

## Firebrand 321

### Chapter 321: If the Prize is Right

#### If the Prize is Right

When Martel woke, it was not only the beginning of a new day, or a new fiveday; it was the start of the spring festival. He had paid this no heed, given his busy schedule. He could not imagine having the time to go out night after night; staying up late meant lack of sleep, which impacted his performance in class, which would get him detention.

Still, just the excited talk around the tables already at breakfast had an effect on him. Everyone seemed in a better mood, happy to have winter behind them and a whole fiveday of festivities and entertainment ahead. Perhaps Martel could spare a few hours, just a short trip into the city to enjoy himself and the company of his close friends; he had earned as much, he felt.

He did have Julia and his alchemy; he would have to find time to stop by at least once, just to make sure she was fine. It might make sense to wait until he learned more useful recipes before spending too much silver on ingredients and the like; while the potion of warmth was useful for Julia, she seemed disinclined to use it, and the weather was getting warmer anyway.

Reversely, the potion of cold might be nice to have on a hot summer's day, but for now, it felt a waste to produce a lot of those. Maybe he could ask Mistress Rana to teach him something specifically; he recalled how she had once given him a small vial that worked as a powerful pain relief. Potions with such effects felt like something very useful to learn.

But all such speculations and pursuits would have to wait; the first lesson of fire magic awaited him, and as the bell rang, Martel jumped from his chair and hurried to the Circle of Fire.

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Later that day, he found a message waiting for him. Just a note, no envelope, and he did not recognise the handwriting.

Master Martel,

You are courteously invited to our spring festivities at the Four Flagon Tavern in the bridge district, newly opened. We hope to have the pleasure of your company soon. The first round is on the house.

No signature. How strange. For a moment, Martel wondered if it was a trap of some sort before dismissing the notion. Too much time spent with Nine Lords and Night Knives made him see enemies everywhere.

But just in case, it would not hurt to show up with a mageknight by his side. It had been a while since their last night out, after all. "Max, hey, Max!"

The mageknight turned around, waiting for Martel to approach him in the hallway. "What is amiss?"

"Nothing amiss. I've been told of a new place opening up in the bridge district." Martel glanced down at the note. "The Four Flagon Tavern. Supposed to be a good crowd there, with the festivities and all. Want to go tonight?"

To Martel's surprise, his friend did not jump at the chance, nor did he give an outright reason against. Instead, Maximilian seemed strangely unsure of what to say, which was most unlike him. "I

like the idea, but I was thinking tonight – you've been doing so well in the sparring matches, are you not intrigued to go tonight?"

Martel shrugged. "I don't see much to be gained. I feel I have learned what I could. I'd rather spend an evening with a bit of fun for once."

Maximilian scratched the back of his head, looking apprehensive. Martel could only recall seeing him this way before when hiding something. "Right, I get that. I was just talking to some of the other mageknights though..."

"Max, what's going on?" Martel crossed his arms, waiting for an answer.

"Alright, the others did not want me to tell you, because they thought it might influence the fights. Basically, some of them have been trying to arrange duels between you and anyone foolhardy enough to take you on. Every time I can announce that you are coming to fight, it makes me a hero."

"What, like in The Broken Crown? Max," Martel simply exclaimed, packing his disappointment into the final word.

"I understand why you might feel bothered, but really, everyone is impressed by you. The odds of you losing are reaching four to one by now!"

Martel stared at his friend. "You're gambling on me fighting?"

"Just a little, to add some excitement." Maximilian cleared his throat. "Now that you are saying it out loud, I see why you might dislike the notion."

"Wait. I want you to set up a fight tonight."

The mageknight looked at him in surprise. "Really? Against whom?"

"Any pair of warriors ready to lose."

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Martel stood in the Chamber of Earth, getting the measure of his two opponents. One was Julian, whom he had handily defeated before. He did not know the other. Unlike last time, Julian seemed less self-assured, looking at Martel with grim determination. The warriors had taken position in front of him, side-by-side; it was easy to imagine that as the fight began, they would approach him from his left and his right at the same time.

"Fight!"

Martel raised his shield as the first thing, knowing he would take at least one blow. For his second spell, he cast a flame wall. Splitting the small battlefield in half, he trapped Julian on the same side as himself, letting his burning wall surround them in a circle. As expected, Julian's axe struck him straight on the head, but his shield kept him safe. Knowing he would still be inferior in a fight based on weapons, Martel unleashed a fire ray to quickly take out one opponent, just in case the other found the courage to jump through Martel's wall of flames.

The fire ray brought Julian to his knees. He lashed out with his axe, but Martel stepped back to avoid it, all the while keeping both of his active spells running. He felt the strain, making his mouth dry and his head pound as two magical effects both demanded his attention, but he held fast. In front of him, Julian threw aside his weapons and yielded.

Dispelling both his effects, Martel saw his other opponent as the wall of flames disappeared. As Martel was prepared for this to happen, he reacted first, landing a fire bolt. He had to parry a swift retaliatory attack before he could launch his second bolt, and it proved enough; the mageknight gave up as Julian had done. As people cheered and applauded, Martel claimed victory.

Maximilian walked over, slapping him on the shoulder. "Damn impressive, Nordmark!"

"Thanks. And my bet?"

"Let me collect your winnings for you," the mageknight grinned.

## Chapter 322: A Dramatic Reveal

### A Dramatic Reveal

Martel wished that Maximilian had told him about the gambling in the Chamber of Earth long before. Simply by wagering a bit of silver and spending a few minutes casting spells, Martel had earned as much as one outing with the Night Knives. While he found it hard to respect the young nobles so willing to gamble away their wealth, he could not complain when it benefited him. If he could keep this going, he would not have to worry about earning coin from any dubious sources such as Lady Pearl.

He did notice during the second combat lesson next day, how several of the mageknights scowled in his direction; him beating two of them at the same time without any advantage probably did not sit well with them. But Martel had no reason to care about their wounded pride. If they wanted a rematch, they would have to risk silver.

Moira did not appear, giving Martel a reprieve from the threat of detention as well. All in all, Malday's lessons went well, and Martel had an evening out with his friends to look forward to. But first, before the Four Flagon Tavern awaited them, Martel had another errand.

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Martel's destination was the harbour, which took him straight through the market. This suited him as well, as his purse felt full, and he was in the mood to spend. He picked out a wooden comb for his first purchase before finding a stall offering honey cakes. His purchases done, Martel continued to the docks and Julia's insula.

She was home this time, letting him in. "I brought a few things." Martel handed over the honey cake first, which she grabbed with both hands and began biting into as she sat down on her mattress.

"Thanks," she mumbled between chewing. "Aren't you going to eat yours?"

"Both for you."

"That's nice." Julia broke off a big part of her current cake and handed it to him. "You should at least taste it."

"Alright." Martel smiled, accepting the piece. "I also got you this." Placing the piece of honey cake in his mouth with one hand, he handed over the comb. "I figured you'd like one of these."

Julia accepted the comb and began running it through her hair, though it immediately got stuck on knots. "I haven't done that in a long time."

