

## Firebrand 311

### Chapter 311: Camaraderie

#### Camaraderie

As soon as the potion went down his throat, Martel felt warm. As he walked home to the Lyceum, he took off his cap and removed his cloak as well. By the time he went to bed, he wore only his underwear as he lay under a single blanket despite this being a winter month.

He woke, shivering all over. Glancing at his clock in the dark, he could eventually tell that it was four in the morning. He wondered if he was ill; this felt like a fever, this sudden onset of being cold. Putting on clothes before crawling back under his blanket, he soon felt warm again and stopped shivering.

He finally realised that the potion had stopped working, leaving him exposed to the cold. A rather short duration compared to what Mistress Rana had claimed, and an abrupt end to the effect. He figured the former was due to his own lacking in terms of alchemy; as for the sudden change, he wondered if that was also his own fault or if all elixirs work that way. He would find out. Wearing socks, a night shirt, and a cap, he went back to sleep.

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When he woke again, Martel felt normal, and he went to his class in the Circle of Fire as usual. They practised the flame wall spell primarily; among the others, Harriet remained the only one who could summon anything remotely useful, and it still would not be sufficient to deter a determined foe. Martel practised as well, improving his casting time; he was tempted to throw it in her face how superior his spellwork was, but he restrained himself. If Moira simply told the other acolytes that losing their skirmishes against the mageknights still earned Martel a detention, he did not want to give them any reasons to exploit that.

After two lessons, Martel felt exhausted. He had spent his spellpower practising during class, and he still had detention this evening. At least Moira had yet to push any of her acolytes beyond the point of actual exhaustion; on the contrary, she reproached any who might seem like they were doing it to themselves.

"Martel, wait a moment," a voice called out to him in the hallway.

He had been on his way to his room for a bit of rest, but Martel was happy to turn around and face the speaker. "Hey, Eleanor."

"I was thinking we could work on our chapters last bell? I think we can both be finished tonight," she suggested.

"I can't," he admitted. He lowered his voice as he spoke again. "I have detention."

She looked at him with a mixture of amusement and surprise. "What did you do to deserve that?"

"Every time we lose a fight against you and the other mageknights, Moira gives me detention."

"Mistress Moira," Eleanor said in correction before she frowned. "Wait, every time? Even if the fault is not yours? You are always the best fighter on your team."

Martel shrugged with a defeated smile. "If one person fails, I guess we all die."

"Well, I can wait for you in the library until you are done, and we can finish our work then?"

He shook his head. "My detention is the entire bell. Library will be closed by then. Look, I don't want to hold you back. You should get your work done. I'll finish mine when I get the chance, I guess." He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile and continued to his chamber.

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Moira waited for him as he arrived in the Circle of Fire. "You lost again, even though nobody on your team had any reason to sabotage you. They had no knowledge that you would be punished for failure. Unless you were stupid enough to tell them?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Of course I didn't tell them. But it didn't matter. Harriet can't do the spell, which she should have told us," Martel complained.

"She is to blame for her poor spellwork."

Martel was almost taken aback; he had not expected she would agree with him.

"As is the captain who does not know the capabilities of his soldiers."

Moira still finding a way to blame him, on the other hand, felt familiar. "But I'm not anyone's captain. We're all acolytes, all equal. They have no reason to listen to me."

"No reason other than survival? Besides, why do you need others to approve before you take up leadership? Will you loiter around, waiting for defeat until someone pats you on the shoulder and gives you permission to make decisions?"

Her voice and words were as sharp and condescending as ever, but Martel found it difficult to argue. "But how do I get them to accept my decisions?"

"You did before. It was your idea that half should fight defensively and half offensively, wasn't it?"

It was, which made Martel wonder how she knew.

"Stop thinking as a soldier and start thinking as a leader. Unless you wish to spend every Glunday with detention."

Martel did not.

"Alright, take position. Your footwork is laughable, and your fire bolts barely tickle me. Time to whip you into shape."

Dejected, Martel trod to the other side of the chamber and prepared himself to duel.

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Almost limping, Martel crossed a near empty Lyceum on his way from the Circle of Fire back to the dormitory tower. He felt too worn to do anything but sleep, even if tomorrow was Manday, which meant handing in the translation for Master Fenrick. Luckily, that was also the day when he worked in Mistress Rana's laboratory in the afternoon instead of his usual morning shift in the apothecary. That gave him a full bell to finish his work then.

Entering the common room at the ground floor of his tower, Martel noticed a lamp burning by one of the tables. Within its ring of light, he managed to make out Eleanor. "What are you doing here?" he asked as he approached her.

"Well, I know you work mornings in the apothecary, so I figured you would have to finish the chapter tonight." She gave him a wink. "A mageknight does not abandon a comrade on the field of battle."

Right, she would not know that Manday was the exception where he worked in the afternoon instead of mornings for Mistress Rana. Touched by her consideration, Martel saw no reason to mention it. "Let me get my things, and we can get to work."

## Chapter 312: A Teacher's Calling

### A Teacher's Calling

Martel arrived for Master Fenrick's class with a nice stack of parchment filled with Arcean letters. Looking around, he saw everyone else had the same. Exchanging glances with Eleanor, he gave a quick smile. Her help had been rather invaluable, both in terms of speeding up his work process and eliminating many possible errors he might otherwise have made. He knew she had only worked together with him for his sake, as he could not offer the same assistance to her, which only made him more grateful.

"Alright, students. I see you've all brought your assignments. We'll be reading the book in order, so we'll start with Griffé and his first chapter. Assuming none of you have butchered your work, we'll begin on Tyrian runes this time next fiveday." Master Fenrick gazed at them all from behind his spectacles. "But rest assured, I will collect your work and scrutinise it if anything smells suspicious." He cleared his throat. "Griffé, if you please."

Looking nervous, Alain gripped the edges of his parchment and began reading aloud.

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One bell later, Martel had finished the course on Arcean. He did not imagine himself ever having any conversations in the language like Eleanor could, but he knew the letters, at least. He should think of some way to thank Eleanor when he got the chance for helping him clear another course, just like she had with astronomy. It would have to wait, though; an afternoon spent with Master Alastair and Mistress Rana awaited him.

In the Hall of Elements, Martel demonstrated his mastery of his newest spell. Whether earth, stone, metal, Martel imbued any material with his magic and flung it as a missile against Master Alastair.

Nodding in approval, his teacher smiled. "Excellent. I don't think there's much improvement to be made regarding this. I say it's time we turn to the last element, which admittedly is also the most difficult to use with this spell. It's a lot easier to pour your magic into something you can actually touch or see. Doing so with nothing but air is harder, but it also has the advantage of always being available. I can also guarantee you that it's an attack they never see coming." The old battlemage laughed.

