to find the snoring mageknight.

"Wake up! Maximilian!"

The acolyte blinked. "Hold your horses," he mumbled. "My head! Who is yelling at this unholy hour?"

"It's me. I need your help."

"Then you better lower your voice, Stars damn you." He reached out to grab a mug of ale on his drawer and emptied it.

"Sorry. But it's urgent. Every moment counts."

Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, Maximilian blinked a few times and gave him a groggy look. "What is it?"

"Someone's in danger. Regnar. He's been taken. I know how to find him." At least, Martel hoped he did. He sat down on the bed next to his friend. "I need your help to free him."

"Calm your goats, Nordmark," the acolyte mumbled. "Who is this fellow? I have never heard of him."

"He's a hedge mage. He works with the travelling troupe. You remember, we saw their play?"

Maximilian frowned, slowly processing the information. "What? Martel, how long have you known him?"

"Uh, a couple of days. That's hardly relevant."

"If he is in trouble, I would say that is hardly your concern."

"Look, I know where he is. Hopefully. But the city guards won't help someone like him. Not unless someone of rank tells them." Martel stared at him intently.

"He has been taken – you mean, abducted? What for?"

"Ransom."

The mageknight rubbed his temples with each hand. "Martel, imagine ten city guards come marching down the street to where he is held. One look at those uniforms, his captors will slit his throat and abscond."

"I hadn't thought of that." Martel slumped in his seat. "What – what about us? Can we do something?"

The acolyte glanced at the novice. "Mate, all respect, you are learning to make it rain. You are not exactly a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield."

"But you are. You could handle a couple of brigands with ease."

Maximilian stared at him a moment longer before his shoulders visibly relaxed. "True. I could."

"So help me. Please."

"Martel, next time, you let strangers sort out their own mess."

"But this time?"

Maximilian exhaled. "Well, we can take a look. If there are not more bandits than I can handle... It might be a little interesting. The trouble with sparring is you are not allowed to really hurt the other person. It makes it tame."

"Oh, sure." Martel did not quite agree, but whatever convinced Maximilian.

The mageknight reached out to grab his sword belt; apparently he had taken it off during the night and thrown it on the floor. "Let us find this hedge mage of yours."

~

Led by Martel, the pair went to the alleyway where he had recruited the street children the previous night.

"Hello," Martel called out, waiting.

Maximilian glanced around, hands holding his belt. "Strange friends you got."

The boy appeared. "Thought you'd be back last night."

"Yeah, sorry," Martel mumbled. "We got held up. We're ready now."

"Our coin?"

Martel dug out the silver and gave it to the boy.

"Let's go. We got the house. Badger watches the front, and Mouse is in the back."

"Colourful company," Maximilian grunted.

Following the urchin, they moved south to reach the harbour district. Down one street, the street boy suddenly raised his hand. "Stop. There's the house ahead. The hovel with the red-painted door." To Martel's eyes, it looked an ordinary house, if rather worn. They were at the edge of the district near the city wall, far from the main streets and richer neighbourhoods. Their guide gave a loud whistle, and another boy appeared. "Any traffic?"

Badger, who looked to be seven or eight, shook his head. "Not seen any come in or out."

"Let's check with Mouse."

They circled back and approached the house from a different angle, this time reaching the alleyway behind. It looked as dirty and dark as any in the city, with refuse piling up. Far ahead, a man stood leaned up against a house wall. Again, the small street boy whistled.

A girl appeared, as thin and dirty as the others. "Hey, chief."

"What you seen?"

"Nothing since we got here."

"The man with the coin, the one we first followed," Badger interjected, "I think I seen him upstairs. Lying down to sleep."

"Is he guarding our house in question?" Maximilian asked, his voice sounding even deeper when compared to the children. He nodded at the man in the alleyway.

"Yeah," the small chief said, "but they got someone on the upper floor watching the street through the window, so that way in isn't better."

Martel thought about Maximilian's words of what would have happened if the city guard came marching down the street. "Well, we can't go through the back. That guy will yell and alert the others."

"We will have to risk it," the mageknight declared. "Assuming we do this. How many are inside?"

"I've seen two fellows upstairs as said," Badger explained.

"With that guy standing guard that makes three in all, but him I will take out first," Maximilian contemplated. "Even with a few more, I am not worried about those odds." He stretched his shoulders. "I am ready."

"There may be a smarter way," said the street boy. "We can lure that guard away. You can slip in unnoticed. At least that'll let you surprise anyone inside."

"How?" Martel asked.

The boy smiled. "Leave that to us. Question is, you got the coin?"

The novice looked at Maximilian. "I don't have a single penny."

Grumbling, the mageknight found some copper coins and a piece of silver from somewhere in his tunic. "This better be worth it, you little rascals."

Accepting the money, the little chief grinned. "Badger, go ahead."

From afar, they watched the urchin stroll down the alleyway. Just as he walked past the guard, he threw a rock into the man's crotch. The latter bent over with an exclamation, grunting in pain, before he straightened up and ran after Badger.

Maximilian and Martel exchanged looks. "Time to go."

~

Carefully, Maximilian opened the backdoor with his blade drawn. It opened into the ground floor of the house, looking like most of such old homes in Morcaster did, built before the rise of the insulae. All one room, it had a fireplace in the middle for heat and cooking food with benches around, and a table in one end provided a place to eat. No sign of Regnar.

"Upstairs?" Martel whispered, looking at the stairs. Mentally, he prepared himself in case he had to fight.

Maximilian shook a finger and pointed at a hatch next to the table in the room. "Why is the cellar locked?" he asked quietly.

They shuffled over. Martel bent down to grab the padlock. "The guys upstairs must have the key."

Maximilian reached down to push Martel's hand aside. His look became intense for a moment before he ripped the lock straight off the hatch with his empowered strength. "I unlocked it," he remarked. He pulled it open and walked down the stairs into the cellar.

Martel followed straight behind him, igniting a flame in his hand for light. It was much like the storage room at his home in Engby, allowing a cold space for storing food. Dusty shelves filled the walls, holding a few jars. An empty barrel in the corner. And chained with his hands over his head against the opposite wall, Regnar sat.

The pair hurried over. Martel held out his hand, illuminating the hedge mage. His face was bloody and beaten. A thin chain ran down to lock his hands in manacles before going through a rusty ring on the wall.

"Boy, you shouldn't have come," Regnar whispered to Martel.

Maximilian gripped the rusty ring with one hand and pulled to no effect. "What?" he mumbled. He pulled again, straining himself.

"It's gold," Regnar explained, jangling his chain. "Our magic is useless. But my pin. Give me my boot! The left one." He stretched his chained hands down towards his left leg, showing his inability to reach.

"Your boot?" Martel asked confused.

"Yes, hurry, boy!"

Martel pulled the hedge mage's left boot off, unleashing a powerful stench that made him recoil his head. "What now?" he asked as he placed it in Regnar's hands.

"Lads, come on down in the basement!" a cold voice rang out. "We got company."

Regnar's eyes widened in fear. Maximilian and Martel turned around, the former raising his blade. In the other end of the cellar stood a large, one-eyed berserker, blocking the door while hefting a gruesome war hammer in his hands.

Chapter 32: Gold, Steel, and Magic

Gold, Steel, and Magic

Even in the frail light of his flickering flame, Martel recognised the one-eyed berserker in front of them. And his hammer. The first time he and Maximilian had spent time together, they had watched the Tyrian take down an experienced mageknight. Now, his opposition consisted of an acolyte, a novice, and a hedge mage chained in gold.

Maximilian pointed his blade at the berserker. "Walk away. We are armed with magic besides steel." Next to him, Martel tried to make his little flame look more intimidating. Unlike previous situations, it did not seem to work.

The Tyrian laughed. "Regnar, always getting others embroiled in your misfortune. Do your little friends know the reason for your predicament?"

The hedge mage dropped the boot in his hands. "I'm sure you can't wait to tell them."

Down the ladder came two more, accomplices of the berserker, who spoke again. "He and I used to work together. I fought in arenas for large prizes, and from the audience, old Regnar gave me a helping hand, and I always won."

"You cheated," Maximilian exclaimed.

"Then came the biggest fight. Me against five others, proven warriors. Prize money of a hundred crowns. And when it started, Regnar lay drunk in a ditch. All I got for my troubles was this." The berserker pointed at the scar that ran across his blind eye.

"Bjarki," the hedge mage spoke, "you got me. You'll have your gold and your revenge. Let the kids go."

The Tyrian shook his head. "If an apple falls in my hand, why should I throw it away?"