"Well, now you can." Martel's eyes fell on the small cauldron in the corner of the room. "Oh, my teacher has taught me a new recipe, though probably it won't be that interesting. It keeps you cold, which we don't really need."

"What about a potion that makes you sleep?" Julia asked.

He gave an inspecting look. "You have trouble sleeping?"

"Sometimes. My dreams aren't nice, so I wake up, and then I can't fall asleep again. Which sometimes makes me so tired, I wish I could sleep, no matter how bad the dreams."

"I understand," Martel said, even if he could not imagine having nightmares so evil, they would keep him awake. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks." She carefully put the comb next to her doll and resumed eating her honey cake.

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From the harbour, Martel went straight to the bridge district. It took him a little while to find his destination, having to ask the locals for direction, but eventually, he stood before the Four Flagon Tavern. The building was large, certainly able to accommodate a great number of patrons and host festivities. It was built in stone rather than wood, which was typical in the northern part of the quarter, near the noble district. The sun had already set and last bell rung, and the place seemed busy with traffic in and out of the doors.

Entering, Martel found the indoors suited to the outer appearance. Nothing looked to be in disrepair; tables and chairs were in good condition, tapestries decorated the walls, and the serving staff wore good clothing without stains or signs of wear. Plenty of seats were taken by customers in high spirits. It made Martel wonder why he had never heard of this place before, considering he had frequented the bridge district often. Though granted, when it came to visiting taverns, he had never had reasons to seek elsewhere than The River Pearl in this neighbourhood.

He walked around a little while, looking for Maximilian. Sets of stairs led both up and down, which felt unusual. An upper floor was customary, but it looked like this establishment also served customers in the cellars; such a location was typically only ever used for storage.

Just when Martel figured he would have to look elsewhere, an arm shot up and waved to get his direction. Following the signal, Martel found his friend seated at a small table, defending an empty chair from would-be robbers in need of seating. A full mug stood alone, waiting for him; Maximilian had his in his hand.

Taking a seat, Martel grabbed the tankard. "Much obliged." They clanked their drinking vessels together, and both took a sip.

"Any idea who sent you that message?" asked the mageknight.

"I don't see anyone I recognise." Martel shrugged.

"Well, they were not lying. When I went to order, someone asked for my name. Once I gave it, these were on the house." Maximilian gestured towards their ale.

Curious – even though the note had been sent to Martel, they also knew and included Maximilian.

Glancing around, sipping from his mug, Martel noticed a large group of people appearing from the basement. "Hang on, what's going on?" he asked, watching scores coming up the stairs to fill the common room.

"Maybe they closed down the lower room, forcing everyone up," Maximilian suggested.

"Could be." Martel shrugged and continued to drink.

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With the people from downstairs, the place was packed, and Martel did not notice as someone wove through the crowd towards him. Just as the man reached the two acolytes, Maximilian looked up with a frown; next, their new companion slapped his hand down on Martel's shoulder. "You came!"

Taken aback, Martel glanced up to see a familiar face. It was the leader of the wandering troupe that also employed Regnar. "Theo! So you sent the message!"

The storyteller grinned. "Indeed I did! We haven't forgotten what you did for us."

"Why all the secrecy?"

"For dramatic flair, of course," came the reply, to which Maximilian snorted. "What do you think of our new home?"

"Yours? You own this tavern?"

"Ah, nothing so grand. But the basement has a stage, which the owner has invited us to take over. We are wanderers no more," Theo declared with a grand gesture. "Every night, we perform. You must come and see us!"

"Sure!" Martel looked at Maximilian. "Tomorrow night?"

"Sounds good to me," the mageknight growled. "What about that old codger with his pipe, is he still with you? I rather liked him."

"Regnar, yes," Theo said while nodding. "He is not in the city right now, but he'll join us eventually. Which will be good – lots of plays that rely on his magic."

Remembering his last time spent with Regnar, Martel felt more ambivalent about the hedge mage, but he felt ready to let it go. Certainly he enjoyed the actors and their company; having them permanently in the city would be nice. "Alright. Well, we'll see what you guys can do on your own tomorrow!"

Theo grinned again. "You won't be disappointed!"

Chapter 323: Theatre Below

Theatre Below

Just the anticipation of seeing the play brought memories back to Martel, and his focus slipped a few times during Glunday's fire lessons. All his experiences with theatre had been with this particular troupe, albeit at the open stage on the square. He could not help but think about taking Shadi there, still early in their friendship – her absence still stung him, making the memory bittersweet.

Likewise, although Martel remembered the satire about the emperor and the war as very entertaining, that same play had gotten the actors arrested. That in turn forced Martel and Regnar to scramble to pay for their release, and the hedge mage had used Martel as a distraction while getting the street children to rob the audience in attendance – Martel had almost forgotten about that, and after Ruby had used him in the same fashion, it stirred a touch of anger in him.

But still, Martel did not regret these experiences. The very first play he had seen, with Roland and the wyrm, it had been an experience like no other. Martel had never been entertained like that before in his life. And perhaps he could recapture some of that magic tonight, especially with the same company.

With his classes over, Martel quickly made his way to the girls' dormitory tower and knocked on a familiar door.

"Martel," Eleanor expressed. "Is something the matter?"

"Do you remember the plays we saw last year?"

"Of course. What about them?"

"The actors are back. They set up a theatre in the bridge district and invited us to see their show. Want to come with me and Max tonight?"

"That is all it is, I trust? From what I recall, that hedge mage got you in some trouble." Eleanor gave him a piercing look.

"He's not even in town, they said. I promise, it's just entertainment. It wouldn't feel right to go without you."

A smile travelled across her mouth. "Alright. I would enjoy seeing a play with you."

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As the trio arrived at the Four Flagon Tavern, shortly before last bell would ring, they joined a steady stream of other patrons, all making their way towards the basement. The crowd moved slowly, as they had to pay admission by the stairs; the young boy in the troupe, Ian, still handled this task. He grinned seeing the three young wizards moving forward with the mass of people. "Theo told me to expect you. Go right in."

Expressing their gratitude, they continued down the stairs. Below the ground floor, they found one big room, as large as the common room above. In the opposite end, a stage rose; between that and the entrance, numerous benches filled the floor. Lots of people already filled the seating, and Maximilian resolutely pushed his way forward to grab three seats, with his friends following at a more leisurely pace.

Once he sat down, Martel glanced around, as much as the surrounding crowd allowed him. Lamps hung along the walls, though primarily around the stage to provide good lighting, which already showed a background of some lordly hall.

Already, the whole space was aflutter with excited chatter, and Martel could feel it infecting him. He had no idea what the play would be about, but he had never seen a bad one.

It took a while to get everyone seated, and the impatience in the audience grew until at one point, people began clapping rhythmically while shouting for the show to begin. Finally, Theo appeared and gave a deep bow. "Good people of Morcaster, welcome to The Theatre Below!"