"I look forward to figuring it out."

"Of course you do. You're interested in learning, after all."

Looking at his teacher, Martel remembered that this was not part of the regular schedule; Master Alastair was teaching Martel of his own accord. For no other reason than to help him prepare for what lay ahead. Few people had the fortune of such a teacher.

"Are you listening?"

"Yes, master, I am."

"Good. Now, when it comes to creating a bolt of pure air, it helps to spend a moment gathering the wind to you. Just at first until you learn to cast the spell as second nature..."

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With all his obligations at the Lyceum completed for the day, Martel went into the city. He had a long walk ahead of him with cold weather, making him long for a potion of warmth. Unfortunately, Mistress Rana had kept the one he had just made, declaring it good enough to be sold. Which Martel could not complain about; he had a newfound appreciation for the cost of alchemy supplies.

He had also hoped to move on to a new recipe by now, but Mistress Rana preached patience above all else when it came to alchemy, and she had delayed it for another fiveday.

As he reached the copper lanes, Martel gathered his wits about him before knocking on the door to Weasel's hideout; he knew the welcome to expect.

Badger opened the door, tilting his head to look at him curiously. "Weasel said you shouldn't come around anymore."

"I know. I'll be waiting at the end of the alley. Tell Sparrow I'd like to talk to her, and Weasel, if he must come along."

True to his word, Martel walked down to where the alley met the outer street. He pulled his cloak around himself, wishing spring would come soon. It could not be much longer now.

"What do you want?" Weasel's tone of voice left no doubt as to his opinion of Martel.

Martel glanced down the road; the young chief was alone. "I accept that Sparrow will be staying here. But she should still learn to use the gift she's received. I can show her a few simple exercises to help her train."

"What do you want for that?"

"Nothing. I just want to see her get better at magic."

Weasel shook his head with a dismissive expression. "Nobody believes that."

"It's true nonetheless. There are people who help me become a better mage. I want to do the same for Sparrow."

"What kind of exercises?" The voice belonged to a small girl who suddenly appeared between some debris.

"I told you to wait," Weasel huffed at her.

Ignoring him, Sparrow looked at Martel. "What kind?"

Martel looked around in the alley. The houses looked derelict and abandoned; it would be best to teach Sparrow out here, with the earth below their feet; the wooden floor inside their house would prevent her from connecting to her element. He got down on one knee, ignoring how cold the ground felt. "You'll want to practise somewhere out of sight, but this alley will do while I'm here,

and there's nobody around. You got a natural connection to earth, Sparrow. So I suggest you start practising with that." He stamped his hand against the dirt.

"How?"

"It might be easiest to touch it at first. Feel it against the palm of your hand." Martel dug his fingers down to dig up some of the dirt. He gestured for her to extend her hand and let the grains of earth fall into her grip. "Look at it. Feel it. Decide to move it, but keep your fingers still. If you will it, your magic will do the rest."

Sparrow frowned in concentration; Martel noticed that despite his scowl, Weasel had yet to interrupt them. Suddenly, the dirt in her hand flew in every direction. Surprised, she laughed.

"Alright, I suppose that's a start. Maybe try to imagine exactly where you want it to move. Say, from one of your hands to the other." Martel gathered up some more dirt and left it on her palm, which he placed next to her other one. "Gently, like a breeze cautiously pushing the earth across the length of your hands."

Once more gaining a look of focus that sat strangely on the small girl's face, Sparrow tried again.

### Chapter 313: Getting to a Nunnery

#### Getting to a Nunnery

While doing chores in the apothecary and the workshop on Solday morning, Martel felt a tinge of anticipation that slowly grew to excitement. While he figured the party tonight would be different from last – he was not sure what exactly a ritual celebration entailed – spending the evening with Ruby felt promising. And since he still had the afternoon off to practise his Sindhian magic, he did not feel bad about being gone tonight. Especially as doing this task would pay for a lot of herbs and other ingredients, not to mention glass bottles.

At lunch, Maximilian hunted him down just as he was leaving the dining hall. "If I remember, you have no classes on Solday, correct?"

"Yeah, that's true." Martel had a feeling he was about to disappoint his friend.

"Excellent. I suggest we spend the evening in debauchery."

"I can't. I got plans already."

The mageknight gave him a suspicious look. "Not dusty tomes and monotonous spellwork, I trust?"

"No, I'm meeting someone." As much as Martel trusted Maximilian, he had no wish to explain the nature of his engagement, or why he needed money. Born to wealth, his friend would never understand.

"Ah, but you are a cad, Nordmark! That must be why we get along so well. Tell me at least you will make an appearance tomorrow in the Chamber of Earth! I know many are eager to watch your next exploits."

It seemed a waste of time, but Martel did not wish to hand out two rejections in a row. "Sure, if I got time, I'll be there." He made his escape before Maximilian could pressure him further.

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Wearing his fine clothes, with his cloak wrapped around him to hide said fact lest anyone at the Lyceum wondered at his plans, Martel began his walk towards the bridge district. He carried his shoes in his arms, protecting them from the sludge of snow and general wear of the cobblestones. A light snowfall threatened to make it worse and also weigh his cloak down, so he used his magic to push the wind away from him, granting him a bit of a reprieve from the elements.

Once he reached the Pearl and entered, he shook the snow from his cloak and glanced around. By now, the staff seemed familiar with his face; rather than approaching him with mischievous looks and insinuating offers, the serving girls simply greeted him briefly before resuming their duties.

Martel stood awkwardly for a little while, wondering if he should go look for Ruby, ask someone to find her, or perhaps go and tell Lady Pearl herself of his presence. He was spared making a decision by the arrival of his companion for the evening, her red lips twisted into a smile as their eyes met.

"Master Martel, good to see you. I believe our carriage should be ready momentarily."

The mage inclined his head in greeting, trying not to be obvious as he took in her appearance. She wore an elegant necklace with her namesake as a gemstone, which he had seen before. Her dress was a beautiful cut and looked expertly made from soft fabric, fitting well to her form. "I look forward to tonight."

Her smile renewed itself. "As do I." She glanced to one of the smaller entrances, where a man dressed for the outdoors waved at them. "Our driver is ready. No reason to delay." She took his free arm, his other still holding his shoes in a bundle, and together they walked out to the courtyard of the Pearl.

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Once underway, as the carriage rumbled on the cobbled roads of Morcaster, Martel exchanged his footwear. Ruby watched him with slight amusement. As he bent down to tie the laces, he noticed her own shoes were reasonably practical as well, clashing a little bit with the elegance of her attire.

