

## Firebrand 331

### Chapter 331: The Second Touch

#### The Second Touch

An insistent knocking continued until Eleanor finally opened her door to see a fire acolyte and a mageknight outside. The former looked stressed, the latter seemed annoyed. "What is happening?"

"I wish I knew," Maximilian muttered.

"As I told you," Martel interjected, "tonight is a full moon, and I think the maleficar has taken another victim. I also think I know where he is hiding, but I don't want to go after him alone."

"See? We have been here before, I feel," the young nobleman remarked.

Eleanor frowned, digesting the information. "What about the teachers? Surely they are better equipped to handle something like this."

"The moon is rising in the sky. Even if they believe me, by the time we're done convincing them and they actually get going, it'll be too late," Martel argued.

Standing behind him, Maximilian gave a shrug. "He will not be dissuaded, our northern boy."

Eleanor bit her lip. "Let me get into armour. Meet me in the entrance hall."

Martel nodded, a little relieved. "Yes."

"I guess I am fetching my mail as well," Maximilian sighed.

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Soon after, the trio made their way towards the merchant quarter. "Where exactly are we going?" asked Maximilian.

"There's an entrance that leads to the sewers," Martel replied.

"You must be joking!"

"No. That's how he moves around the city with his victims undetected. Below ground."

"But his first victims were in the copper lanes," Eleanor pointed out. "The little girl, and later that woman. She was killed in her own home. He didn't move her anywhere."

"The sewers don't connect to that part of the city, so he had to stay there," Martel explained. "After that, he went underground to target other neighbourhoods. The inquisitors agree with me. They've searched the sewers as well looking for him."

"Well if they cannot find him, how are we supposed to?" Maximilian asked brusquely.

"Wait, what do you mean 'as well'?" asked Eleanor.

Increasing his pace, Martel avoided looking behind him at his companions. "He's holed up in the one place they won't look. The catacombs. And yes, I've been trying to find him. But I had to give up just like them. I wasn't strong enough."

"Strong enough for what?" Eleanor hurried forward to walk alongside him.

"There's necromancy in that old crypt. I saw it myself, the living dead. A skeleton, animated by evil magic. That's why I need you two along – it's dangerous down there," Martel admitted.

"You probably just saw some old bones falling out of an alcove," Maximilian remarked with a sour demeanour.

"I saw it clearly. And there's more. I also felt this – evil presence. Something deeply unnatural and foul, it made me shiver," Martel continued. "Sinister magic, just like a maleficar."

"It is easy to get confused when walking underground, especially in such unpleasant surroundings," Eleanor spoke gently. "You might have been mistaken."

"It feels like we are trudging through the city based entirely on your hunches and nightmares," Maximilian added.

"Well, if I'm wrong, no harm done." Martel turned to lead them down the alley with the hatch that Weasel had once showed him, leading into the sewers.

"Except to my nose and dignity." With a sigh, Maximilian pulled the hatch open.

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Below ground, Martel ignited a flame and took out a piece of chalk, marking their route.

"You do come prepared," Eleanor admitted.

"The catacombs are northeast, so... this way." The fire acolyte chose a direction and began walking on the ledge, followed by the mageknights.

"Tell me again, just so I am sure, we are dragging our way through filth because you 'felt an evil presence'," Maximilian recounted.

"You'll understand once you experience it yourself," Martel claimed.

"Is there any chance that all this is just because you got scared walking past some old bones? You said you saw a skeleton marching about. Would that not explain your little fright rather than any maleficar?" the mageknight questioned.

"It happened on two different occasions," Martel replied, trying to suppress his frustration with his friend. After all, Maximilian had come along, even if he brought a lot of sneering questions with him. "Seeing the necromantic creature was unpleasant, but it felt nothing like the other time. It's like – the difference between smelling a warm pie and a raw onion. Both could be considered food, but you'd never mistake one for the other."

"I see, I see. So this maleficar, would you describe him as an apple pie or maybe a shepherd's pie? Just wondering if he's sweet or savoury," Maximilian laughed.

Martel made no reply, keeping his thoughts to himself as he made another sign with the chalk and led them down a new tunnel.

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"We're here." Martel increased his flame to better illuminate the walls, filled with Archeon scribbles. "The catacombs begin here."

"Fascinating." Eleanor moved closer to inspect the writing. "The words seem simple. All about boundaries and such. Similar to Tyrian wards, I suppose. How strange if the Archeans possessed such magic as well, yet none of it has reached us."

"Thanks for the lesson, Master Fenrick," Maximilian snorted. "Are we going in or what? Sooner this is done, sooner I can be home in bed."

"We're going slow," Martel decided, ignoring Maximilian's protests. "There are dangers down here."

They continued at a lesser pace, the two mageknights taking the lead with the fire acolyte behind them. His flame cast a circle of light to show the many alcoves on either side, all of them occupied by the skeletons of those long since dead. Martel kept sharp watch and a fire bolt ready should any of them move so much as a fingerbone.

"Strange," Eleanor remarked after a while. Nobody had said anything since they entered the catacombs, and Martel felt almost startled upon hearing her voice. "Do you smell that?"

"Between walking through sewers and a crypt, I am breathing through my mouth, thank you," Maximilian retorted.

"She's right," Martel said. He felt it for the second time in his life, almost like a pungent smell in his nostrils until a shiver crept down his spine. Foul magic. "He's here."