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It turned out to be a comedy. This made Martel a little anxious for a while, remembering the consequences of the last amusing play performed by this troupe. Fortunately, none of it seemed to be hidden slights aimed at the emperor or the High Council. Once Martel noticed Eleanor laughing merrily without reservation, he relaxed and allowed himself to do the same.

It was an amusing tale of a peasant who went to sleep in his own hut and woke up in the bed of a baron, the latter playing a prank on the hapless serf. Watching the fool stumble around, questioning his good fortune until he accepted it, truly imagining himself a wealthy noble only to wake up in his own bed the day after, made Martel howl with laughter.

He did notice that the entire play was performed without any kind of magic. That perhaps explained the choice of what to perform; the actors did not require any spellwork to perform their jests and merriment, unlike the story of Roland and the wyrm, for instance, where the dragon breathed fire. Presumably, this meant Regnar was still away, which Martel felt oddly disappointed by. Meeting the old hedge mage would allow Martel to clear the air and move on; now he had to keep feeling odd about what had happened during their last time together. On the other hand, the rest of the troupe had done Martel no wrong, and he could enjoy the company without any awkward feelings caused by Regnar's presence.

As the play ended to great applause, Martel turned to his companions. "We got time to stay a while, right? I feel we ought to congratulate the players on their performance, and the new theatre." He glanced around at the space once again; he could only imagine the troupe was thrilled to have a permanent stage.

"I suppose a short while will not be any trouble," Eleanor conceded.

"Of course we are staying!" Maximilian almost bellowed. He had downed several ales during the break in the play.

Laughing, Martel got up and waited as people around him pushed their way forward towards the exit. His gaze idly wondering, he was taken aback when he noticed a familiar face. He blinked, unsure if the distance filled with other heads made him see wrong; the air in the basement felt heavy from the crowd, and standing up quickly had made him a little dizzy. But keeping his gaze locked as others paraded past him, he became convinced. Ruby and her red lips were in the audience, though rather than her practical clothes, she wore the dress of any typical commoner's wife.

Aware that his height made him easy to spot, Martel sat down. Only after he had done so did he wonder why. He had nothing to hide, after all. If anything, she should feel embarrassed in his presence rather than reverse. Gathering his resolve, Martel got back up, much to the amusement of his friends watching him moving up and down. But as he looked through the last of the crowd moving out of the basement, he could not see Ruby any longer.

## Runes, Hedges, and Alchemy

Despite feeling strange about something so trivial – Martel did not even know if Ruby had noticed him – the evening spent at the Four Flagon Tavern proved to be the best in a long time. Martel found himself still laughing the day after, remembering particular scenes or witty remarks. And the company had been excellent; his two best friends together with an hour spent making merry with the actors afterwards.

Waiting for Master Fenrick to arrive, Martel toyed with the idea of returning to the theatre. He had rarely been so entertained in his life; the only argument against would be that it took an entire evening of his time, which could be spent practising spellwork or other such pursuits.

"Good morning, students. Another delightful bell of Tyrian runes awaits us."

Even if the words were spoken with a flat voice, Martel believed that Master Fenrick meant them. He truly took pleasure from discussing these matters of lore, whether Archean letters or Tyrian symbols. Given that the latter gave access to a new kind of magic, Martel felt the same way about that particular subject.

"I trust everyone found time to study the rune we discussed last fiveday?"

Martel had, sort of. They were supposed to practise drawing it, which he had done for a while. But he had been unsure for how long to do this, or how many times; since the simple exercise involved no magic at that point, he could not measure whether he was getting better, or doing it well enough. So after a while, he had just stopped to practise Sindhian magic instead.

Master Fenrick unfurled a large piece of parchment and held it up to show the rune of warning. "The word of activation is, though I'm sure you all remember, *vara*. And this means?"

Martel quickly raised his hand, eager to give the impression that he had studied the material. "To warn."

The teacher nodded, even as Martel heard Cheval nearby scoff. "Figures that the Tyrian half-breed knows." Nobody reacted, and Martel chose the same response.

"To recapitulate," Master Fenrick said, "this is a passive rune, meaning it will stay dormant until triggered by an outside action. In this case, movements by a person near it. How the rune knows to differentiate between a human and, say, a deer, I cannot explain. In general, passive runes, at least those known to us, only work on humans. The skálds are cunning like that."

Martel thought about his own rune token in his pocket, lying dull and grey, and those shining with magic such as the one he had seen in Lady Pearl's study.

"Now, time for you to actually give this a try. Each of you, draw the rune on your own parchment. Focus on your desire to be warned of any movement, and when you are ready, hold out your hand above the symbol and speak the word," Master Fenrick instructed them.

The symbol was simple, little more than a few lines crossing each other, but Martel still looked carefully at the example in his teacher's hand as he drew his own. When done, he looked down and thought about being warned. Once he felt ready, he held out his hand. "*Vara*."

Nothing happened. Feeling slightly disappointed, Martel looked around at the others. Whenever anyone felt bold enough to try and speak the relevant word, they did so to the same result as him,



which did make Martel feel a little better. Still, he got the feeling that learning this would be as gruelling as when he had picked up any other kind of magic. Taking a deep breath, he once more looked down on the symbol and focused his mind to try again.

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After two hours without discernible progress in Tyrian runes, Martel rather enjoyed his lesson with Master Alastair. Casting spells that he knew, even if he was still learning and improving, felt good after a bell of frustration. And he had cracked most of the facets of the elemental bolt; it could not be much longer before he had mastered the spell.

Likewise, following Mistress Rana up to her laboratory was a pleasure, now that Martel had gotten the hang of Sindhian alchemy. Certainly, he did much worse than her when it came to awakening the ingredients, but given that she was a master alchemist, Martel did not let this bother him. The fact that he had successfully brewed potions all on his own was good enough for him. He was only concerned now about learning more recipes.

As he saw the ingredients for the potion of cold waiting for him, Martel remembered Julia's request. "Mistress, I was wondering – is there an elixir that helps someone to sleep?"

"Certainly there is. I can give you six hours of uninterrupted, restful sleep if so needed. But you are not nearly ready to learn that."

"Of course, mistress," he quickly assented.

"Why? Do you sleep poorly?" She gave him a scrutinising look.

Martel shook his head. "Not at all. One of my friends asked, that's all."

"I see. Well, get to work. Time is wasting away."

"Right away, mistress."

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When the work was done and bottled up, once Mistress Rana had squirrelled away the fruits of his labour, she returned with something in each hand. Five pieces of silver in one; a small vial in the other. "This is a potion of blissful sleep," she told him. "You can have your wages for the fiveday, or you can choose the potion if you have greater need of it." She moved her hands up and down, weighing each choice as it was mentioned.

Silver was always good, but Martel had plenty for now, and he would earn more, whereas it might be a long time before he learnt this recipe. His decision made, Martel accepted the potion.

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After a long day of learning no less than three different schools of magic, Martel felt ready to rest. Of course, he would have to continue practising before that; he could not spend an entire evening doing nothing. And before he could even begin, a small note was delivered to him.

Dear boy,

I heard you came by.