"I suppose if there will be dancing, I should appreciate you wearing more nimble footwear," she remarked with a smirk.

Martel laughed a little, feeling too befuddled to make a witty response. Clearing his throat, he decided to go down another path of conversation. "What is this place we are going?"

"A convent for an order known as the Sisters of the Sun. Usually, none are allowed onto the inner premises of the compound beyond the outer gardens, but tonight is an exception. It is a ritual feast held to celebrate – honestly, I don't remember. The doings of some saint long ago, probably the founder of their order."

Martel had barely heard of them before, so he was not one to judge Ruby's lack of knowledge; the monastic orders had little presence in Nordmark. "And you're meeting someone?"

She nodded. "We'll be entering separately. Just walk around on your own, mingling as you see fit, but keep me within your sight. Use your magic as you know best, and when you see me leave, make your own departure soon after. We'll meet back at the carriage and go home."

"Alright. Sounds simple enough." Perhaps if it did not drag out, he could spend some time with her back at the Pearl.

Ruby took out two small objects and handed one over to him. "Your invitation. Just hand this over at the entrance."

Martel summoned a tiny flame to provide some light. He looked at a round token, twice the size of a coin. It felt like metal, perhaps iron. On one side, the sun was depicted; on the other, the bust of a hooded woman. "What should I say if someone talks to me in there?"

"No need to hide who you are. Nothing wrong with a mage attending a celebration. Though you should avoid mentioning me or why you are there. It might ruffle some feathers."

"Understood."

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The carriage stopped in a small yard nearby. Ruby led Martel through a few winding alleys before they reached a large street. In the distance, Martel thought he saw the spires of the Basilica, though the darkness made it difficult. They continued a little while until reaching a compound with great walls, looking as much a castle as a place for nuns. Yet the main gate stood open, and they stepped right through. Beyond, they found themselves in a garden with a handful of other people; some looked like guests as well, given their expensive garb, while the rest were members of the clergy.

Some of the guests loitered around, talking to each other; others walked inside, one by one, passing through the main doors to enter the compound itself. Ruby nudged Martel in that direction. "I'll follow shortly after," she told him quietly before separating.

Approaching, Martel smoothed his doublet and tried to look, if not noble, at least wealthy enough to belong. Holding out his sun token, he passed through the doors.

He noticed several things in rapid succession. Inside, the hall looked austere; stonework without the decorations or ornaments that any palace would be filled with.

On either side of the entrance stood tall women wearing yellow robes, though not of the typical kind for women; these were shorter, more practical, allowing for better movement. Furthermore, they carried staves, much like the city guard did.

Lastly, a great symbol carved into the ground lit up as he stepped onto it. Looking down, Martel recognised it as the Tyrian rune that revealed magic.

## Chapter 314: The Riddle of Three

### The Riddle of Three

As soon as the symbol below Martel's feet lit up, several of the yellow-clad women wielding staves approached him. "No magical items are allowed within the convent, milord. This should have been explained to you." The nun speaking extended her hand.

Martel stared at the palm in front of him. He figured she was waiting for him to hand over any magical artefacts on his person. Hard to do when the magic resided inside his body. "I'm sorry," he stammered, trying to buy time.

"This is a powerful light," remarked another nun, looking at the Tyrian rune beneath their feet. "I can't remember seeing it glow like this before."

The question flew through his mind why they could see the light of the symbol, given that ordinary people could not normally see purely magical effects, but he sensed now was not the time for such a discussion. More and more of the nuns appeared, almost crowding around him. He briefly wondered if he could push them all back with a good wind spell, and how much Sol would condemn him for attacking nuns in a convent.

"Young master, are you a mage?"

Martel noticed the form of address had changed. He felt that boded ill.

"No mages are invited tonight," someone else remarked.

Martel glanced over his shoulder; more members of the clergy, monks included, had gathered to block his retreat. Stars, the inquisition would strangle him alive for using magic on all these men and women of the cloth.

"Is there a problem?" A frail voice, which nonetheless managed to cut through the murmur, reached Martel; the speaker likewise parted the other people to make himself visible and stand before the young mage.

One of the yellow-clad nuns bent down to whisper in the old monk's ear. Meanwhile, Martel took deep breaths while doing his best to pretend that he felt calm.

"Young man, are you a wizard?"

Martel looked at the monk, placing his trust that his status would protect him. "I am."

"Did you come to this place with intentions of violence?"

"No, honourable father, I did not."

"Then by Sol, I swear you shall not be met by violence on these grounds either. But we are causing a stir and interrupting tonight's proceedings. Would you follow me that we may speak with only four eyes present?"

Mollified by the oath, Martel nodded. The old monk briefly whispered in the ear of the nearest nun before he turned around and began to walk across the entrance hall, and the women parted to allow Martel to follow. As he did, he stared at the back of his guide, who felt strangely familiar. It was only when he noticed that the monk wore robes made from velvet rather than wool that he remembered. He had seen him before in the Undercroft; this was the Friar, the Ninth Lord of the temple district.

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Martel followed the monk a brief distance across the entrance hall, his heart pounding and his eyes searching for an escape route. The Friar led him into a small cell, containing only a bed and a drawer, much like his own room back at the Lyceum. "The good sister will not mind if we borrow it, I'm sure," the old man said as he sat down on the bed. "Will you close the door?"

As Martel did so, he was keenly aware of being trapped inside this small room. But if they came for him, he could threaten the old monk. Since he had sworn by Sol that Martel would be allowed to leave, the mage saw no reason to feel guilty for defending himself.

"A wizard, and so young. The Lyceum has a handful of those, but only one causing so much stir in the city. Did we not meet in the Undercroft?" The Friar smiled while Martel kept silent, afraid that



saying anything could be used against him. "But now you run with the Night Knives. I heard about your dust-up at the docks." His smile vanished. "I was disappointed to hear my name had been abused to set up that little affair. Can you guess who I found when I unravelled that thread?"

Martel could, but he stuck to his strategy of silence.

"Powerful enemies for one so young. One reason I wanted to meet you. To understand your character. You must forgive an old man for his curiosity."

"Sure." That felt safe enough to say.

"In fact, before you leave, would you indulge me a little further – are you familiar with the riddle of three?"

"Uh, no."

The Friar smiled again as he looked up at the mage, still standing. "I'm glad to be the one to introduce you. Though riddle is perhaps a poor word. It is more like a question with several answers. It concerns a young acolyte – much like you – who asks the same thing of his three masters."

"Yes?"