"I'm sorry about your gold and your eye," Martel meekly said. "We'll pay the ransom you want."

Bjarki laughed heartily. "The ransom! That was just to tap some money from those fools our friend travelled with. Passing the time waiting until our ship's departure."

"What ship?" asked Maximilian.

"To Sindhu," Regnar explained. "They're going to sell me."

"The Sindhians have slaves?" Martel asked.

"No, but they are masters of alchemy. And they can harvest a lot of magical ingredients from a mage," Bjarki explained. "What luck that we will have not one, but three mages to sell. Boys, take them alive!"

~

The berserker went against Maximilian, the only one who seemed a threat. His two henchmen approached Martel with drawn blades.

Flight was impossible. He already stood with his back against the wall, and the thugs blocked the way to the stairs. They wore sinister smiles. "Surrender, and we won't hurt you," one of them claimed.

Martel reached out with his magic. Everything on the shelves came flying through the air. Jars of clay and glass smashed against the bandits.

They cursed loudly, raising their arms to protect their heads. "You little bastard," one of them cried, swinging his sword wildly. He leapt forward, raising his blade for a deadly blow with no sign of capturing the novice alive anymore.

Staring death in the face, Martel reacted on instinct. He raised one hand in front of himself and called upon what lay in him. A stream of fire shot out.

It hit the bandit in the chest. It did not contain the power to kill or even scorch him as such, but it set his clothes on fire. Screaming, he dropped his sword and stumbled backwards, smashing his hands against himself to quell the flames.

"Even a dead mage is worth something." The other bandit, rubbing his head where a jar had mashed against him, cautiously moved towards Martel with malicious eyes.

The novice raised his hand towards him and tried to repeat his feat. The flames appeared around his hand, but not in a burst as before. The magic obeyed his instinct, but not his will. The thug advanced, readying his sword. Fear taking hold of him, Martel retreated until his back stood against the wall.

~

Maximilian stepped to the side, avoiding the berserker's hammer yet again. It came swinging with such force, it would shatter bone if it broke through the mageknight's magical shield.

With a curse aimed at the short reach of his sword, Maximilian failed his riposte. The hammer's long haft constantly forced him on the retreat, as he lacked a physical shield to withstand the blows, which left him out of range to strike back. His empowering magic meant little if he could not come close enough to land a blow.

The mageknight avoided another attack; meanwhile, one of the bandits ran screaming past with his clothes on fire, hurrying up the ladder.

Maximilian grabbed the nearest shelf and pulled it off the wall. Using it as a club, he struck against the berserker's head. The latter easily evaded, but it bought Maximilian a moment to get in close and thrust his sword into Bjarki's leg. Immediately, the ground below the berserker's boots cracked, and a shimmer of magic rushed up from the dirt floor to fortify the wound.

Smiling, the Tyrian smashed the blunt end of his hammer into Maximilian's face. Blood gushed out from his nose. As the mageknight staggered back, he found no further room to retreat or evade the oncoming attack. The berserker raised his war hammer, runes glowing upon the steel, to land a crushing blow.

~

Martel stood with both hands wreathed in flames, trying to look intimidating. It did not work against the thug with his sword, who seemed to relish Martel's fear. Beyond, he could see the berserker prepare his hammer to smash Maximilian to the ground.

A click could be heard. Holding a pin between his fingers, Regnar's golden manacles fell from his wrists. He pointed one hand at Maximilian, mumbling something.

As Bjarki's hammer fell with force to shatter Maximilian's ribcage, it met resistance. Magic shimmered to soften the blow.

Meanwhile, Regnar kicked out his leg to hit the thug on the ankle, distracting him. Martel seized the opportunity to grab the brigand's arms, setting his sleeves on fire. Screaming and losing his weapon, he fell to the ground, rolling around.

Rising to his feet, the hedge mage moved his hand to point at Bjarki. As he spoke incantations, the berserker staggered backwards. His mouth open, he looked to be gasping for breath. Maximilian cut him across the chest, which earned the mageknight a punch to his jaw in retaliation, making him stumble backwards.

Still looking like a man drowning, Bjarki strode across the room. Grabbing Regnar by the collar, he thrust him back into the wall. The hedge mage sank to the ground next to his unlocked chains, groaning, and the berserker breathed freely again as the spell broke.

From the side, Martel grabbed Bjarki's left arm with flaming hands. Sneering, the berserker slapped the novice with his other hand, using enough force to send the boy to the ground.

Regnar and Martel dealt with for now, Bjarki turned back towards Maximilian. Raising his hammer, he struck out to hit the mageknight's blade, sending it across the floor.

Maximilian launched himself against the berserker to wrestle against him. In such close quarters, Bjarki could not use his hammer. He dropped it and grabbed the mageknight with his inhuman strength, lifting him into the air. One hand on Maximilian's collar, the other closed around his throat and began to squeeze.

Behind Bjarki, Martel watched his friend being suffocated. Maximilian's eyes bulged, filled with pain and dread. Next to the novice, Regnar still groaned, all but incapacitated and of no further aid.

With sadistic delight on his face, the berserker continued to squeeze the life out of Maximilian. "To Helriki with the money," he whispered. "Been too long since I killed someone."

From behind, a golden chain came flying over Bjarki's head to wrap around his throat, and Martel pulled to tighten it. Besides the immediate threat to his air supply, the gold sapped the berserker's magic. Bereft of his inhuman strength and struggling to breathe, he dropped Maximilian.

Fury on his face, the mageknight made a fist. With all his empowering magic behind it, Maximilian struck the berserker straight on the chin. And again.

Clawing at the chain, Bjarki tried desperately to free himself. His boots struck against the ground, but no magic came to fortify him against Maximilian's onslaught. Punch after punch, magically enforced, battered his face. Finally, he went down.

~

Quickly, Martel closed the golden manacles around the berserker's wrists before he came to. Both the henchmen had fled the cellar by this point. Rubbing his head, Regnar got on his feet. "My fellows, that was unexpected." He broke into a smile. "I owe you my life. Thank you, both."

"If I had known this guy would be here, honestly, I would have left you on your own," Maximilian admitted. After a moment, they all broke into relieved laughter.

"What do we do now?" Martel asked.

"We hand this overgrown peach over to the city guard," the mageknight declared. "I shall explain what happened. They will not doubt the word of a viscount."

"Useful," Regnar mumbled.

The sounds of footsteps upstairs reached them, and they all became quiet. "What's all this racket?" asked a voice, and a man came jumping down the stairs. It was the last of the thugs, who had been lured away by the street children.

He stared around the cellar for a moment before the pommel of Maximilian's sword sent him to the ground.

~

Hours later, Martel and Regnar walked onto the square with the travelling theatre. Maximilian had stayed with the city guards, explaining matters to the official and ensuring the berserker was taken properly into custody, golden chains and all.

"I should get back to the school. But your friends will be happy to see you returned," Martel spoke.

"If nothing else because they can't replace me," Regnar laughed. As he continued, his voice became serious. "Thank you again, lad. You stuck your neck out for someone you've only known a few days. I can never repay you. As little as my life is worth, I own even less." He laughed again.

"You needed help. Someone had to do it."

"An admirable attitude, though also rare, I fear."

"Well, if you feel grateful, anything you could teach me about magic..." Martel said hopefully.

Regnar smiled. From his pocket, he dug out his pipe and ignited the herb inside it. "These Asterian mages in their big school don't think like I do. You walk their path, Martel, not mine. But I will tell you this." He took a drag on his pipe, releasing smoke. "They'll teach your mind how to shape magic. But you have strong instincts, boy. Magic is not your servant like it is theirs, but it can be your friend in ways it will never be theirs."

"I'm not sure what that means," Martel admitted.

Barking laughter came from the hedge mage. "Good. Genuine wisdom is always confusing. If in doubt, Martel, trust your blood over your brain." He began walking towards the stage, but stopped to look over his shoulder. "On Manday is our last performance, and we always finish with a new play. Stop by and bring your friends. You got free admission." He smiled, winked, and continued on his way.

~

Walking past the gates to the Lyceum, Martel felt starved. He had not eaten all day, he realised, and the water clock in the entrance hall said fifth bell. Too late for lunch, and two hours to go before supper.

The clerks manning the desks stared at him as he walked by, but Martel was too hungry to care. He turned right towards his room; he was also deprived of rest, and if he could sleep for a few hours, it would make the wait for supper easier.

Walking past the workshop, the sounds of people at work reached him as usual. Only then did Martel remember; today was Solday when he had the task of assisting the artificer.