What do you think of our home?

Hedge mage no more, just a  
mage! Come again some time,  
*I'm back with the troupe.*

Regnar

Despite his ambivalent feelings towards the no longer wandering mage, Martel did feel curious about what the old wizard had been up to. Who knew? Perhaps Regnar could show him a bit of spellwork that the Lyceum would not teach. Open yet another branch of magic for Martel. But such would have to wait for tomorrow.

## Chapter 325: Regnar's Reunion

### Regnar's Reunion

As the fiveday came to an end, Martel woke on Solday feeling good. He had put all that with Lady Pearl and Ruby behind him; he was not going to be caught up in the affairs of the Nine Lords anymore, or let them take advantage of him again. He was learning alchemy, he had started learning Tyrian runes, and although he had not been able to enjoy the spring festivities much thanks to his busy schedule, watching the play at the Four Flagon Tavern with Maximilian and Eleanor was a memory worth revisiting. And with lots of spare time today, along with the invitation from Regnar, he might even catch another performance.

Martel considered asking his friends to join him, but the mageknights had class until late afternoon, and if things became awkward with Regnar, perhaps it was better to go alone. It would let him leave soon after lunch, and he could spend some time with the actors before their next show.

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Crossing the streets of Morcaster, Martel noticed the festivities still in full swing; perhaps even more so, considering this was the last day. Although the sun remained up, people had already started drinking; every tavern that Martel passed by seemed full of patrons. Leaving the centre of the city to enter the bridge district, this only intensified. Evidently, revellers were making the most of what remained of the festival. And while this particular quarter did not have the abundance of open squares, lending themselves to stalls and entertainers that filled the market district, Martel still encountered much to please the eyes and ears. Approaching the Four Flagon Tavern, he even noticed one of the actors performing an amusing monologue, which Martel caught the tail end of.

"... And if you found that to your amusement," the orator continued, "come see our new play at the Four Flagon Tavern! It promises to be a spectacle like you have never seen, with daring tales of bold heroics, all of it augmented by magic! Performance begins at last bell!"

Judging by the size and mood of the crowd, seats would be full. Martel waved at the performer, and she smiled in return before she launched into another monologue. Having seen that one before, Martel continued the last stretch to reach his destination.

Unlike most public houses, the Four Flagon Tavern was at best half full with customers; presumably, most would arrive tonight before the performance, perhaps starting their celebrations elsewhere before moving to this locale. Appreciating the short wait for getting served, Martel got

himself a drink. He was not particular thirsty, but seeing everyone else with a tankard in hand made it seem only right for him to have one as well. Once duly armed, Martel crossed the common room to move down the stairs.

He ran into the young boy, Ian, just as he reached the cellar. "Hullo, lad," Martel greeted him.

The child, perhaps ten years of age, looked up from his work, sweeping dirt from between the benches. "It's the wizard from the fancy school," Ian replied with a grin. "I never got the chance to ask, how did you like the play the other night?"

"It was amazing. I can't remember the last time I laughed so much."

"Yeah, it's my favourite! Though tonight should be great as well. I've seen all the magic Regnar has prepared, it's going to overwhelm everyone in the audience!"

"I'll be sure to catch it soon. Is Regnar back there?" Martel pointed towards the stage.

"He should be, yeah. You staying for the show tonight?"

"Maybe. If I feel I have the time."

"Else you can always come back another night," Ian told him. "We are here for good now, after all! No more constant travelling around."

"Which is why you have to sweep," Martel said with a smile. "This isn't some market square. You're happy to be staying then?"

"I really am. Travelling around is useful to get away from people that don't like us, but it also means I never have friends for longer than a few days. Other than the rest of the band, of course."

Being friendless was never easy. "I'm glad you're staying. Alright, you better get back to your broom." With a wink, Martel moved past the boy.

Approaching the stage, he saw the actors busy setting up for their performance. Backgrounds were exchanged, furniture moved around, and other preparations made. Even the old hedge mage gave a hand, hauling a chair with a token effort. "Martel!" he exclaimed. "I'll be right back," Regnar claimed, directed at the others working.

"Any excuse to get out of helping," someone mumbled.

Ignoring any remarks, Regnar jumped down from the stage – Martel wondered if someone his age should really be doing that – and approached the acolyte. "Come with me, boy, let's sit and talk."

They walked behind the stage, where the space held all sorts of items intended for the theatre. Every manner of clothing, primarily, but also weapons, many kinds of chairs, tables, chests, and the like, looking either fit for a lord's hall or a serf's hut.

Regnar plunked himself down on a throne and dug out his pipe, igniting it with the tip of his finger. "Good seeing you again, lad."

"Yeah, same. Even if I'm still annoyed at you pulling that trick on me last time." Martel was not going to get angry about it, but it needed to be said.

"Aye, I figured as much. Hence my farewell taking the form of a note. Traveller's habit, leaving before the consequences catch up to us," Regnar admitted. "But we're not ungrateful. You've looked

after us like you're one of us, which is why I wanted you to know about our new home. If ever in need, you just come here, and we'll look after you likewise."

"Well, I probably won't be in Morcaster for long, but I appreciate that." He raised his flagon in response, like a salute.

The hedge mage glanced over his clothes. "Not just a fashion choice, then. You're a battlemage?"

Martel nodded. Somehow, it felt heavy to confirm it out loud. He thought that he had made peace with it, but maybe he had just been too busy to think much on it. He took a sip from his ale instead.

"Well, given how you wield fire, I'm hardly surprised. I'd offer to take you with us when we next go, except we're no longer going anywhere."

"Thanks anyway."

"But you should come by while you're still in Morcaster, as much as you want," Regnar impressed on him. "While meeting another mage is commonplace for you, it's a rarity for me."

Considering his low count of friends, Martel was not going to dismiss someone willing to increase that number. "I will." He cleared his throat. "So, how come you joined the others late?"

"Ah, part of our deal for this place. The tavern is owned by a wealthy family of aristocrats. Besides rent, they wanted me to perform a few magical tasks for them."

"Anything interesting?" And hopefully not illegal.

"Just verifying some old artefacts were indeed magical and not fakes, checking wards on their estate and so forth. The head of the family just died, so lots of family squabbling over heirlooms and inheritance."

Something bothered Martel about this, like the feeling of being watched even if he could not spot anyone. "What family?"

"Ah, some typical noble name for this city. Thierry, it was. Got a big estate up in the northeastern district." Regnar inhaled deeply on his pipe.

It took a moment for Martel to remember, and another before alarm bells began ringing. Ruby had mentioned that name. Lady Pearl was dependent on this fellow, and now he was dead.

Another piece came to mind. Flora had mentioned another task, wanting Martel's help because – she expected to be fighting magic.

The acolyte looked at Regnar. "We need to go."

"Huh? What's the matter, lad?"

Before Martel could reply, someone on the stairs yelled across the cellar. "There's trouble afoot!"

Everyone scrambled to their feet. The actors gave up their work arranging the stage and moved through the theatre, Martel and Regnar following behind them.