"He says to them, 'I know all the reasons for using magic. But what is the best reason to refrain from using it?' The first archmage responds, 'You should preserve your powers when possible, as you never know when the next battle will happen.'" The Friar coughed. "With me so far?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good. The next master replies, 'Always keep your true powers hidden and others guessing.' And the third says, 'Power is a privilege, only to be used when there is no better way.' Now I ask the same of you," the old monk continued. "Which of these answers would be yours?"

Martel considered the options. He could just say something, but that might upset the Friar, which seemed unwise. Better to give a measured response. The first answer made him think of Moira, preserving spellpower and talking of battles. The second sounded like something Master Alastair might say, with his subtle ways and clever spells. The last reminded Martel of Master Fenrick, whom he rarely if ever saw use a spell, yet the lore master knew more about magic than anyone else.

"The last one," Martel finally said.

The Friar gave him a scrutinising look, making the mage wonder what thoughts churned behind the wrinkly brow. "Very well. Thank you for letting me know. Please, don't let me keep you any longer."

The whole conversation had felt almost bizarre, but Martel was not going to question his luck. He inclined his head and opened the door, quickly leaving.

Appearing in the doorway to the cell, the Friar watched the young wizard leave. One of the yellow-clad nuns appeared by his side. "You were right. A thief entered while we were busy with the mage. They broke into the vault. We're in pursuit."

"Follow the mage as well."

"Already done."

## Chapter 315: A Ruby Among Yellow

### A Ruby Among Yellow

Martel quickly left the compound, aware that everyone in the entrance hall and the enclosed garden stared at him as he passed by. He felt like the time Father Julius had caught him taking an apple from the fruit tree outside the temple in Engby, yet the priest had turned a blind eye and allowed him to leave with it.

Once back on the street, Martel took a few deep breaths before he continued towards the carriage. He had not seen any sign of Ruby as he left; presumably, she was busy talking to other guests inside. He would just have to wait for her back at the carriage. It annoyed him to think that he had disappointed her. In the future, he would pay a lot more attention to the floor of any entrance and avoid anything that remotely resembled a Tyrian rune.

Turning down the first alleyway, Martel continued his controlled breathing to relax himself. Yet something bothered him; he still felt like all eyes were upon him, even though he walked alone. Or did he? Slowing his pace a bit but still trying to look casual, Martel extended his magical sense to feel the heat around him. Something small ahead, rodents or the like; something much bigger behind him. The distance and interference from various objects scattered around the alley made it hard for him to tell exactly, but he felt confident that he sensed people following him.

He was not sure why; if the Friar or the nuns wanted anything with him, they could have done so back at the convent. Perhaps it was someone else entirely; muggers looking for an easy victim, or maybe it was just some poor soul walking home after a long day at work.

Regardless, Martel did not wish to take any chances, but nor was he interested in a confrontation. So he opted for a third option. Behind him, he summoned the brightest light he could, enough to keep anyone blind staring at it. At the same time, he broke into a run and went around the first corner he could, making his disappearance into the alleys.

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Martel kept up his quick pace until he felt certain that nobody could follow him anymore. He sensed himself lose connection to the bright flame he had summoned, which meant he had placed decent distance between himself and any would-be pursuers. And in case it really had been some innocent passer-by, Martel hoped he had not given them a heart attack.

He continued on his way, keeping his wits about him as he had gone down a different path from where they originally came, and he did not know this part of the city. Luckily, the temple district had its share of bell towers, which he could use as landmarks to navigate by.

He was nearly where he expected the carriage to be when he heard loud noises. It took him a moment to recognise the sounds of fighting. He hurried onwards. It might have nothing to do with him, but if someone innocent was in danger, he ought to help. Given the location, though, he felt a growing fear that whatever skirmish was taking place, it involved people he knew.

Turning a corner, he saw the scene ahead as he stared down the alleyway. Lady Pearl's carriage stood with the door open, the horses stamping their feet and acting nervously, and the driver was

nowhere to be seen. In front, Ruby wielded a set of daggers in a flurry, fighting several of the yellow-clad women from the convent with their staves.

Martel felt his mind boil trying to understand. He could think of no reason why Ruby would be fighting with the nuns, and something told him that he ought to side with the members of the clergy. Attacking them just felt outright wrong.

At the same time, he could not bear the thought of betraying Ruby. Seeing her fight, even in her desperate situation, he admired the flow of her movements, how she constantly dodged attacks like the most beautiful dance. He finally understood why her dresses always sat tight to her form.

But she was outnumbered, and the short reach of the weapons meant she had no hope of hurting her enemies; if Martel did not intervene, the outcome was a given.

And still, the thought of revealing himself and unleashing his powers on a group of nuns made him hesitate. It would not be difficult for them to guess that he was the same mage that had visited the convent just now, and this seemed like something the inquisitors would gladly use as an excuse to strangle him. But perhaps, taking a cue from Master Alastair's lessons, he could help Ruby without making himself known.

Pouring his magic into the very earth below him, Martel raised up a clump of dirt and turned it into an elemental bolt that shot straight through the air and smashed into a nun, hitting the back of her head. With a groan, she fell forward, staggering to get back on her feet. Without waiting, Martel launched another at a second target. And a third.

As the only one looking in his direction, Ruby alone looked down the alley to see the wizard at work. Their eyes met, or at least Martel thought so; the distance and the darkness of the night made it hard to tell. It lasted only a moment; taking advantage of the gaps in the ranks of her enemies, Ruby bolted and disappeared.

Martel hid himself, watching as the nuns set off in pursuit; it took a little while for those hit by his spells to get back on their feet and follow as well. The Friar's words about the riddle of three returned to him; he wondered if he had been right to use his powers, or if this had been one time when he should have refrained.

When everything seemed quiet, he tiptoed forward until he reached the carriage. Sticking his hand inside, he grabbed his boots. Those acquired, he scurried away to be out of sight, exchanged his footwear, and began a long walk home to the Lyceum.

## Chapter 316: Mending Fences

### Mending Fences

Martel made it back to the Lyceum in an almost reasonable fashion, but the events of the evening left their mark on him, keeping him from sleep. Meeting the Friar had been strange enough; stumbling upon Ruby fighting nuns had increased the bizarreness of it all by an order of magnitude. Martel presumed he had done right by helping her escape, but it nagged him that he did not know what had transpired. What had led to the fight? Something must have happened in the convent with Ruby while he spoke to the Friar. He would have to find her and ask, assuming she would tell him; Martel could not dismiss the troubling notion that he had somehow been taken advantage of.