Guilt and embarrassment slithered over him. He had a good reason for his absence, but would it matter? Only one way to find out.

Turning right, Martel entered the workshop. He passed through the outer rooms until he found Master Jerome etching runes on a stone tablet. He cleared his throat.

Looking up, the artificer frowned. "Martel? You are rather late, boy. I must impress on you the importance of fulfilling your duties if you wish to finish your years at... what's that on your face?"

Martel's hand slid over his cheek, which felt hot and sore. It took him a moment to remember that Bjarki had slapped him, apparently with quite some force.

Jerome rose from his workbench. "What happened to you, boy?"

"Well, master, I've had a bit of a day."

Chapter 33: Staying Grounded

Staying Grounded

His face still sore, Martel applied Eleanor's balm to his cheek as the first thing when he woke up, just as he had done yesterday when coming home. Relief came quickly and he sank back into bed, dozing for a while longer. Thankfully, his kitchen duties on Pelday lay at lunchtime, not breakfast.

He wolfed down a hearty meal an hour later and went to his first elemental lesson of the day. Compared to learning water, his first foray into magic, Martel found earth far more amenable. It responded to his attempts straight away, even if he could not exert much control over it. He thought about yesterday, making jars fly through the cellar. In comparison, his magic felt clumsy and inadequate now. Unfortunately, he could not recreate the circumstances from yesterday that allowed his power to flow so intuitively; he would have to learn control over earth the slow way. Still, Master Alastair seemed satisfied with his progress.

~

After lunch, an ominous note awaited Martel in the entrance hall.

See me immediately.

Mistress Juliana

Anxiety clumped together in Martel's stomach immediately. Not daring to disobey, he headed towards the faculty chambers. Soon after, he knocked on Mistress Juliana's door.

"Enter."

Martel found the room as before, furnished with books and the occasional item of curiosity. Setting aside a bunch of parchments, the overseer turned her chair around to look at him.

"Sit."

He did so.

"Martel, I hear you were involved in a brawl in the city. Maximilian of Marche has already told me the details."

"Well, yes." Martel was unsure what he was meant to say.

"With a Tyrian berserker, of all things. And this part I found hard to believe, but to assist a hedge mage you barely know, who had been taken by these thugs?"

"That sounds about right."

"What were you thinking?" Her stern eyes pierced into him like arrows.

"They were going to kill him, most likely. He needed help."

"So you went against a berserker? Martel, I have seen such warriors charge a whole regiment of legionaries on their own. Do you understand how reckless this behaviour is?"

"It wasn't our intention," Martel protested. "I meant to get the city guard. When that wouldn't work, we meant to sneak in and get Regnar out. The Tyrian surprised us."

"Regardless, your task is to study magic. Not get involved in abductions! No wonder you found yourself in over your head."

"Have I broken any school rules?" Martel was not going to feel guilty for helping someone.

"No, since you have not been found guilty of instigating the brawl." The overseer regarded him with her strict expression. "But you are lucky that bruise is all you got. A worse injury could have cost you an eye or a limb. Or kept you bedridden for months, unable to continue your studies."

"I'll thank my Stars that didn't happen."

"If a student's activities in the city are found to be disruptive, it is within my remit to ban them from leaving school grounds," Mistress Juliana continued.

"Someone was in need. I helped. I didn't mean to fight anyone, and I don't intend to do so again," Martel defended himself. "We didn't even know the berserker was a part of it all."

The overseer stared at him for a long moment. "I will refrain from such drastic measures for now. On the assumption that this does not happen again."

Martel did not imagine Morcaster had more than one kidnapping ring led by a Tyrian berserker selling Asterian mages to Sindhian alchemists as reagents. "It won't."

~

The meeting over, Martel found a quiet spot in the western courtyard and sat down. With a bit of distance to yesterday's events, he re-examined the whole fight as he remembered it. He did not recall thinking while it all unfolded; he had either been gripped by emotion, mostly fear, or acted on instinct. And once it had been over, relief had flooded him, excluding other feelings. Would he do it

again, now that he knew the risk? Martel could not say. But the encounter had left him with questions.

His second lesson with Master Alastair proved a good opportunity for answers. Working with the earth in the Hall of Elements, Martel glanced at his teacher. "Master, I saw something strange."

"Yes?"

"I don't know if you've heard, but, well, I encountered a Tyrian berserker yesterday."

"Half the school knows. The other half will by tomorrow." Master Alastair gave him a stern look reminiscent of the overseer. "I hope you have learned some caution from all this."

"Definitely," Martel claimed, not really sure if he had. "But I noticed something. Where he walked, the ground itself cracked underneath his boots, and even he can't have weighed that much. He seemed to gain power somehow from it, fighting better."

"I'm hardly an expert on Tyrian magic," Alastair admitted, "but their berserkers have some connection to the earth itself, it's true. They draw might from it, which would explain their enormous strength." His expression turned wry. "I once saw a berserker charge a regiment of legionaries on her own."

Martel frowned. That sounded familiar. "Mistress Juliana said the same thing."

"Probably because we saw the same thing."

"You did? How, when?"

"Mistress Juliana was a mageknight. Didn't you know?"

Martel could barely imagine it. "I thought she'd always been the overseer."

Master Alastair laughed. "No. She was my protector for several years back in our army days."

"Protector?"

"All battlemages have a mageknight assigned to keep them alive. We make a tempting target on the battlefield, after all."

"Right." Martel thought about Maximilian in the fight yesterday, keeping the berserker's attention.

Master Alastair's smile faded. "Mages face many dangers in general, it seems. Stay out of trouble in the future, Martel. You won't be so lucky next time."

"I'll be mindful of that," the novice claimed.

"Very well. Enough about berserkers. You have your own earth magic to practise."

~

When Martel entered the dining hall for supper, he assumed people stared for the usual reasons, or perhaps due to his giant bruise. Seeing the students stick their heads together, whispering, he realised it was something else. He could not see Maximilian, so he collected his meal and sat down at an empty table.

To his surprise, a handful of others soon joined him. He glanced at them, meeting their fervent stares, which only made him feel disconcerted. "Hullo."

"Is it true?" asked an acolyte in the robes of a watermage. "Did you strangle a berserker with your bare hands?"

Martel looked down at his slender fingers. "Of course not. How could I ever do that?" He did not notice their disappointment at his answer and simply continued, "I used a chain."

Excitement spread across the table. "I knew it! I told you, Maximilian of Marche does not lie," a mageknight declared.

"So you killed a Tyrian berserker?"

"No, just choked him until he fainted." Martel took bites of his food in between answers. "No need to kill him once he was down."

"Weren't you afraid?"

"Uh, I guess. I didn't have much time to think. He had his hand around Maximilian's throat, suffocating him."

"Huh, Maximilian did not mention that," the water acolyte remarked.

"Did he give you that?" A novice pointed at Martel's face.

"Yeah, he gave me a good smack. Sent me to the floor."

The other students continued a spirited discussion of fearsome berserkers, dastardly Tyrians, and magical fights. When he first arrived, Martel would have been overjoyed to have others seek out his company this way. Now, he felt out of place. Their interest revolved around something he had done, or rather, how they imagined it. An exciting fight against a villainous foreigner. But recalling Maximilian's face as Bjarki squeezed the life out of him, Martel felt uncomfortable about their enthusiasm and thus their company. He finished his meal quickly and made his departure.

"Martel, wait a moment," someone called to him as he left the hall.

Looking over his shoulder, Martel waited as Eleanor caught up to him; some snickered at seeing the attractive acolyte follow after the gangly novice.

Together, they walked down the corridor. "Maximilian told me about yesterday."

"Where is he? I haven't seen him all day."

"He has been busy between the infirmary for his broken nose, sorting this out with the city guard and the inquisitors, and telling the story to everyone at school," Eleanor related. "It is true then?"

"Yeah." Martel's fingers ran over his bruise.

"Why would you do this?" She reached out to grab his arm, making him stop. "Risk your life for someone you barely know?"

"I knew him well enough. He showed me kindness, treated me as a friend." Martel cleared his throat. "He's a wanderer without family, no roots. His other friends couldn't or wouldn't do anything. There was only me."

"That is not enough reason to put yourself in such danger."

"A man was saved, and a monster stopped," he retorted. "You can't make me regret that."

"Martel, you cannot risk life and limb like this!"

"Between Mistress Juliana, Master Alastair, and now you, I understand the message," Martel said, sounding a little more irritated than he meant. She let go of his arm. "Look, I didn't mean to get into a fight with a giant beef of a man who wanted to chop us up and sell us for parts. But what's the point of learning magic if we just stand aside when needed?"