As they came up to the common room, Martel noticed the change. Most of the customers had cleared out, and instead, a band of Night Knives stood on the floor, armed to the teeth.

Chapter 326: A Spell to Help or Hinder

## A Spell to Help or Hinder

Staying on the steps down to the basement rather than going all the way up, Martel remained hidden behind the others while he took in the scene. A handful of tavern guards stood scattered around the circle of Night Knives occupying the centre of the big common room. As of yet their weapons remained sheathed, but who knew for how long. A well-dressed man could be seen speaking with animated gestures and handwringing; Martel figured that would be the owner of the tavern.

"I don't understand, I have no business with you. I don't even know who you are!" the man declared.

"You have upset Lady Pearl, who runs this district. You'll close your tavern for the time being and throw those actors out," came the cold response.

Martel could not see, but he recognised the voice as belonging to Flora.

"Close it, with everyone coming for the show? Close it on the last day of the spring festival?" the owner complained.

"If you reach an understanding with Lady Pearl, you may be able to open it again one day. If you refuse, we'll close down your tavern right now. For good."

Martel heard whispers and turned his head to see the actors in quiet discussion.

"There's not that many," argued one of them. "With the tavern guards on our side, we can do this."

"What about the city guards? Send Ian to fetch those," suggested another.

"Lady Pearl will have bribed them," Martel interjected, joining their circle. "They won't interfere."

"We should do as we always do," Regnar declared. "Leave. It's never worth taking the fight. They'll only be back."

A loud voice, belonging to someone very young, broke through the two discussions taking place.

"Leave our home alone!"

Martel looked towards the speaker and saw Ian stepping towards the Night Knives, hurling an empty tankard through the air. It hit the mercenary straight on the nose, and while hardly a threat to his life, he cursed and drew his sword to swing at the boy.

Perhaps it was the tension of the moment, perhaps the Night Knives had just waited for any provocation – they got extra pay in case of a fight, after all; regardless of reason, everyone seized weapons, and a skirmish broke out.

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With the tavern guards scattered around the room whereas the mercenaries stood shoulder to shoulder, the latter held an advantage, immediately positioning themselves in ranks. Flora meanwhile retreated back to begin shooting spells from within their protective circle.

Martel could guess that the Night Knives would crush their opposition the way things looked now; experienced mercenaries and an earthmage against lazy tavern guards and a hedge mage. Unless a battlemage tipped the scales.

Looking at the people he knew on both sides, Martel made his decision. Retreating further down the stairs to give himself cover, he began blasting fire bolts at the ring of mercenaries ahead.

The air became heavy with sounds of fighting and the smell of both blood and magic. Rays of frost and streaks of fire battled through the space, felling fighters on either side. As everyone became aware of their enemy possessing magic, on both sides, the warriors grew cautious, keeping shields and eyes ready to protect against the spells.

Martel could not see Regnar, but he witnessed the efforts of the hedge mage. Rather than directly offensive spells, he employed the same magic as used on the stage. Lights, sounds, or even just gusts of air appeared across the room, distracting warriors to keep them from fighting.

Realising the opportunity, Martel began watching for the signs of the next spell from the hedge mage. As soon as he saw a Night Knife close his eyes or stagger backwards, Martel followed up with a fire bolt that hit perfectly.

But on the other side, Flora did work as well. Chains made of pure ice slunk through the air to wrap around defenders, immobilising them. Given their few numbers, not many remained; the Night Knives would soon dominate the room. The actors and those others unable to fight had fled down the stairs, leaving Martel and Regnar alone on the staircase; the acolyte was not sure he favoured their odds with only them left.

He needed to step up. He needed to fight like a battlemage. Clear across the room, more than thirty feet, Martel conjured up a flame wall. It was a greater distance than he had ever covered before, and he poured his spellpower into the magic just to make it happen, but it worked. Half the mercenaries were caught on the same side as him and Regnar; the other half, including Flora, remained trapped on the other side.

With much fewer enemies to contend with, Martel abandoned caution to unleash a fire ray that struck two mercenaries. They screamed and dropped their weapons, running away and jumping out of the open windows to escape.

From the other side of his fire wall, Martel heard a cold and familiar voice call out, "Pull back!"

Obeying Flora's command, the mercenaries retreated, some of them carrying their comrades out. Martel waited until everything seemed clear before he dismissed his spell, and the wall of fire vanished.

"Bloody impressive spellwork," Regnar mumbled.

Martel walked off from the stairs and surveyed the room. Most of the tavern guards looked wounded, with no sign of the owner. "We are lucky it scared them off."

"That was the spell of a battlemage," the hedge mage pointed out. "I don't think these hired swords expected to encounter that."

"Probably not." Martel reached out and applied some heat to the ice chains still wrapped around some of the guards, melting them. "Curious that their wizard didn't do the same. She's an earthmage, and I've seen her raise walls like that to control the battlefield."

"Have you now," Regnar muttered. "Well, not much use here. With the basement below us, not a lot of earth for that spell to work with." He stamped his feet against the stone floor before bending down to examine the wounds of a guard. "Theo!"

With the sounds of fighting ended, the actors appeared on the staircase. "They are gone?"

"For now," the hedge mage replied. "Some of these lads need their wounds tended to."

Several of the players disappeared down into the basement again while Theo approached the two wizards. "When will they be back?"

"Their leader is an earthmage," Regnar considered. "They tend to be cunning, calculating, but not prone to rash action. My guess is, she'll assess the situation and what exactly she is up against before returning. I doubt they'll be back today, but tomorrow? Could very well be."

Theo nodded. "We can still carry on with the play, in that case."

Martel jerked his head around to stare at him. "Are you crazy? You need to leave!"

The storyteller shook his head. "We already took the fight. Doing the play will give us some much needed coin, especially if we do have to flee. Besides, the show must go on."

That seemed a strange sentiment to Martel, considering the show had not even started yet. Around them, the other actors returned with bandages and the like.

"Theo is right. Martel, could you stay and keep watch tonight? I'll be busy doing the effects for the performance. Once it's over, I'll relieve you of duty," Regnar said.

It seemed a foolish risk for them to take, but Martel also bristled at the idea of what amounted to basically thugs throwing his friends out of their new home. "I'll stay as long as I can," he promised. "But at some point, I have to go back to the Lyceum. If I miss class, I expect they'll end up chaining me inside."

"Not to worry," Regnar told him. "Now we know to expect trouble. Your presence will buy us some time that we can use to prepare a hasty departure, should it be needed. And until then, I do believe I'll place a few wards to protect this place."

Martel nodded in response before he went upstairs, choosing a room with a window that overlooked the main street outside.

## Chapter 327: Blissful Sleep

### Blissful Sleep

Despite Martel's fears, nothing further happened at the Four Flagon Tavern that night. He left through a hatch hours after dark, emerging in the alley behind the building, and returned to the Lyceum to get what sleep he could.