Bleary-eyed, he dragged himself to the Circle of Fire in the morning. He assumed they would continue practising the flame wall spell, which fortunately he did not require much focus to do; even in his diminished state, he cast the spell far better than the other acolytes.

Yet as Moira arrived, she declared that they would practise duelling; Martel got the feeling that she had noticed his weary state and decided to punish him this way. Which was exactly what happened; paired against Harriet, Martel took several hits while offering less in return.

"You should consider tomorrow," his teacher remarked to him, though she did so quietly without the others hearing. "The punishment for a loss still applies to you."

In other words, he could expect another skirmish against the mageknights, and detention afterwards once the fire acolytes bit the dust. Sighing, Martel stretched his neck and did his best to concentrate as they began another round of duels.

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Lunch offered a reprieve before the second lesson in fire magic, which Martel spent trying to figure out how to handle tomorrow's fight against the mageknights. A letter, written in a recognisable hand, interrupted his thoughts. As he opened the envelope and unfolded the letter, a gold coin fell into his hand.

Master Martel,

I thank you for your help last night. Due to the events that transpired, I suggest you remain at your home for the time being. Enclosed, you shall find the payment as promised. Should this be absent, you might want to inquire among the staff at your school, as I can assure you the money was enclosed when this letter was delivered.

Lady Pearl

Well, at least he had been paid. But this command, disguised as a suggestion, that he ought to keep his distance felt like confirmation that something had gone wrong last night. Martel did not intend to let this rest; yet for now, he had more pressing matters. He needed to figure something out, so he did not end up with detention after every single Malday for the rest of the year. Glancing around, Martel went off in search of Maximilian.

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For the second lesson in fire magic, they resumed practising the flame wall. Apparently, Moira felt Martel had been sufficiently punished for his sleeping habits, or perhaps she figured he was sufficiently rested now that it would not work. Either way, when they were given a short break to recover their focus, Martel approached Harriet. "You're progressing nicely with the spell."

She narrowed her eyes. "What do you want?"

"Whatever differences we have, I think there's one thing we agree on."

"What's that?"

"That nobody works harder than us, and there's no better mages than us fire acolytes. But still we have to listen to arrogant mageknights brag and belittle us, all because the fights are tilted in their favour," Martel said.

"I guess. So what? They're not going to change how the practices work just because we think it's unfair."

"No." Martel looked at her straight in the eyes. "But tonight, we got a chance to prove them wrong."

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After last bell had rung, the acolytes of the Lyceum gathered in the Chamber of Earth. Murmurs arose at seeing no less than two fire acolytes. Battlemages were a rare sight in the sparring club, after all. Immediately, several began speculating whether they would duel each other as they had last time.

"I usually don't bother," Harriet mumbled as she scowled in every direction at the talking acolytes. "We're not going to be fighting other mages on the battlefield anyway, so what's the point?"

"Generally true," Martel admitted, though he still felt lots could be learnt from fighting mages using different kinds of magic. "But tonight, we have been issued a challenge by some mouth-breathers who think they're better than us. Are you comfortable with our strategy?"

"Yeah, it's fine. Though I'm rather drained of spellpower after this morning's lesson. I'm only doing one fight."

Maximilian approached, handing them staves from the school's armoury. "You fire sprites ready?"

"Where's the two bastards?" Harriet asked.

A pair of mageknights stepped forward. Martel did not know either of them; they had only become acolytes this year, and he had no classes with them. "You better watch your mouth," one of them threatened while her companion raised his axe in a menacing manner.

"You know the best way to shut us up." Martel smiled, and the four mages about to duel took position opposite each other.

With a grin, Maximilian looked around, seeing everyone watching. "Fight!"

Both mageknights swung their weapons at the opponent in front of them. Both battlemages raised their shield to take the first blow while also releasing a fire bolt at the same target. Struck twice in a row, the female warrior fell to her knees in agony.

Suddenly alone and facing two battlemages, the remaining mageknight panicked and swung his weapon wildly. Harriet had no problem parrying with her staff while Martel released his fire bolts. Within a few moments, the fight was over.

Harriet looked as the two warriors got back on their feet with dejected expressions. "If you ever speak ill of us again, we'll be right back here. Remember how easy it was for us to take you down." She turned around and left the Chamber of Earth, Martel doing the same with a smile.

The female mageknight looked towards Maximilian. "What did she mean? We never said anything about them. You told us that the gangly fellow wanted to challenge us."

"Just words in the heat of the moment, I imagine. Now, who bet against the battlemages?"

Chapter 317: Cold Thoughts

Cold Thoughts

During Martel's morning shift at the apothecary, Mistress Rana approached him with a list of herbs and other ingredients. "Time for you to learn another recipe. Study all of these in time for our work on Manday."

Martel happily accepted the note, glancing at the scribbled words. He recognised some of these while others were unknown. He already looked forward to going through the herbal compendium and learning all he could; every new recipe was like learning a spell, giving him something new he could do with alchemy.

As Mistress Rana left, Nora approached and looked over his shoulder. "Potion of cold, if my memory serves me right. Looks like she's teaching you along the same pattern as me."

"Great, I've been feeling way too hot for the last few months."

Nora laughed and resumed her work.

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During the first lesson of combat today, Martel had gone easy on the other acolytes. He had played defensively, refraining from hitting them anywhere it might hurt or humiliate them. Whether any of them had noticed, he could not say. But at least he had not caused further enmity between them.

When it came time for the second lesson, they all noticed as Moira entered the gymnasium to watch them brawl against the mageknights. The other fire acolytes did not react noticeably; to them, nothing especially was at stake. For Martel, threatened with detention, the situation was different, but he hid any reaction to her appearance rather than allow anyone to guess his concern.

"I've been thinking," he began to say, making the other fire acolytes look at him. "We're getting good with the flame wall spell, but we can't risk trying the same strategy every time. They'll know where to focus their efforts or run around us to outflank us."

"Well, what are you suggesting?" Harriet asked, her voice neutral.

Encouraged by the fact that she out of everyone seemed willing to work together, Martel outlined his plan.

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"Begin!"

Eight mageknights rushed across the open space to close the distance between them and the four fire acolytes. Rather than fire bolts whizzing through the air, several fire walls erupted in the space between the combatants. It broke the charge, as some of them immediately recoiled while others could not halt their momentum. As everything suddenly turned to confusion, the elemental mages seized the advantage. Whenever a mageknight appeared past the flaming walls, a pair of fire acolytes threw their bolts at the opponent, using their magical shield to resist any blow the attacker might land first.