She slowly exhaled. "You cannot help anybody if you are dead. At least, ask for advice the next time." She quickly added, "From somebody other than Maximilian, who has the survival instinct of a slug in a salt mine."

Martel could not help but laugh a little. "Alright. I'll remember that. Hey, the theatre troupe are doing another play on Manday eve. Want to go?"

She gave half a smile. "Sure. I will come along."

~

Watching the sun slip below the horizon from his window, Martel enjoyed the quietude. The Lyceum alone had more people than Engby, and with the spring faire, Morcaster felt packed. With recent events added to that, Martel felt satiated for now. Sometimes, he appreciated having his own room even more than learning magic.

With regards to the latter, it was too early for sleep; Martel could get a good hour of practice in. He had a few pebbles and a penny for that purpose to strengthen his earth powers; especially metal was a good challenge, as Master Alastair had explained, requiring stronger magic to control than simple dirt did.

But as had happened before, Martel felt tempted to practise something else. He remembered Regnar's words to him, of magic being a friend rather than a servant. He thought about how his powers had defeated the two bandits, yet been too weak to hurt the berserker.

He had to grow stronger. He had to trust what lay in his blood. Concentrating, Martel summoned a flame between his hands and watched it burn brighter and brighter.

Chapter 34: Shared Spoils

Shared Spoils

At breakfast, the same spectacle happened as last night's supper. Once Martel had taken a seat, novices and acolytes alike filled the table. A few asked eager questions of Martel, but his curt responses curtailed their inquisitive behaviour; he was not in the mood to relive the events.

"Move over." Maximilian's words made several of the students hurry to make room for him, allowing him to sit opposite Martel.

"Maximilian, how was it to fight a berserker?" someone asked.

"Quiet," the mageknight growled. He looked at Martel. "I got something for you." He pulled out a heavy purse and threw it with a thud onto the table. "Your share, Nordmark."

"My share? Of what?"

"We apprehended a dangerous criminal." Maximilian grinned. "One with magical powers, even. A reward is only suitable."

The other students stared with envious looks, but none of them dared speak.

"Return the purse to me when you can," the mageknight continued. "It is my third-best."

"Sure. How is your nose?"

"I could not be more thrilled," Maximilian claimed.

"How so?"

"Now I have a great story whenever someone asks me how I broke my nose."

~

Counting the coins, Martel found himself thirty silvers richer. One afternoon of danger had yielded the same payment as thirty bells of work. He saw the appeal.

When his second combat lesson arrived, he tossed the purse back to Maximilian. "Thanks," the mageknight grinned. "Satisfied with your plunder?"

"It's more coin than I've ever owned," Martel admitted.

"A poor peasant, what a surprise," Cheval jeered.

Nobody laughed. Martel slowly turned his head to look at him. He could not fathom why he had ever been afraid of the acolyte. Some rain and mud had been enough to defeat him. Martel knew that if it ever came to a fight, he would torch the mageknight.

Cheval met his withering gaze for a moment before he made a sneering sound and walked away.

With a faint smile, Martel looked at Maximilian again. "The players are giving a new performance on Manday. We are invited."

"Why not? We deserve a good show."

A displeased voice cut through. "If you have time to stand around, you have missed the point of this class." Reynard entered the gymnasium. "Fetch your weapons and get to training."

"Have you heard, master?" said one mageknight. "Maximilian here defeated a Tyrian berserker."

"I did." Their teacher nodded at Maximilian. "A noteworthy feat."

Despite being overlooked, Martel decided not to speak up. Choosing his battles, this was an unnecessary one; he did not need any more attention or acknowledgement than he already received, least of all from Reynard.

"You should all take heed. The enemy is not only at our border, but in this very city. Tyrians, Khivans, they fill our streets with violence, undermining us from within," the Master of War continued.

Martel clenched his fists. He caught Eleanor's gaze, and she shook her head at him. He did not take her hint. "Yet the Tyrian had three accomplices, Asterians all," the novice spoke up.

"Criminal scum," Reynard replied, his eyes moving over his students. "No surprise they threw their lot in with a Tyrian. Thankfully, good and decent citizens outnumber these brigands many times over."

"So all Tyrians are criminals, but Asterian criminals are just a few bad apples," Martel considered. "How convenient."

The teacher glanced at the novice with an overbearing look. "I am not surprised a half-blood has trouble understanding. Now, get your weapons and start practising. As for you, weather boy, stay out of my way. I am tired of wasting time on you."

~

His classes done, Martel had two errands in town. His purse heavy with silver, he kept it tight in his grip as he moved through the crowd of both customers and peddlers hawking their goods. Avoiding offers of food and drink, clothes of every kind, and cures for all ailments under the sun, Martel made his way through the market district. Approaching the harbour quarter, he entered a particular alleyway.

This time, the children appeared before he even spoke, and they did not have their hands ready to draw weapons.

"I'm here to pay you your share," Martel told them.

"For what?" asked the boy that acted as their chief.

"A dangerous criminal was captured, and we got a reward." He counted out fifteen silver coins.

"These are for you." He placed them in the urchin's hands, who could barely contain them all.

The boy's eyes widened before they regained their hard edge. "You're alright. For a longshanks." The other children gathered around, staring at the money.

Martel imagined that was the greatest compliment he could receive from these children. "Thanks. If I ever need criminals watched, I know where to go."

"I'll find one for you right now," Badger suggested. "Or two! Three!"

"Of course, our price will go up," the chief added. "After all, we've proven that we're worth it." His companions clamoured in agreement, and Martel chuckled as he left them.

~

Martel's other errand took him across the harbour, full of sailors now that spring allowed ships from Sindhu to reach Morcaster, before he reached the Khivan enclave. Here and there, he saw small groups of drunks, clearly enjoying the spring faire; notably, they were Asterians, and he wondered why they would come to the Khivan quarter, which neither held their homes nor the festivities.

They all eyed him suspiciously, a few throwing remarks after him, which he ignored; he could barely understand their slurred words anyway. He reached the watchmaker's shop and knocked. From a window upstairs, Shadi's head appeared.

"Martel! I'm sorry, I don't think my dad will let me go out tonight."

"That's alright. Honestly, my legs are tired. I've crossed half of Morcaster and back."

She leaned out further, looking at his face in the waning sunlight. "What happened?" she exclaimed.

He ran his fingers over his bruise. "It's a funny story. Or not funny, but if you let me in, I'll tell you all about it."

Chapter 35: The Rooster and the Egg

The Rooster and the Egg

Glunday passed with little excitement; as Manday came around, it promised to be eventful. It was the end of the spring faire. Besides the final revelry, the travelling players would perform their last play. But first, Martel had two lessons in theory of magic. The second of these could be a drag to get through, consisting of practical exercises to improve their magical endurance, but Martel looked forward to the first class of the day; every time, he learned about things he could never have imagined, and while the world seemed a little more frightening afterwards, it also felt more wondrous.

~

As soon as Master Fenrick entered the classroom, Martel raised his hand. "Master, I have a question."

"Ask away."

"Why is our magic different from what Tyrians do? Why isn't it the same?"

"A sensible question," Master Fenrick assented. "What could be the reason, do you think?"

"Well, a berserker uses the same magic here as he would in Tyria, so it's not about the place," Martel considered.

"Because they're different from us, barbarians," a novice declared. "Different blood."

"Yet children with Tyrian blood have no difficulty mastering magic the Asterian way," Master Fenrick countered, looking at Martel's blue eyes. "And our ways are simply what is remembered of the Archean ways."

"It's how we learn?" Martel suggested. "Our traditions are different."

The teacher nodded. "I believe so. You recall my lesson on humans having soul, mind, and body? To the Tyrians, there is no division. To them, it is like a man claiming he can walk across the river, as long as all water has been drained first. The river is the water, and the water is the river."

Several of the novices frowned or looked dismissive. Martel did not, digesting the words. He had the feeling that perhaps they contained a grain of wisdom; it was a different understanding of magic compared to the Asterian approach, intellectual and analytical. Martel recalled Regnar's words of using magic by instinct rather than will.

"But we know it's true," another novice argued. "You told us about the undead, and how they lack one of the three parts."

"Undead created by Asterian magic," Master Fenrick countered. "Recall that we cannot use the magic of the mind or the soul, like the Archeans did, who knew powerful curses or splendid illusions. No mage born in Aster has succeeded in using magic born of the mind to affect the mind. Yet the Tyrian bards, or skalds, have songs that will make friends turn on each other, seeing an enemy where their brother should be."