When he woke, his fears still pursued him. It felt ridiculous attending class like any ordinary day, knowing the Night Knives might return to the tavern at any moment to finish their assignment. Yet Martel knew that absence from the Lyceum would not be tolerated; any freedom he currently possessed would quickly be withdrawn if he did not appear as required.

His concerns interfered with his focus, leading to poor performance as could be expected; Moira was swift to deride him, but at least she did not punish him further. And given Martel had participated in an actual fight yesterday, he would argue that he had gained more valuable experience from that than any training in the Circle of Fire.

The moment his second lesson had ended, Martel grabbed his cloak, cap, and a small vial before he entered the city. He would have to go without supper; he felt far too anxious to wait any longer. On swift steps, he rushed through the streets going east. With the spring festival at an end, he encountered much less traffic and could quickly make his way to the bridge district.

Reaching the Four Flagon Tavern, Martel noticed the doors stood open, which seemed a good sign. If it operated as usual, matters could not be all bad. Though he did also observe fewer people going in and out compared to the previous five days. Some of this might be because festivities had ended, or the hour of the day was still early, though Martel imagined it was because of the fight. Even though the actors had gone through with performing their new play last night, the benches had been less than half full.

Stepping inside, Martel found a dreary sight rather than a bustling tavern. Fewer guards compared to yesterday as well; perhaps because of wounds, though Martel would have imagined the owner immediately hiring more help in light of recent events.

Crossing the room, Martel continued down the stairs to the basement. He saw the actors scattered around the space, cleaning up or making preparations for tonight's performance. Pipe in hand, Regnar approached him upon spotting the acolyte. "Good seeing you, lad."

"Anything happen after I left?"

"A shed in the backyard burnt down. A warning to us, I imagine." The hedge mage inhaled from his pipe.

"At least this building is stone."

Regnar exhaled a few smoke rings. "Aye. I set up wards to protect us against intruders and the like. I'm mostly worried if they come back in force. Half the guards left."

Martel wanted to ask more about these wards, how they worked, and the magical principle behind them, but now was not the time. "They'll definitely be back."

"We'll see. Whatever this spat is, we'll have to ride it out."

Martel had somehow thought that Regnar understood what was going on, but he realised now that the old mage thought this was some trivial dispute. "I don't think you've grasped the situation. You've run afoul of Lady Pearl by joining up with her enemies and setting up shop basically a stone's throw away. She thinks you're a threat, and you're in her lair. She'll continue until she is rid of you."

"What you're talking about, lad? I know of this bald wench, but I figured her dispute was with Wendell, the guy who owns this place. That he didn't pay her tribute or something like that."

Martel shook his head. "That noble family you did work for, who set this all up, they're against her. Probably working with her other rivals. That's why they wanted you lot in here, in her district. As a provocation, to stir trouble, something like that. They probably made sure she knew as well."

Regnar removed the pipe from his mouth. "Stars, this is some quarrel between the Nine Lords, isn't it? I'll talk to the others. They are not as familiar with Morcaster as me, but once I explain what's going on, I'll convince them we are better off back on the road." He gave a melancholy smile. "Back to sleeping in hedges."



"That's good. Just tell them you're leaving, and you'll be safe. They won't care once you're gone."

"Alright. Appreciate you tipping us off, lad. Staying for supper?"

"I better get going. I have another errand, and I need to practise my spellwork." Last lesson in Tyrian runes had felt like a failure.

"A wizard's work is never done." Regnar smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Come back tomorrow to see us before we leave."

"I will!"

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Despite his urgency to return to the Lyceum and spend an evening by drawing the same rune over and over, Martel still found time for a detour. In his pocket, he could feel the small vial that he had bought from Mistress Rana with the wages of the previous fiveday. Being a gift for Julia, Martel wanted to deliver it now rather than keep forgetting; if it worked and gave her restful, uninterrupted sleep, he might persuade Mistress Rana to teach him the recipe soon, and he could make more for his little apprentice.

And if his teacher was reluctant to show him, Martel could try to learn on his own, though he figured that was still too soon; working with some of these herbs, such as hemlock, made poisoning a real risk. Martel was pretty sure that the inquisitors did not care whether poisoning others was done accidentally or not. Not to mention, Martel would not forgive himself for hurting someone innocent in this manner.

Moving through the insula, Martel reached Julia's door and knocked. She quickly let him in and gave him a curious look. "What brings you by?"

He pulled out the small vial containing the elixir of blissful sleep. "This is for you. I don't know exactly how it works, but it was made by my teacher, so it's sure to be safe and effective. When you need a good night's rest, drink this."

Julia accepted the flacon with more interest and emotion than she usually showed. Evidently, this mattered more to her than his previous gifts. He could see why; food, shelter, clothes and blankets to stay warm, all these things could be obtained in different ways. But restful sleep, free of unpleasant dreams, that was a rare gift.

She looked up at him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Maybe once I learn the recipe, we can make some together."

"That sounds nice."

"I think so too." With a wink, Martel left again.

## Chapter 328: The Friendship of a Mercenary

### The Friendship of a Mercenary

The first lesson of Malday came and went easily, Martel practising his staff fighting against the other acolytes. They still posed no threat to him, but he had stopped trouncing them; it only fostered

bad blood, and matters had been reasonably cordial between them all lately. No point in upsetting that without cause.

A message found Martel as he stepped out of the dining hall after lunch, changing what had begun as an ordinary day into an unpredictable one.

Martel,

Meet me across the square.

You know the place.

I'm there during fourth bell.

Flora

Martel looked at the great clock in the entrance hall, showing an hour after noon. Halfway through the fourth bell; she had probably arrived just before lunch to deliver the message and now waited for him. Unsure what to expect, Martel figured it was best to find out. He only delayed long enough to burn the note between his fingertips before he left.

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She sat at a table with a tankard in front of her; Martel gestured at the tavernkeeper to receive one as well before he joined her. Beforehand, he had glanced across the room just to take note of who else was present. Everyone seemed like ordinary commoners, and nobody carried arms. The audacity to ambush a battlemage just across from the Lyceum did not seem to fit the style of Flora or the Night Knives.

"Thanks for joining me." The words were cordial, but her voice sounded cold.

"I always do when invited." Martel did not feel nearly as casual as he attempted to appear; he took a sip of his ale to hide his expression and buy a few moments to feel less nervous.

"Me and the fellows did a job the other day. It did not go well. You see, I expected the others to have one mage on their side, but not two. And especially not for one of them to be a battlemage." She stared at him with an accusation in her eyes.

"Sounds like it was the wrong task for you to do."

"You're playing a dangerous game, Martel. Refusing to join us on a job is one thing, that's fine, but selling your services to the other side? Right in Lady Pearl's backyard?"

Martel gave a shrug. "I'm not playing games of any kind. I know the actors down in that theatre. You attacked my friends while I was present. You expect me to stand aside and do nothing?"

"If you had any sense, yes! You knew we had come on behalf of Lady Pearl. You know what it means to make an enemy of her. You've burned your bridges, and for what? You think those painted fools can resist, keep their lousy little theatre?"