With the mageknights in disarray, unable to attack in a coordinated fashion or bring permanent pressure against the battlemages, the skirmish was quickly decided without a single fire acolyte falling. As the warriors got back on their feet, licking the wounds to their pride and recovering from the sting of multiple spells, Martel and his comrades exchanged slaps and triumphant outbursts.

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Feeling good, Martel ate his supper with a sense of satisfaction. Despite the differences and hostility between them, the fire acolytes had worked together. Even if Moira continued to pit them against each other, hopefully today's lesson would stick with them and let them rise above it for future challenges.

Added to that, he would learn a new recipe on Mandy. While the potion in itself did not sound terribly exciting, it was another step forward. And the sooner he learned it, the sooner Mistress Rana would teach him another.

Besides that, being spared detention this fiveday meant his schedule was looking less burdensome. He might even have time to go out with Maximilian one of these days. As it would soon be spring festival, opportunities should abound for a good night out.

While he still felt bothered about what had transpired at the Sisters of the Sun, at least Martel had received his payment. Which meant that he had plenty of coin for more alchemy supplies or a night of festivities in addition to paying Julia's rent. With the first month of spring having arrived, Martel counted out fifteen pieces of silver and left the Lyceum to do just that.

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While the calendar claimed winter to have ended, the weather disagreed. Snow began to fall, if only lightly. Hurrying through the streets, Martel made his way to the docks and Julia's insula. He knocked on the door to the office of the reeve responsible for the building.

"I've come to pay the rent for my chamber," Martel said as the door opened.

"Yes, master mage. I remember which one." The man inclined his head and accepted the money.

"All to your satisfaction? The mattress I provided and so on, everything good?"

"Yes, fine." Martel assumed so, since Julia had not said anything. She probably would not be picky about such things anyway. "I'll be back next month."

"Of course, good master."

Martel left to go up the stairs and reach Julia's floor. As he knocked to announce his presence, nothing happened. It seemed he had caught her away from home. He would have to come later this fiveday, maybe, just to check on her.

Nothing further to accomplish, Martel left the insula to walk home. The librarian left his post once last bell had come and gone, meaning nobody could open the upper floors of the library for him; so if Martel wanted to study the herbs mentioned on Mistress Rana's list, he had to get back before then.

The snowfall intensified as Martel walked, making him shiver slightly with cold. He began raising the wind around himself, using it to push the worst of it away, when for some reason, his conversation with the Friar came to mind. Specifically, the riddle of three and when to use his power. Seeing the others on the street hurrying about, similarly exposed to the elements, Martel realised he was spending magic simply to provide himself a little unnecessary comfort. If others could handle the cold, so could he. Ceasing his spellcasting, Martel increased his pace instead.

Chapter 318: Helping the Hunter

Helping the Hunter

As Martel arrived at the Circle of Fire, he glanced surreptitiously at the other acolytes, wondering if yesterday's victory over the mageknights had made a difference. It did not appear so, at least not on the surface. They still stood scattered, waiting in silence rather than engage each other or even just be in close proximity.

Moira appeared, and by the snide look on her face, Martel had a guess at what she intended to say. "Well, you finally pulled yourselves together. Yesterday was an adequate performance, your first one. But just like you, they'll learn from this. They'll recognise the signs of your spellcasting, when and where to move, and so on. And of course, do not expect the Khivans to give you four or five attempts at defeating them. So if any of you felt good about yesterday, even satisfied, I suggest you clear such self-indulgent feelings from your mind."

Pretty much what Martel had expected to hear. If nothing else, her remarks had begun to affect him less and less, being predictable.

"Alright, since at least you seem to understand the potential of the flame wall spell, continue practising it. If you want to be useful in an actual fight, there can't be any delay between your spellcasting and when it appears. You too, fire-touched," she added with a glance at Martel. "Don't think yours is good enough."

"I'd never dare," he mumbled, eliciting a nervous chuckle from Edward, close enough to hear the remark. Unfortunately, he knew she was right. It still cost him valuable moments from when he started to when he finished casting the spell; doing it instantly would allow him to spend that time shooting off a second spell instead. Giving the other acolyte a look of shared suffering, Martel began practising.

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Picking up a note from the desk in the entrance hall, Martel momentarily thought it might be another message from Lady Pearl, and he felt ambivalent given all his questions about the other night. But as he unfolded the parchment, he remembered that she always sent letters in an envelope.

Dear Martel,

It has been a while. I would be obliged if you would consider paying us a visit in our home.

You know the place.

Marcus sends his regards.

Flora

Martel frowned a little, curious at the reason for the message. The Night Knives did not seem the sort to invite people around for purely social visits, but nothing in the note gave him an indication of what it might be about. If simply an offer of work, he assumed Flora would have mentioned it. Could it be a task of a secretive nature?

No mention of a specific date either, so he assumed this was not time sensitive. Soliday was always a good day for such errands, with his afternoon being free. Summoning a flame to burn the note, mostly out of instinct and principle, Martel went off to practise his Sindhian magic.



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As the bell rang, a handful of novices left the Hall of Elements, busy talking among themselves. They only noticed just in time as an old woman with a wild expression and wilder hair in a purple robe strode down the hall, walking straight through their formation as they hurried to get out of the way. Without sparing them a glance, Moira continued into the chamber beyond, where she found the Master of Elements.

"You wanted to talk."

Alastair looked at her and made a quick gesture, summoning winds to close the doors. "I did. But I was happy to come to you, which I also think my note said."

The Mistress of Fire gave a shrug. "I'm not so decrepit that a walk down the corridor will crush me."

He laughed. "Perish the thought. You are the most formidable mage I've ever known."

"Flattery? What do you want?"

"Nothing of the sort. I just wanted to ask about your students."

She gave him a scrutinising look. "Let me guess, your chief concern is the gangly one, who also happens to be fire-touched."

"I am transparent, I suppose." Alastair gave a smile that looked almost boyish. "But given he's only had a year as a novice, and he'll only get the same as an acolyte, I just wanted your assessment of his progress."

"Bah, you really have any doubt as to that? He is my most gifted student since you. Out of my current acolytes studying with him, he'll be more equipped than the rest to fight as a battlemage. That can't be a surprise to you."

It was Alastair's turn to shrug. "I just wanted it confirmed. I spent a lot of time teaching the boy. The thought that it might all go to waste thanks to some Khivan cannon..." He took a deep breath rather than finishing his thought.

An expression ran across Moira's face. "Damn you, boy, I spend all my time trying not to think about that. You have no right to remind me!"

Alastair's face turned apologetic. "Of course, I'm sorry."

"The last one they sent to the Tenth Legion, I don't think she lasted longer than three months." Moira's voice quivered. "As for the siege of Nahavand, I'm lucky if they last a year before I get told."