"Really?" Martel exclaimed. "By singing?"

Master Fenrick nodded. "Galdr, they call it. Why do you think the Asterian legions stay south of the Frosten River? Imagine a regiment on patrol in the great forests of Tyria. A song reaches their ears from somewhere unseen, and they slaughter each other."

"My father says that the barbarians have nothing we want except mud hovels and dirty hides," a novice declared with an overbearing voice.

"It is true that little would be gained from conquest," Master Fenrick conceded. "Yet we tried, ninety years ago, seeking to punish them for their raids and subdue them. Three legions crossed the Frosten River. Only a few hundreds returned from the deep woods of Tyria." The teacher smiled ominously. "Close your ears if a Tyrian skáld begins to sing."

~

Seats on the front bench awaited Martel and his friends as they arrived at the theatre. Fortunate as well, as the square had filled up. As the last play of the faire, and rumoured to be a special one, the audience had come in droves.

"Where is your Khivan touch?" asked Maximilian.

"Her father wouldn't let her attend," Martel explained.

"Hah, he does not trust your intentions, I wager," the mageknight laughed.

"Or he is worried about the groups of drunkards that go looking for trouble in the Khivan quarter," Eleanor remarked.

"Right, fair point."

Martel listened to their exchange with rising concern. He remembered the other night, being accosted verbally by a few drunks as he walked through the Khivan enclave. He had given it no further thought, considering how intoxicated people acted; then again, they had shown him little interest, and he did not look Khivan.

His thoughts were interrupted by the storyteller appearing on stage. "Tonight, good folk of Morcaster, we have a particular delight for you, sure to tickle your theatrical palate. Never shown before, I have no doubt you will enjoy The Dinner of King Rooster!"

An actor strode onto the stage, dressed as a rooster with a crown. People laughed, as did Martel; yet next to him, he heard Eleanor softly say, "Oh dear."

~

The play continued for an hour, parading a number of animals dressed in pompous clothes and jewellery. They strutted around on the stage half the time; the other half, they ate a lavish feast. One actor, dressed as a pig, pretended to eat another pig wearing poor men's clothes. All the while, they had a lengthy conversation, which Martel did not really grasp, but it had to be funny because people laughed.

At one point, the rooster king lay an egg, which Martel did find hilarious, considering only hens did that. The egg was swaddled and taken off-stage, only to return, in a manner of speaking; an actress dressed as a giant chicken, still with eggshells around her body, leapt onto the stage.

When it finally ended, the audience was in tears of laughter, and many threw pennies onto the stage. Martel preferred the play about Roland, but since admission had been free, he was not about to

complain. He looked at his two companions. "That was pretty fun, I suppose. I never could have imagined a story about animals having a dinner," he chuckled.

Eleanor stared at him. "Martel, it was a satire."

"A – a satyr? I thought they were just dressed as animals."

"No, they were making fun of people. The rooster with the crown is the emperor. The egg that came out of him is the Khivan war. That is why the chicken made a mess of everything and refused to leave," Eleanor explained patiently.

"Really?" Maximilian interjected. "I thought the egg was about the rumour of the emperor's constipation. Well, the sheep was definitely the war minister." He snorted. "Bit funny, I admit."

"Are they going to be in trouble?" Martel asked concerned. He did not feel confident he could do much if Regnar was hauled to the dungeons.

Eleanor looked around. "I doubt the praetorians will care much about a single performance for less than a hundred people, but it is probably for the best that the spring faire is over tonight."

"Hah, the sheep had so much wool because its shears were dull!" Maximilian exclaimed. "Just like how the war minister has a dull mind!" The others glanced at him. "I just got the joke," he added.

"That reminds me, I have a few things to buy," Eleanor remarked. "I need perfume and weapon oil."

"I'm getting something to drink. Martel?"

The novice threw his head towards the stage. "I'll say farewell to Regnar."

~

Moving beyond the stage, Martel quickly found the hedge mage. "What did you think of our little play?" the old man asked, digging out his pipe.

"It was fun. Well, the parts I understood."

"I guess it did require certain knowledge of Morcaster's elite," Regnar admitted. "Still, we made almost double tonight compared to last night."

"Are you going to be in trouble?"

"We leave tonight, going north for a few months. Give them time to forget us." The old man ignited his pipe and winked as he placed it in his mouth.

"Well, if you are ever back in Morcaster, I'll catch your next play."

"Count on it." The hedge mage dug one hand into his pocket and withdrew a small object. "This has protected me for quite some years." He let it drop into Martel's hand. "Now I hope it can do the same for you."

The novice examined Regnar's gift. It looked like a small stone, hewn and polished to have several flat sides. On each, a rune was inscribed. "What does it do?"

Regnar smiled. "Protects you. Farewell, Martel, until our next meeting."

The spring faire had come to an end.

Chapter 36: Silver Lining

Silver Lining

After the intense events of the faire, Martel was happy to wake up on an ordinary Soliday. He looked forward to assisting Master Jerome and practise his magic according to his own schedule. Since he forgot his chore last Soliday, Martel felt particularly eager to make up for it.

His task turned out quite ordinary. An enormous pile of big feathers from geese lay before him along with a knife. For the next bell, Martel sharpened them into quills. As it turned out, the school went through quite a lot of them; the librarian alone required a steady supply for copying or repairing books.

At the end of the bell, the artificer approached him. "Martel, come and see this." He took the novice with him to another room full of tools for woodworking. Different pieces of timber lay scattered throughout, and sawdust covered the floor.

Jerome took him to one table, where a large, square piece of wood lay. Taller and wider than any man at least and pale in colour. Curiously, silver streaks ran across the board, and Martel ran one finger along it. It felt smooth, like the wood, but colder to the touch.

"Silver," the artificer explained, "melted into the wood. It will hold the enchantment."

"What does that mean?" Martel asked, his curiosity doubled.

"I'll need one of the teachers to do it, perhaps Master Alastair, but we will fill the silver with magic to cool. I will make four of these boards," Jerome explained. "To create a cabinet. Anything within will be kept at the same cool temperature, regardless of how hot it is outside."

"That's neat. Is this for storing food?" Martel had heard of the very rich owning such rooms for cold storage to keep meat fresh without salt or vegetables without pickling.

Jerome laughed. "Something a little more interesting. This is for Master Farhad's clock. You remember him?"

Quite well, Martel thought. "Yes. What kind of clock needs this?" He knew about sundials, and he had seen the water clock in the entrance hall, but he could not imagine how cold could help a clock.

"Ah, see, Khivan clocks keep time by a pendulum swinging back and forth. Very precise, far better than anything we have," Jerome explained. "But heat affects the pendulum. Interferes with the swing, reducing precision. With this," he added, rapping his knuckles against the board, "the pendulum will stay the same. This clock will be the most precise in the world, my boy."

"That's impressive." Martel did not quite grasp the importance; the day began when the sun rose, ended when it set, and nobody needed any clocks to know that. But if it meant work for Master Farhad, Martel was happy.

"I have written some details for our dear watchmaker." Jerome took out a letter. "Ready to be my messenger again?"

"Oh, with pleasure, master."

"Let me find you some pennies..." The artificer began to rummage through some drawers.

"No need," Martel hurried to say. "I failed to show last Soliday. Delivering this letter is the least I can do." He extended his hand.

Jerome gave him the parchment. "Very well. See that it is delivered today, please."

"Certainly, master."

~

Martel decided to delay his trip into the city until after lunch; might as well have a full stomach before he ventured out. Doing his customary check for mail right after, he received a note. He recognised the handwriting even before he saw the signature; he wondered if this had been written by one of his newly made quills.

See me at your earliest convenience.

Mistress Juliana

Martel could not help but feel guilty, though he did not know what he had done wrong. At least the note did not stress his immediate appearance unlike the last time; hopefully that meant a gentler issue than brawls with berserkers.

Rather than wonder and worry, and since he did have time right now, Martel went to the overseer's chamber. As he arrived, muffled voices reached him from beyond the door. He waited a while until the door opened, and an acolyte left. Standing awkwardly in the doorway, Martel cleared his throat.

"Come in." Even when seated, Mistress Juliana felt domineering.

Martel sat down, trying to interpret her expression. He failed.

"Martel, do you know why I asked you to come? Has Master Fenrick spoken with you?"

"No." As far as Martel knew, he had behaved exemplary in all of Master Fenrick's classes.

"Next fiveday, he will take a group of acolytes to see the Stone of Archen."

Of all the possibilities, Martel would not have guessed this, especially since he had never heard of this rock before.