"They've done nothing wrong. If burning a bridge means protecting innocent people, I'll set fire to every damn plank of wood in Morcaster." Finding his nerve, Martel returned her gaze without flinching. Power seemed to be the only language these people understood. Thankfully, he possessed it more than most. "And I'm fire-touched – those aren't idle words."

"Don't push your luck. You go directly against Lady Pearl, she'll find a way to retaliate," Flora warned him. "You'll never see it, and it won't be traced back to her. She doesn't keep her position by ignoring threats."

"That's the sentiment she's taking too far. They're a bunch of actors and a hedge mage in that tavern," Martel argued. "None of them pose any danger to her, yet she's scorching the earth in reaction."

The earthmage shook her head with a sarcastic smile. "You're being naïve. It doesn't matter if that's true. Lady Pearl will never allow an unpredictable mage in her midst who's beholden to her greatest rival."

"Well, she doesn't have to worry. I already told them they should leave, and they've agreed to do so," Martel informed her.

A sceptical expression met him. "Just like that? She'll find it hard to believe. I already do."

"That's because you think of them as spies and assassins rather than what they are, ordinary people wishing to avoid conflict," came the irritated response. "Just give them a day or two to pack up, and your Lady Pearl will have her wish."

Flora crossed her arms. "This better not be a ploy. If this is simply buying time to enact some scheme, you'll be considered guilty as well, regardless of your involvement."

For a moment, Martel hesitated. Could the hedge mage actually be part of a plot by Lady Pearl's enemies? He dismissed the thought immediately. Even if Regnar might do something like that, it was not in his nature to endanger the rest of his company. He would have kept them out of it. "Just give it time. They'll be gone soon enough."

"I'll relay that, but don't think our eyes are closed. Given you spend most of your time here, at the Lyceum, it'll be easy to return to that tavern when you're absent. And that hedge mage doesn't stand a chance on his own," Flora said sharply.

Martel looked at the woman he had considered a friend, of sorts. They had fought together. None of that seemed to matter now, only her latest task. She was truly a mercenary, placing coin above any notion of friendship.

"That won't be necessary," he finally said. "But you should be careful about provoking a battlemage. We're known for our temper." Martel got on his feet, fed up with threats. He had faced Flora once before, and their powers in battle seemed even at that time; since then, his quiver of spells and his magical prowess had greatly increased. He saw no reason to fear her, and if she brought her entire mercenary band against him, Martel would stake his life on Maximilian and Eleanor being more than a match for the whole lot. He turned around and began to leave.

"Still naïve, I see." Her voice reached him, but he refused to give her the satisfaction of the slightest reaction, so he continued walking with the same stride, showing no sign that he had heard her parting words.

Chapter 329: A Child's Innocence

A Child's Innocence

The worst of his concerns about the troupe alleviated, Martel could better concentrate on his lessons the next day. Still, until the actors left the bridge district, they would not be safe. The sooner the better. Just in case he might help facilitate this, or should Regnar need assistance persuading the rest to pull up their tents, Martel figured he would pay them a visit. It would also ease his lingering worry that despite their intention to leave, his friends might still be targeted by further attacks. Seeing them unharmed would ease his mind.

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The Four Flagon Tavern was quiet, all things considered, with only a handful of customers in the common room. On his way in, Martel had also noticed people outside on the street keeping a careful watch. But the place seemed peaceful, at least, with no imminent sign of trouble brewing. Down in the basement, he quickly located Regnar.

"You guys getting ready to leave?"

The hedge mage nodded. "I convinced the others. They all saw the wisdom in avoiding this conflict – except Ian, I guess, but you can't expect a child to always understand. We're just slowly packing things up. We had rather expected to stay here a long time, so we're not quite as swift to have everything back on carts as in the old days. We also sold our draught animals, so Theo is out buying new oxen."

"That's good. I spoke to the earthmage from the Night Knives, those mercenaries that came here. I told her you were leaving – hopefully, that means they'll stay away and let you go in peace."

"I appreciate that, lad." Regnar sat down on the nearest bench and took out his pipe. "I shouted at those fellows on the other side of the street, those watching us, much the same message. I figured they'd take it back to the mistress, though by the looks of them, I might have overestimated their intelligence."

Martel chuckled a little, despite how serious and unfortunate the situation felt. "I suppose it's best not to take chances. I can't be sure that Flora, the earthmage, passed on the message either. Maybe I should go myself to the Pearl and let them know."

"Nah, lad, don't go near those people. We'll be fine and out of here soon enough." Regnar bit into his pipe and gave Martel a pat on the shoulder.

"All the same, I don't like the idea of a misunderstanding causing another fight, especially as I probably won't be here to help. And I don't think I have to go straight into the wyrm's lair, as they say. You think I could borrow some parchment and a writing set?"

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A short while after, an urchin carrying a message in one hand and a copper penny in the other entered The River Pearl. With the note delivered, the child continued on her way, keeping the coin for her troubles. Meanwhile, down the street, Martel sat on a crate watching the passers-by. He had liked the bridge district; an interesting blend of people and travellers, the presence of those he thought were friends such as the Night Knives, and memories of happy times spent at places like the Pearl. Little of that remained, and Martel knew he was not particularly welcome in this quarter anymore.

His thoughts ended at the appearance of a young woman, whose red lips still intrigued him despite it all. "I did not expect to see you again, though at least you had the good sense not to walk straight into the Pearl," Ruby said.

"I just wanted to tell you something."

"You know, written notes are exceptionally useful for that purpose."

"Messages can get lost. I thought this important enough to tell you in person."

She kept her eyes on him. "Go on."

"The actors, including the hedge mage, are leaving. Your mistress will get her wish. In a few days, they'll be gone."

"That's good to hear. Provided it's true."

A trickle of bitter laughter escaped from Martel. "That's how you see the world, isn't it? Everything is a ruse, everyone deceives, nothing can be trusted."

"I trust myself. What my eyes and ears tell me. I trust my hand wielding a dagger and my feet to be quiet. Trusting anything other than that only invites you to be fooled." Ruby spoke with half a smile, but Martel sensed that she meant every word fully.

"If that is how you wish to live. I said what I had to say. You can leave the tavern alone."

Now it was her turn to laugh, and the sound held no more joy than when Martel had done so. "It is true what they say about the pride of wizards. You think simply because you have said so, that's how it goes. All that power must really go to your head. I wasn't given such gifts at birth – I've had to fight for every scrap I could ever put my hands on."

In her words, Martel saw a glimpse of the child she had once been. Not much different than Julia, Sparrow, or Weasel. Made unkind by an unkind world. "In that case, I'll set my pride aside and simply express my sympathy."

"Still arrogance, simply by other words. Goodbye, wizard." She turned around and left with hasty steps.

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Leaving the bridge district, Martel decided to extend his journey a little by including a trip to the harbour. He was curious how the potion had worked on Julia, assuming she had tried it. She did seem to have the scavenger's instinct of collecting everything but never using it, always afraid it might be more needed another day. But if so, he would impress on her that she ought to drink it. Soon enough, he would be able to make plenty more, after all.