"I know, Moira, I know."

"I keep a tally. I have trained thirty-seven battlemages since the war started. Only fourteen are still alive." Her shoulders shook.

Alastair put his arms around the old woman. "You shouldn't torment yourself like that."

"I try to hate them. It's the only way it wouldn't hurt. And it should be so easy, when they look at me with their dumb eyes and lack of understanding, like rabbits staring at the hunter. I want to grab

them by the shoulders and yell at them to leave, to flee! But all I do is lead them to the hunt. And every time the hunter takes another, I wonder what I could have done to prevent it."

"It's alright," Alastair mumbled, stroking her hair. "It's alright."

## Chapter 319: Warning Signs

### Warning Signs

Martel sat in Master Fenrick's classroom with anticipation in his stomach. Studying Archean was all well and good, but learning the Tyrian runes would actually give Martel new magic, along with insight into how many of the things in Morcaster worked. Just around the Lyceum, Martel had noticed countless examples of the small symbols. He knew they were used to push the water around the system of pipes, and the clerks likewise used it to send messages swiftly through tubes. Not to mention, access to the door of the library's upper floor, freeing Martel from needing the librarian to open it for him.

"You'll all be happy to hear that you've passed Archean, even if some certainly did the task better than others," Master Fenrick announced. "Ideally, we'd spend time delving into the many mistakes repeated again and again, but since the school prefers you continue straight on to Tyrian runes, we'll do that."

Martel could not disagree with the priorities of the Lyceum on that account.

"Now, there's a number of very basic runes that even thick-headed acolytes should be able to learn and activate. For instance, I'm sure you've seen how messages are sent across the Lyceum from the entrance hall," the teacher continued. "That is done by inscribing a rune of attraction upon the parchment and activating it using the right Tyrian word. Which means, you'll be learning as many runes as you can, but also basic Tyrian vocabulary."

Several of the mageknights groaned at the realisation that this would be another language class.

For his part, Master Fenrick smiled. "The second floor of the library has a few tomes containing our collected knowledge of the Tyrian alphabet, along with descriptions of their functions and the activating word. Though some of it remains speculative."

Martel raised his hand. "Pardon me, master, but how exactly does it work? How do we activate a rune?"

"If you'd be patient a moment longer," the teacher replied with slight reproach, "I'm getting to that. Tyrian runes work on intent and vocalisation. In other words, you must know and wish for the effect to happen, and you must speak the appropriate word. Do not ask me the lore behind this, as we don't have time to delve into such."

That was the first time Martel ever heard Master Fenrick resist going into the theory behind magic.

"No, first, we'll work on teaching you all some basic runes and practise how to pronounce their associated words. Trust me, it'll take you a good while to even come close to approximating the right sounds." Master Fenrick took out a large piece of parchment and unfolded it, showing them the rune upon it. "This, perhaps the most useful symbol you'll ever learn, is the sign of warning. The associated word is *vara*. Repeat that after me..."

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After two hours, Martel felt almost dizzy from studying the runes. They had yet to actually try activating any – Master Fenrick said that in-depth knowledge was a prerequisite – but Martel could already feel the potential of it; a whole new branch of magic opening up to him, much like how Sindhian magic had given him alchemy.

It also made Martel curious about the rune token that he always carried in his pocket, given to him last year by Regnar. He had yet to understand its actual purpose, but he was starting to have some idea. Furthermore, realising that the library held books describing the runes, maybe he could actually find out. He would look into that tonight, though first, he had another afternoon lesson waiting for him in Mistress Rana's laboratory.

He saw all the different ingredients lying on a worktable that she had told him to study. Like the last recipe, all of it was different parts of plants. He wondered if those were just the simplest potions to make; probably the easiest to gather ingredients for at any rate.

The alchemist pointed at the reagents. "Which one is this?"

"Hemlock. A few drops can be used to help someone suffering from seizures. In larger quantities, it can be paralytic or even lethal, so great care must be taken, and the age and size of the patient must be taken carefully into account before administering any remedy containing this plant," Martel recited.

Mistress Rana nodded in approval, and they continued down the table as Martel described everything he had memorised. Satisfied, she gestured for him to gather everything up and go to the fireplace to begin his brewing.

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The process proved much the same as Martel's previous attempts at alchemy, except rather than boil, the liquid in the cauldron should be simmering at most. Too much heat destroyed the cooling properties of the ingredients, which made a certain kind of sense. Though it still felt strange to think about. It reminded Martel of how little he actually knew, and how much he had to learn.

Working at less heat also meant more time to finish the brewing. By Martel's estimate, though he would have to go to his chamber and check his Khivan clocks to be sure, he worked for more than three hours before Mistress Rana declared the potion ready to be bottled. As before, she poured, allowing him to focus on trapping the magic inside the vial. It coalesced into a blue glow. And as Martel closed his hand around the glass, he found it cold to the touch even though it had been simmering less than a minute ago.

"I suggest you chain your curiosity and save this potion for a hot summer's day. You drink it now, nothing will make you feel warm, and you'll have a long, sleepless night ahead of you," Mistress Rana warned him, though she did so with almost a twinkle in her eye. He could barely recall when he had ever seen her so expressive before.

"Understood, mistress. Thank you for teaching me."

"Yes, yes. Clean up your worktable."

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In the evening, Martel went to the library as intended. He located one of the volumes containing all the known lore regarding Tyrian runes. While the book itself was heavy and expensive, Martel soon

realised it was because lots of the descriptions contained meandering guesses and considerations that did not necessarily correspond to the truth. In fact, leafing through the book, it became apparent that Asterian insight into the symbols was limited and suffered from a great deal of uncertainty. Which seemed a great shame; simply from what Martel had seen, from how the few known symbols were used, the applications were extensive.

He made a few attempts to find the symbols inscribed on his rune token, but he had a hard time recognising any. Either because they were missing, or perhaps whoever made these entries had copied the designs incorrectly.

Yet going through them, Martel suddenly saw one that looked familiar. Not from his own token, but one he had seen in Lady Pearl's study. It seemed among the more advanced symbols; much of the discussion about this, as written in the text, went over Martel's head. But from what he could deduce, this was a rune of suppression, used to nullify other runes, much like how gold suppressed his own magic. It raised one question and made another return to Martel's mind; why would Lady Pearl possess such a token, and what exactly had he helped Ruby accomplish at the convent of the Sisters of the Sun?