"This is an unusually small group with only six acolytes, whom you happen to know from your lessons on Maldays."

The mageknights, Martel thought.

"As such, we both consider it fitting you go through the ritual now."

The second-last word unnerved Martel. In the stories, rituals never bode well, especially not for unwitting participants. "What's that?"

"More of a ceremony, really. But it will reveal your star, which may help your understanding of your own magic. You leave on next Solday in the morning."

That left one fiveday before departure. "Is the journey long?"

"It will take you about a fiveday travelling there and the same to return. See the quartermaster for supplies," Juliana told him. "Also, speak with each of your teachers on how to keep practising while away. We do not wish for you to lose two fivedays of progress entirely."

"Certainly. Is that all?"

"That is all."

Martel left her chamber, feeling a little disconcerted, and not simply because he had stressed over what the meeting was about. When he woke up this morning, he had never even heard of this stone. Now, out of the blue, he had to travel hence and back again for a purpose he did not quite understand. He accepted that he had to do as his teachers instructed, of course, which included taking such a trip. It was merely that he had started to feel settled in with a daily rhythm and slow, but steady progress towards mastery of magic; suddenly, the path veered sharply left, and he had not had any inkling that it could even happen.

At least he would have good company.

~

With Master Jerome's letter safely tucked inside his robe, Martel went into the city. By now, the path to the Khivan quarter was most familiar, and he could walk while thinking on other matters. Mostly, the upcoming trip filled his head; he wondered how it would be to travel with the others and what awaited at their destination. Maybe his teachers could illuminate the matter for him, since he would be talking with them regardless about continuing his lessons on his own. And while the thought of travelling for two fivedays with the mageknights would have once left him distraught, he began to look forward to spending the time with Maximilian and Eleanor. Perhaps it would end up enjoyable.

Entering the Khivan enclave, Martel noticed a few signs of the spring faire. Mostly refuse from drinking, such as cups or wineskins. As the Khivans had not celebrated, he could guess it came from Asterians, who for some reason entered the district while drunk.

Progressing deeper, he also saw signs of damage on some buildings. Doors with markings from kicks, shutters receiving blows and the like. A few people were on the streets, and they seemed either muted in their behaviour or regarded him with suspicion if not outright hostility. Uncomfortable, Martel hurried his steps to reach the watchmaker's workshop.

He opened the door even as he knocked to step inside. He found both watchmaker and daughter seated and at work; the former carefully filed on some bits of metal while the latter polished them.

"Hey, Martel," Shadi greeted him.

Master Farhad looked up with a less than pleased expression. "Mage boy again."

"Be nice, dad."

"I have a letter from Master Jerome." Martel retrieved the item in question from his pocket and extended it.

Farhad snapped it from his fingers and began to read.

"Everything alright?" Martel asked. "Looked like there'd been trouble on the streets."

"No worse than every spring faire," Shadi replied. "Well, maybe a little worse. More drunks than usual. But nobody at our door or anything like that."

"I don't understand. Why do they come here?"

Shadi looked at him with surprise. "They don't like Khivans, Martel."

"But you live here. You were born here."

"They don't care."

Martel felt tongue-tied. The injustice of it galled him, while he felt bad for Shadi, who seemed more hurt than she let on. Between anger and sympathy, he did not know what to express. "I'm sorry," he finally settled on, and it bothered him how inadequate it sounded.

"We're used to it. It's been like that for a long time. Though I guess it gets a little worse every year."

"Boy, you wait here," Farhad interjected. "I give you message back to your master."

"Dad, his name is Martel."

"Yes, yes, fine. Wait here, boy." The watchmaker went into the adjoining room and began scribbling down.

"At least dad has good work with this clock for your school," Shadi said. "It really helps with the rent."

"That's good. I'm really curious to see the result."

"It's getting harder and harder for him to sell his work. Even though his clocks are better than anything else in Morcaster. People don't want Khivan time pieces, I guess."

Again, Martel found himself stumped on what to say. He was saved by Farhad returning with a scrap of parchment. "Give this to your master, boy. More measurements for next part of work."

"I'll give it to him straight away," Martel promised, accepting the missive, and Farhad returned to his work. "Oh, I forgot to say. I have to go on a trip next Solday. Something the school sends us on."

"Where to?" Shadi asked.

"Honestly, I don't know. Some stone place. They don't tell us much. I'll be gone a few fivedays, it seems, but I'll say farewell before we leave."

"Alright." She smiled.

"Boy, I work here. You have your own work, deliver message," Farhad said brusquely.

"Yes, of course." Martel nodded in farewell and left the workshop.

Chapter 37: Dancing Stars

Dancing Stars

"Master Alastair, may I ask a question?"

"Always." His teacher looked up from the pile of dirt in the Hall of Elements. "What is it?"

"Mistress Juliana told me yesterday we're going to some stone of Archen. What is that?"

"Ah, yes. Which teacher is taking you?"

"Master Fenrick, I believe it was."

"Good, good. He knows most."

Martel pushed the dirt with his foot. "But what's the trip for?"

"Didn't Mistress Juliana explain?"

"She said it was about stars, which didn't really help much."

"Well, all mages are born under the sign of a star. Malac, Perel, or Glund. Archean astronomy claims that when your star is ascending, your magic is stronger. When retrograde, it will be weaker."

Martel scratched his neck. "Really? So I might learn faster on some days than others?"

"Something like that. Usually, the effect is minor, I would say. Still, it may be helpful to know," Alastair remarked.

"Will it hurt?"

His teacher chuckled. "It's a bit of starlight shining on you, boy, that's the whole ritual. Just enjoy the trip with your school friends."

"Alright, I will do that."

"But it's good you remind me. I'll show you a bunch of exercises. Every night when you stop, do one of them and only one. Next night, another, and so on. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Good. The first one requires that you sit down. Earth is obviously a different element to work with than water, but the two share some traits nonetheless. Both have a solid form even if one is fluid, unlike air and fire, which are more intangible."

Martel sat down on the ground opposite his teacher, taking in his lesson.

"You must feel the earth against you, boy. Send your magic down into the dirt until it feels like it is a part of you. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Not really," Martel admitted.

Alastair laughed. "Good thing you have lots of practise ahead of you. Now let's try another exercise..."

~

Still desiring more knowledge about his trip, Martel went to the library. After washing and drying his hands, he waited as the librarian helped another student. Once the former turned around and saw Martel, he gave a little sigh.

"Yes? What do you want?" the librarian stared at him.

"I would like a book about the Stone of Archen."

"That description would match at least a dozen places, but I presume you mean the one that lies near Morcaster. Very well, follow me." the librarian went down his rows of bookshelves with Martel in tow. He snapped one book from the others and handed it over.

Martel's eyes glanced over the introduction after he had found a seat. As he might have expected, the book was written after the fall of Archen with limited knowledge available. He leafed through the book until he came across a description of what he assumed was the relevant stone.

Ever obsessed with the stars, the Archeans had a ritual to determine the position of the stars at a wizard's birth, should this not be known. They even made use of this for their more intricate mechanisms, such as the moon chamber which requires an activation from the entirety of the triumvirate. This served as a safety measure, demanding three different wizards to be present in order to open the door deeper into the complex.

Martel continued to read a bit further, but nothing else seemed relevant. The remainder of the book delved into the supposed experiments taking place at the facility, but this remained speculation and of little interest to Martel, considering the place had been a ruin for more than three hundred years. He closed the book and returned it to its shelf.

Before he could leave the library, he noticed the door to the upper floor open. A little curious, he paused to watch Eleanor pass through the door, closing it behind her. "Hullo, Eleanor. Did you also read about the Stone of Archen?" Given that she had access to the floor for acolytes only, she might have found books more illuminating than the one accessible to him.

"Oh, Martel," she said. "No, I was reading about a different subject. I already know what the trip is about. Master Fenrick explained it to us once in his class."

"I see. Which subject did you read up on?"

Eleanor hesitated before she replied. "Same as last. Magic of the mind."

"Oh right. I just learned about that in Master Fenrick's class about the theory of magic." Just as he said it, Martel felt a little silly. Eleanor would have learned about this long ago, and he had just reminded her that he was years behind her in his studies.

"That was my favourite class," Eleanor revealed. "Well, not the practical part. That bored me to tears. but trying to better understand the nature of magic was so fascinating."

"Yes! I couldn't agree more."

"I have class I must attend. See you tomorrow." Eleanor gave a little wave of her fingers and left the library. Martel waved back and stood a while until he remembered that he also meant to leave.