Knocking on Julia's door, it remained closed. When somebody finally spoke to him, it came from an unexpected angle. "You looking for the woman who lives there? You're her friend, right, I've seen you."

Martel turned his head to see a small girl sticking her head out from another room down the corridor. He could not help but smile at her words; he supposed to someone as young as her, even Julia might seem like a grown woman. "That's right. I just wanted to speak with her briefly. Are you her friend as well?"

"I'm afraid to talk to her. She's so pretty."

Martel laughed a little. It was nice to be reminded that some children still had innocence.

"I did follow her a few times, but she went into the smelly place, so I went home again."

"The – smelly place? The sewers?"

The girl nodded. "Yeah, that's what my dad called it. Said I wasn't allowed down there."

"He was right." Martel frowned a little, wondering why Julia would go back down there.

"Child, stop talking to strangers!" The voice came from behind the girl, within their rooms; a start went through her, and she slammed the door shut.

Nothing further to glean, with no idea where Julia was or when she might return, Martel left.

## Chapter 330: Bad Moon Rising

### Bad Moon Rising

With the threat to his friends taken care of, Martel could stop worrying so much and focus on his lessons instead. At the same time, his class in advanced elemental magic brought his mind back to the fight at the Four Flagon Tavern. His primary opponent in that fight had not been the warriors, but Flora with her frost rays. Had the fight taken place on terrain more favourable to her, she would undoubtedly have raised her earth wall before he remembered to use his own fire equivalent, and they might have lost the brawl.

It made Martel realise that he still was underequipped facing mages with abilities different than his own. He might beat them in the Chamber of Earth, but only because he was more experienced and specifically trained for combat. His only regular sparring partners with equal training were the other fire acolytes or the mageknights, none of whom could prepare him for facing a veteran mage skilled in air, earth, or water.

"Master Alastair, are there defensive spells one might use to protect against other elements? I'm not worried about fire, obviously, but what about the others?"

His teacher calmed the winds around them in the Hall of Elements and looked at the acolyte. "There is. I had use of them against the Tyrians, who are quite skilled with water magic. But you'll most likely be facing Khivans, my boy, who don't employ magic of any kind. I'm not sure your time is best spent with this."

Martel had other concerns besides Khivans. "Still, I'd like to learn. Just to be prepared."

"Very well. We should have time before you finish the year. Once you have mastered the elemental bolt, we'll move on to a counterspell."

"Thank you, master." With this promise obtained, Martel resumed practising the air bolt.

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Leaving the hall after class, Martel had not gone far down the corridor when he saw a sight to make him freeze on the spot. Two inquisitors came towards him in quick stride, looking dour as always. Just as Martel was about to turn around and find Master Alastair to help him, the mage hunters moved right past and continued on their way.

Martel's relief was quickly replaced by curiosity. He had not seen the inquisitors inside the Lyceum for months. It made him wonder what had brought them back.

Looking for quick answers, Martel turned around and walked the other way to cross the dining hall and reach the entrance of the school, where he approached Henry sitting behind the desk. "What're the inquisitors doing here?"

The air acolyte looked uncomfortable, either from the topic or Martel's presence, perhaps both. Still, he replied, "Same old chestnut. Searching for the maleficar that keeps eluding them. Bloody useless, they are."

"Still? They already interrogated everyone once. Why would they think there's something new to gain?"

Henry shrugged. "How should I know? They don't tell me."

Strange why they would renew their search all of a sudden. What might have happened?

A thought came to mind, and Martel left abruptly. He hurried up the stairs to reach the Tower of Air, which gave a good view in every direction. Searching around, it took Martel a moment to find his quarry; in the last of the daylight, it was hard to find on the horizon. But he saw it, a full moon slowly rising towards its zenith. The maleficar's favoured time to carry out his dark deeds.

And Martel suspected he knew where this evil wizard hid himself. Both he and the inquisitors had searched the sewers without luck, but not because they were mistaken about the maleficar's hideout. Rather because he retreated to the one place none of them dared to follow.

Martel's last trip through the sewers came to mind, when he had paid Weasel to lead him through that underground labyrinth that he might return unseen to the Lyceum, after the ambush on the docks with the Night Knives. They had passed near the catacombs, and Martel had felt an evil presence unlike any other. If the maleficar could be found, it would be in that place.

But it was not his problem to solve. The inquisitors would never listen to him anyway; they would just accuse him of being in league with the maleficar. And they knew about the sewers already, so if they actually cared about finding this villain, they would search there instead of the Lyceum.

The sewers. Martel's conversation with the small girl, Julia's neighbour, came to mind. Even though he had rented a room for her, Julia still went down there.

Concern growing, Martel tried to think calmly about this. He had once before been afraid of this scenario, and Julia had turned out to be fine. She knew the sewers well, presumably how to hide and find her way back.

Still, just to ease his mind, he decided to pay her a quick visit. She had been gone yesterday, but she would probably be home tonight; seeing her would let him put his concerns to rest.

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Martel knocked and knocked. Julia being gone two nights in a row – it could happen, he supposed, especially if she preferred this particular hour for doing errands.

Even so, Martel felt increasingly uneasy. It seemed unlikely that of all the people in Morcaster, Julia would be the one taken by the maleficar; it was just not probable. But what if more than coincidence played a part? Martel had investigated the maleficar, pursued him, both in the copper

lanes and the sewers; what if all his efforts had gotten him noticed, and now Julia paid the price for his failed heroics?

Still trying to stay calm, Martel walked down the hall to knock repeatedly on another door. A matronly woman opened with an almost angry pull. "What?" she exclaimed.

"I am Master Martel of the Lyceum." He saw her eyes widen. "I need to speak to your daughter. The small child."

She cleared her throat. "Yes, good master. Child, come here!"

The little girl appeared soon after, almost hiding behind the doorframe until her mother grabbed her by the neck and pulled her forward.

Martel knelt down to even some of the height difference. "You remember we talked about my friend, who lives down the hall?"

The girl nodded.

"When did you last see her?"

"Yesterday."

"Do you know where she went?"

The girl shook her head.

"But she's not been back?"

"She's never outside during daylight, master mage," the mother interjected. "It's true, your friend left late last night. We've not seen or heard sign of her since then, though she's a slippery sort. Pardon me saying so," she quickly added.

Martel got back on his feet. "Thanks." He left without further words, hearing the door quickly shutting behind him.

Back on the street, Martel's mind churned with thoughts as he walked back towards the Lyceum. Most likely, this was all a coincidence and Julia was fine. Certainly, none could argue it was his responsibility to stop this maleficar. But if the dark sorcerer had taken another victim, Julia or someone else, they would presumably die at his hand, fodder for his cruel rituals. Martel could try to warn his teachers, but he imagined that by the time he finished explaining everything, time would be up. And they would positively chain him to his bed if he had to admit the details about his pursuit of the maleficar.

Martel had a choice. Do nothing or attempt to save a life, assuming anyone was actually in danger. Above him, the full moon slowly climbed further and further up.