## Chapter 320: Sharpening Knives

### Sharpening Knives

Making ink on his own in the small laboratory attached to Master Jerome's workshops, Martel had time to think. As his hands went through the familiar motions, his mind considered how to spend the rest of his day. He had previously decided to go visit Flora, as her message had asked him to do. Since he would already be in the bridge district, it would be a short trip to continue to the Pearl. While the owner of that establishment had told him to lie low, he now got the feeling it had not been for his sake, but rather hers. And although that suggested she would not be inclined to receive him, let alone explain anything, perhaps Martel could find someone else more amenable to him.

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Still undecided whether to pursue this business with Lady Pearl, Martel decided to postpone the decision. For the time being, he went to the bridge district to visit his former comrades-at-arms.

Reaching the quarters of the mercenary band, Martel noticed changes. Even standing outside the walls enclosing their small yard, he heard noises and voices reaching the outside. As he knocked on the door, a warrior unknown to him opened and glanced at the visitor.

"I'm here to see Flora," Martel announced, trying not to look intimidated by the imposing fighter in his Night Knife surcoat.

The warrior lit up in a smile. "Of course, you must be the wizard. She and Marcus have spoken of you. Come in!"

Stepping inside, Martel saw the signs of transformation that his ears had already suggested. Lots of wooden dolls for training filled the space, along with crates holding supplies and several weapon racks under awnings. Half a dozen men milled around the space, doing various training exercises; two of them wrestled against each other with a few onlookers yelling out encouragements.

Passing through, Martel entered the house itself. Several sat around the table in the middle of the room, with another attending the cooking fire in one end. "Martel!" Flora appeared, coming down from the upper floor. The others present cast curious glances at him, some of them nodding in greeting. The earthmage took him by the arm and led him outside again. "Let's take a stroll on the street. Too many people in here, I could use getting out."

They left the house and began a leisurely walk. "Your companions from Aquila have arrived."

She nodded. "Some fivedays ago. Though we haven't done much. Yet."

"Is this why you sent me a message?"

"Indeed. Do you remember I told you of a quarrel between Lady Pearl and the Comtesse?"

"Uh, vaguely." It took Martel a moment to think back, but he recalled his very first task with the Night Knives, collecting debts in the noble district.

"Things are heating up between them, and the good lady has heard a rumour that her rival is employing magic."

"Wait, I thought that whole Pact of theirs prevented any open conflict?"

"It does, which is why they are both acting through proxies. We don't know yet who the Comtesse has employed, but this is why Lady Pearl is happy our numbers have grown. If need be, she can call on us, which will seem like less of an escalation than sending in her own people."

"But given that there are a lot of you Knives now, why do you need me? I assume that's why we're talking, because you want me to join in," Martel said.

"Perceptive. And yes. If there is magic on the other side, whether a mage or something else, the best answer is more magic on our side."

"I appreciate the call, but I can't get mixed up in this anymore. It was close enough last time with the inquisitors."

"Those bumbling fools," Flora scoffed. "They couldn't find their buttocks in a basket."

Martel laughed, in agreement with the sentiment.

"Though that reminds me, I should thank you. I don't know how you and that little street rat got hold of a healing elixir, but it saved my life." She squeezed his arm as they walked down the street.

"I was happy to."

"In that spirit, I won't pressure you. I already owe you a lot. If you don't want to be part of this, I accept that," Flora declared. "I just wanted you to have the offer, in case you still needed a bit of coin."

"I appreciate that. I'm good, but I'll let you know if it ever changes."

"Alright." They stopped, and Flora gave him a quick hug. "I'll let Marcus know you came by. One of these days, the three of us will get together just for drinks, nothing else."

"Sounds like an excellent idea to me."

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As Flora returned to the home of the Night Knives, Martel could no longer delay his decision. Go home and forget about runes, Ruby, and nuns? Or let his need to know guide him, even if it kicked up a hornet's nest. Taking a deep breath, Martel walked towards The River Pearl.

It was still reasonably early in the day, at least for an establishment that did most of its business at night; the sun had yet to set. A handful of patrons still frequented the place, but otherwise it was quiet, and Martel had no trouble gaining the attention of a waitress. "Is Ruby around? I should like to speak with her."

The young woman gave him a quick glance over. "You're the wizard, aye? I'll let her know."

"Many thanks."

Martel waited only a brief while before his former companion joined him. "Martel, I didn't expect to see you." Despite her smile and neutral words, he got the impression she would have preferred not to see him at all.

He saw no need to dally with circumspect words. "I want to know what you were doing Soliday night."

"Right. There was a misunderstanding, I had to get out of there quickly, and the yellow ladies weren't happy that I left without an explanation. That's all."

"I saved you," he reminded her. "And I saw the rune stone that Lady Pearl got from the skáld. It suppresses the effect of other runes. Much like the one at the entrance to the convent."

She let out a deep breath. "Alright, let's not talk here." She turned around and walked away, going out to the inner courtyard of the Pearl, Martel following right after. Glancing around, seeing nobody within earshot, she spoke again with a quiet voice. "The Sisters of the Sun perform an important duty for the city. In their vaults, they store the wills of anyone in Morcaster with something worth leaving to their children. Including one Lord Thierry."

Martel frowned, wondering where exactly this was going, or if she was spinning some long-winded yarn to allay his suspicions. For now, he let her continue.

"Lord Thierry is a long time – friend of Lady Pearl. In fact, he owns the Pearl. The tavern, that is. But he is old and dying. His family has no regard for my mistress and refuses her to visit him." Ruby looked up at Martel. "We needed to know who will inherit the Pearl, in case they'll try to take it away from us."

"So you stole the will from the convent?" Martel could not imagine the audacity of stealing from a sacred place.

"Just a copy. They always make sure to have several, the good Sisters."

"Does it really matter that much? I'm sure given her wealth, Lady Pearl could simply buy another place."

"It is more complicated than that. For one, this establishment is the heart of all her activities. It would cause major disruption to relocate all of that. And while that could perhaps be tolerated, if we left the Pearl, it would give others an opportunity to move in. Take over not only the place, but also its reputation and our business."

It was hard to understand how one place could matter that much, though Martel admitted his knowledge of commerce, including the illicit kind, was lacking. But this still left him with the most important question. "But why did you bring me along? You clearly knew enough about this place that you must have known I would be discovered as a mage the moment I crossed the threshold."

Ruby gave him an apologetic smile. "I needed a distraction."

That was all Martel was to these people. No different than Kerra. He had thought – or hoped – that Ruby would prove to be more than that. He had been naïve, and more than that, he was tired of learning this lesson. This time, he would remember what happened when he dealt with one of the Nine Lords. At least he got paid for his troubles. "Goodbye, Ruby." He turned around and left.