~

On Malday, Reynard had nothing to tell Martel in either of his classes. This did not surprise Martel, who knew that his education in empowerment magic rested entirely in his own hands. It did not matter either; Martel would have the exercises from Master Alastair to keep him occupied during the few opportunities for practising magic that their journey would afford. Besides, he knew enough about empowerment magic, or he certainly would by the end of his first year, to become an acolyte and continue as a weathermage even without Reynard's help.

~

"Martel! I hear you will be tagging along on our little sojourn into the wild." Maximilian greeted him with the usual grin as weapon practice ended.

"Yeah, Master Fenrick seems to consider that best. I guess the company could be worse." Martel mirrored his expression.

"We are going to have a grand old time, I promise you that. I am already stocking up on supplies. The liquid kind obviously."

Martel frowned for a moment. "You think water will be that – right, I get what you mean." His face became concerned. "Wait, what sort of supplies should we bring? I don't really have anything other than a cloak."

"Well, why do you not ask the quartermaster? After all, I assume you are not paying for your own tuition, so the school must be providing you with supplies," Maximilian suggested.

"Of course, Mistress Juliana said as much. Not sure why didn't I think of that."

"I would tell you to figure that out for yourself, but I imagine you would not be able to think of that either."

Martel sent a slap in Maximilian's direction, aiming for the shoulder, but the mageknight quickly evaded.

"You will have to be a lot quicker than that, Nordmark. Alright, see you later. I have a much deserved bath waiting for me."

"Much needed as well," Martel quickly added.

"At least your tongue works better than your weak punches."

~

Martel had only needed to visit the quartermaster a handful of times since his arrival to the Lyceum. After he had been supplied with clothes and bed linen on the first day, he had mostly stopped by to get new candles or the occasional parchment for writing notes for himself. As it turned out, the quartermaster did not have much for him even in light of his upcoming journey. A waterskin and a piece of canvas to serve as a tent was all.

The day passed without further events. Back in his room with his evening exercises complete, Martel looked up at the night sky. He watched the stars as they shone back at him. Thanks to his astronomy lessons, Martel could now identify several of them including the three most important ones. Malac, Perel, and Glund, the wanderers who followed their own path. Soon, there would be a convergence of the three, as it happened a few times a year. Martel assumed this accounted for the timing of their journey.

He wondered which star would be his particular sign, and whether it really mattered. Some believed that the stars could influence a person's character; to Martel, that seemed dubious at best. On the other hand, if the stars could affect his magic, who knew what else they might hold sway over? In any case, he might soon know more once this journey was complete. Laying down in his bed, Martel pushed these questions aside and went to sleep.

Chapter 38: The Question of Khiva

The Question of Khiva

"Master Fenrick? You mentioned how magic is the same in different places, but we have different traditions." Martel looked at his teacher while most of his fellow students stared blankly into space or fidgeted with whatever items they had in their pockets.

"I did indeed. I sense you have a question?" The Master of Lore turned his eyes under their bushy brows towards Martel.

"What about Khivan magic?"

"What about it?"

"I never heard about it," Martel pointed out. "But if we have our traditions, and the Tyrians have theirs, shouldn't the Khivans have theirs?"

"Very good question. As far as I know, there has not been a Khivan sorcerer for three hundred years. Given the importance of that date, can you imagine why?"

The novices, at least those paying attention, looked at each other with uncertainty. Finally, Martel made the obvious guess. "The fall of Archen?"

"Indeed. The Khivans reacted rather drastically." Fenrick cleared his throat. "Seeing the devastation wrought, they banned all magic. Ever since, all children who show any sign of magical talent have small bits of gold inserted under their skin to neutralise their talent."

Martel thought about his fight with the berserker and how the golden chain had taken away his magical strength. He tried to imagine if he had been born in Khiva. He would be an ordinary boy, probably working in his brother's forge and being a burden to his family.

Looking at the other novices, several of them looked almost horrified at the thought.

"But if the Khivans don't have magic," one student argued, "how do they stand a chance against our legions and battlemages?"

"That is beyond my area of knowledge," the teacher answered. "You will have to ask our esteemed commanders."

"But they did at some point have magic? The Khivans, I mean." Martel returned to his original question, still hoping for an answer.

"They did. But we have no knowledge of how it might have looked. After all, we have our own gaps of knowledge to fill out, and the Khivans certainly are not interested in their own magic traditions. They went to great lengths to eradicate them."

"What did they do?"

"In one terrible night, the people turned on all sorcerers in Khiva. Those few that survived went into hiding. All their lore and tomes of knowledge were destroyed. Since then, the Khivans have focused on ways to strengthen their society by other means than magic."

Martel thought about Master Farhad and his clocks. From the few glimpses he had caught, he knew they contained machinery of a complex nature; so complex that even the mages of the Lyceum desired his service, presumably unable to create something of such precision themselves.

"Does that mean if the Khivans win the war, they will come here and kill all of us?" The fright in the small novice's voice spread to the expressions of the other students.

"The frontlines in the war has not moved for years. Not to mention, our armies are in Khivan lands, not the reverse. You are safe here," their teacher reassured them.

Despite his assurances, the novices did not seem to be particularly at ease, and even Martel felt a little uncomfortable at the thought of raging Khivans purging everyone with magical talents. For the rest of the lesson, the students found it difficult to focus on Master Fenrick's teachings.

~

After the class, Martel approached his teacher. "Master, about our trip to this stone. Anything I need or should know?"

"Fetch yourself a tent from the quartermaster. We will bring provisions on a mule, so just wear sensible clothes. We leave as soon as second bell has rung from outside the main gate, so don't be late," he stressed.

"Very well, master." He hesitated for a moment. "What should I expect?"

"Something magical."

~

As daylight waned, Martel went south into the city. Approaching the Khivan quarter, it felt different to him than when he first came to Morcaster. Influenced by his knowledge, he noticed the signs of damage on many of the doors and shutters. Some of the debris did not come from natural decline, but had been forced upon the buildings. And while he could not be sure, it seemed to him that more and more of the hovels looked deserted. As for the people he passed by, their looks were anything but friendly.

When he slipped inside the door to Master Farhad's workshop, he found its inhabitants at work by the benches like last time.

"This boy again." The watchmaker made a few grumbling noises in Khivan and returned his attention to his work, fitting little bits of metal together.

"Dad, be nice," Shadi admonished him. "Your trip is tomorrow?" she asked Martel.

"Yeah. I just wanted to say farewell since it will be a few fivedays before I return."

"I am glad you did. Want to go upstairs? We can talk for a bit."

"No," came Farhad's rumbling voice. "It gets late. Boy should not be on the streets after dark."

"Dad! He can stay a little while."

"No," the old man reiterated. "I will not have boy's blood on my conscience. Get home, mage boy."

Shadi gave him a tight hug. "I will see you when you get back."

"You will." He returned the embrace.

"Tell me all about it, alright?" she asked, pulling back. "All the amazing magic that you're going out to experience."

Martel could not help but take a look at the watchmaker, searching for any scars that might have gold inside of them. All he could find were veins and miscoloured spots. "I promise. You'll hear every detail."

Walking home, he looked up as the first stars began to appear. The sun would not set entirely for another hour or so, leaving only the brightest star to be visible yet. At this time of the year, that should be Malac, the bold warrior. Walking through streets that seemed less and less welcoming, Martel did not feel particularly bold even with the star's light shining on him.

Chapter 39: On the Road

On the Road

On the morning of their departure, Martel still felt a little apprehensive, but he assumed they were all in good hands with Master Fenrick. And out of six acolytes that he would be travelling with, two were his friends.

Of course, one was decidedly not his friend, but Cheval had kept a quiet attitude ever since his humiliation, especially with Maximilian around.

Once breakfast had been dealt with, Martel fetched his cloak and other warm clothes, his waterskin, and the large canvas given to him to serve as a tent.

His hands full with the latter, he made his way out of the main gates. He found some of the mageknights already present along with Master Fenrick and some mules, holding provisions and water.

"Nordmark, throw your tent on here," Maximilian told him, indicating one of the beasts. "I grabbed this little fellow for us." He caressed the mule behind its ears. Martel did as his friend suggested, happy to unburden himself of the unwieldy piece of fabric.

"Here." Master Fenrick threw a staff into Martel's hands. "This will lend you some support as we walk." The teacher held another staff for his own use.

"Thanks." Martel looked around at the mageknights. "What about them?"

"In my experience, they are too busy keeping their hands free to draw weapons at the first sight of imagined danger."

Martel looked at Maximilian, who stood with one hand on his sword hilt. Master Fenrick's assumption seemed a safe one.

Soon after, the remaining acolytes arrived. After counting their number, the teacher gave the signal to get going.

~

Their first day of travel proved a pleasant one. Although not particularly warm, the sun shone, and the wind was only a light breeze. They made good speed travelling on the emperor's road, built to allow his legions swift movement throughout the Empire. Walking with his staff in hand, Martel almost felt like a real wizard.

On occasion, they encountered travellers headed the other way towards Morcaster. Most were peddlers or merchants' caravans journeying to the city with their goods; now and then, a regiment of legionaries marched past them.

As eventide approached, Master Fenrick called for them to make camp. They found a suitable location near the main road where a small brook flowed by. Letting the mules graze, they filled their waterskins and found some branches that let them raise their tents as shelters.

Discarding his cloak, tunic, sword belt, and most of his clothes, Maximilian was first into the water. Another mageknight, Pepin, followed soon after. Martel noticed that some of the girls sent looks towards the boys diving into the water, and he felt a pang of envy, knowing his own physique would not inspire the same.

Swimming around, Maximilian returned to the bank. When he stood on the ground, the water reached to his neck. "Nordmark, jump in! It can only do you good."

"I can't swim," Martel replied. He was not keen on removing his clothes in this company, and the truth provided him with a convenient excuse.

"I am rather disappointed to hear that! When you got that big Frosten river up in Nordmark. I will have to teach you."

"Maybe another time." Standing on the edge, Martel smiled looking down on his friend.

"No time like the present!" From behind, Cheval pushed Martel into the brook with an insidious smirk.

His arms flailing, Martel fell face first into the stream. As his head came underwater, panic overtook him. He forgot about magic; he could not even summon the presence of mind to try to plant his feet against the bottom of the brook. He felt the weight of his boots and his robe, completely soaked, pulling him down. His eyes could see nothing in the dark of the water.

A heavy hand grabbed him by the back of his collar and pulled him upright. Gasping and blowing water from his mouth, Martel continued to struggle and swing his arms around. A slap across his face helped to calm him down, as did the feeling of Maximilian's strong grasp holding him.

The whole affair had lasted less than a minute, yet felt far longer thanks to his flurry of emotions and strong fear. On the bank, Cheval was laughing his head off.

With some difficulty, Martel climbed up from the stream. His wet clothes clung to him, and he felt dreadful both in body and mind. Seeing his expression and appearance, Cheval's laughter only increased.

Empowered by her magic, Eleanor gave Cheval such a push, he went flying through the air and landed in the brook himself. Struggling, nobody bothered to help him.

"What's happening?" Master Fenrick asked, approaching the group.

"Just swimming, master," Maximilian replied.

"You all have weapon practice before you should sleep. Martel, you have your exercises from Master Alastair. Maximilian, Guillaume, get up from there."

The students grumbled for different reasons, but none objected.

~

Seated on the ground, Martel placed his hands on the dirt to do the first of Master Alastair's exercises. He tried to send his magic into the earth and feel a connection, but success proved limited. It was simply too vast. It felt like standing in an enormous cavern of darkness with only a tiny, flickering flame that struggled in vain to illuminate the space.

Distracted, Martel cast a glance towards Master Fenrick. The latter stood bent over a patch of grass. His hand hovering several inches above the ground, he summoned a flame that began to burn the green. He moved his hand in a complex, circular motion, and the fire followed suit, burning the grass as it went before it became extinguished.

"*Vara.*"

Martel heard the master mumble a word which he did not understand, but the symbol burned into the grass briefly gave a glow. Looking at it, it resembled a Tyrian rune, though Martel did not know

its meaning or significance. He stared at it for a moment longer before he returned to his own exercise.

Chapter 40: On the Threshold

On the Threshold

For another three days, they followed the wide road north until at last, Master Fenrick diverted their course west. Travelling on dirt roads, the land grew wild. As their teacher explained, this was no coincidence; people usually did not dare to dwell near Archeon ruins, for good reason.

It took another day before they saw the first signs of civilisation. A broken stone ward, perhaps once used to offer directions to travellers; lying shattered in pieces, the reading could not be deciphered.

The sun had nearly set when at last, they reached their destination. From the outside, it did not look impressive. Short walls stood scattered around the area, missing the roof. The rooms appeared small and simple, unlike the tall, imposing structure of the Lyceum. Furthermore, everything was overgrown by vines, moss, and other sorts of green. All in all, it seemed tranquil. It took Martel one moment to understand why; other than their own movements, the place lay completely quiet. Not a single bird let its song be heard; not even the smallest squirrel ran across in search of nuts.

"Master Fenrick? What was this place?" asked one of the girls.

"We have a reasonable guess. While the Lyceum served as the primary facility for magical studies, the wizards of Archen used this outpost for a few specific purposes. Primarily, the very purpose for which I have brought you along. To reveal with certainty the star under which you were born."

Eleanor asked the question on everyone's mind. "How exactly will that happen?"

"I could explain, of course." Master Fenrick wore a little smile. "But it will be much simpler to show you once we begin."

~

They spent a brief while setting up camp and tending to the mules. Once done, Master Fenrick led them into the complex. As they walked, he pointed out the different features of the place. One room that might have served as a small library with an adjoining scriptorium. Living quarters, kitchens, a tiny dining hall, and so forth. All in all, it seemed like a miniature version of the Lyceum.

It only became interesting once they reached the far end of the complex, furthest from the road. A small staircase led several steps into the ground, reaching a doorway that went into some kind of cellar. Unlike the rest, this door appeared in perfect condition, as did the surrounding frame.

Numerous symbols had been inscribed into the stonework.

It gave Martel a foreboding sense as if trespassing. As Master Fenrick approached the door, Martel half expected his teacher to be repelled by some unseen force. Yet all that happened as he pushed the door handle down was a creaking sound, and the door slowly pushed open.

A flame hovering over Master Fenrick's head provided illumination as they descended into the darkness. After a few steps, the corridor widened to become a circular room, twenty feet across. In the middle rose an obelisk made from a dark, glass-like material. It stood nearly ten feet tall; as Martel's gaze followed it up to its point, he noticed a small hole in the roof.

"The star chamber, as we call it." Master Fenrick placed one hand against the obelisk. "This is the famous Stone of Archen. Once the Triumvirate of the Heavens shines in the sky, the light will be captured here. Before you ask, I have absolutely no idea how the stone works. But you will see the effect tomorrow night once the stars converge in the night sky."

Martel looked at the walls. They were covered in symbols that, to his own surprise, he recognised. Carved into the stone, he found an elaborate star chart much like the one he had made for astronomy class, just far more complex. With his only light source being the flickering flame above Master Fenrick's head, Martel could not make out much, but he did understand the principle.

"Let us continue." Crossing the room, their teacher led them one step deeper into the complex.

~

Adjoining the star chamber lay another room of exactly the same proportions. Likewise, it also had two doorways; one that led back to the previous chamber and one that led forward. The latter was made of solid stone and completely closed, barring their way. This room also had inscriptions on the walls and the floor, which otherwise was bare. No stone or obelisk took up space here.

Martel glanced over the many symbols but could not make heads or tails of them. The poor lighting did not help either.

"The moon chamber. It requires the light of the full moon to work. We are too early, but if we waited here long enough, the moon would reach the right position and fill this chamber with light," Master Fenrick explained.

"What happens then?" asked Clarissa, one of Eleanor's friends.

"Nothing." The Master of Lore smiled at their disappointed looks before he continued. "Unless three mages stand at the exact right spot that corresponds to their star sign. We are fortunate that the convergence of the Triumvirate coincides with a full moon." He gestured towards the ground, which held three large sigils. From above, moonlight slowly crept into the space, illuminating the floor. It allowed Martel to recognise the three symbols carved on the tiles. One showed a warrior in armour, the second depicted a rogue wearing a hood and cloak, and the last showed a sage wielding a staff.

"But what happens after that? If three mages stand at the right place?" the girl asked.

"That door opens." Master Fenrick's finger pointed across the room at the stone door.

~

Their teacher refused to indulge in further explanations, and they returned to their camp. The mageknights did their weapon practice, and Martel tried his hand at yet another exercise given to him by Master Alastair. Holding his hand a few inches above ground, he willed the earth to rise up until it touched his fingers. It happened slowly and rather unsteadily, the small tower of dirt wobbling as only Martel's magic kept it standing. As his concentration broke, the mound of earth fell apart, scattering across the ground. Around their camp, Master Fenrick burned his wards into the ground.