They all stopped, and Maximilian turned around to look at the other two. "Bloody Stars, I did not think we would find anything. Maybe dispel that?" He glanced at Martel's flame. "Sneak up on the bastard."

"If we know he's here, he knows about us too. The simplest Tyrian rune would warn him of our approach, and he's probably got all kinds of magic for such purposes," Martel considered. "And he knows this terrain, so fighting in the dark only aids him. But I can move the flame ahead of us, around any corners first, increase it to blinding radiance."

"We will shield our eyes until you reduce the brightness," Eleanor added in agreement. "Very well." Martel could hear how she took a deep breath before she unsheathed her sword. "I am ready."

Before they could move forward or enact any part of their plan, Martel noticed the change in the air, how he felt. The presence was rapidly growing stronger. "Too late! He's here!"

Martel sent his flame down the tunnel to give them light and see as their enemy arrived; meanwhile, the mageknights readied their weapons and stood side by side.

A moment passed, and another. Martel felt his heart beating at double speed. He kept his eyes peeled on the end of the passageway, waiting for the maleficar to show himself.

Martel was not prepared for what he saw. Illuminated by the flame, the black form of a man appeared, hovering in the air. At first, Martel thought the unsteady light made the shape look flickering until the acolyte realised that this being seemed made of dark smoke, constantly expanding and retracting. Where one might say his head would be, a pair of flaming red eyes sat; the only disruption of colour in the black mass of his body.

With a howl sounding like a storm, the creature attacked.

Smoked

Martel's training took over, and he launched a fire bolt at the attacking spirit flying towards them. The spell struck the shadowy mass in the chest, and the fire seemed to become absorbed by the smoke without inflicting damage.

Both mageknights kept their nerve and struck as soon as their enemy was within range. One sword slashed the creature's right arm, one hammer slammed against its left shoulder.

The weapons slowed down as they passed through, as if travelling through water. Yet as they pulled back, the creature seemed as whole as before. In that moment, Martel knew he had made a grave mistake bringing them to this place.

The creature retaliated. Its shadowy arms lashed out, solidifying long enough to slam Maximilian to the side and Eleanor backwards. Both warriors scrambled to get back on their feet; the viscount did so first. As their enemy reached out a limb again, he raised his shield in defence. Yet the arm became a tendril of smoke, wrapping itself around Maximilian's head. He fell to his knees, gasping without sound. Horrified, Martel realised that the creature was choking his friend to death.

He released a ray of fire, keeping it focused on the monster in the hopes that more intense flames than his first spell would work.

If it caused any hurt, Martel could not tell, but it got the creature's attention. Releasing Maximilian, its red eyes turned towards the fire acolyte and it began hovering towards him.

Eleanor was back on her feet, swiftly swinging her sword. It did not seem to have any effect, but nor did she strike with strength, but rather with speed, keeping the creature occupied. "Keep up your spellwork, it is our only chance!" she yelled.

Martel reached the same conclusion as her; weapons of steel would not work. But fire did not seem useful either. Hoping this monster had some weaknesses, Martel prepared an elemental bolt of water and let loose.

His spell hit, making the terrifying spirit fall back for a moment. Behind, Maximilian had recovered and once more joined in the attack, swinging his hammer wildly.

The creature riposted, once again attacking both mageknights to send them stumbling back. On the verge of panic, Martel felt a burning sensation in his pocket, and he wondered if he had been attacked by a spell. He found it difficult to think or even breathe. Enemies of flesh and blood he could handle, but how to defeat a monster like this?

The spirit approached Eleanor, its arm becoming a tendril once again. Martel could already see how it would suffocate her, and his mind cleared. As it turned out, his fear of watching Eleanor die exceeded any concern about his own mortality.

Running forward to reach both friend and enemy, Martel unleashed another elemental bolt. The imbued water struck magical energy against the hovering spirit, and its red eyes moved towards the fire acolyte.

Gathering his power to unleash another spell, Martel knew it would not stop the spirit. It seemed to look at him, assessing him, and he figured this was it; his overconfidence had finally taken him too far.

In his pocket, the feeling of something burning increased.

The spirit hovered, its form still rolling inwards and outwards like smoke from a fire, but it did not move forward.

Reaching into his robe, Martel pulled out the rune token given to him long ago by Regnar. The previously dull and grey stone now shone with blue light.

"Get behind me," Martel told his companions, holding out the small pebble. Its glow continued to increase, becoming difficult to look at. "Get out!" he yelled.

He heard rather than saw Eleanor and Maximilian obey, retreating down the tunnel from whence they came. Walking backwards, Martel followed in their footsteps.

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Once around the nearest corner, all three of them ran. They did not stop until they found themselves out of the catacombs and nearly fell into the stream of sewer water flowing past them. "Keep going," Martel commanded, and they continued with hasty steps. The glow of the rune stone had disappeared, but he summoned a flame to light the path instead.

They only stopped once the sense of sinister magic was gone, leaving just the stench of the surrounding sewers.

"What was that thing?" asked Eleanor, catching her breath.

"No idea, but I prefer enemies I can hit," Maximilian growled.

"Just as importantly, how did you hold it back?" She looked at Martel.

In turn, he looked down at the rune stone in his hand. He saw it was cracked, lines running through the symbols on its surface. "You remember Regnar, the hedge mage? He gave this to me for protection. I must say, it served its purpose." Though Martel had a feeling it would not do so again; its magic seemed spent. He certainly would not stake his life on it.

"Let us keep moving. I cannot wait to get back above ground," Maximilian said brusquely. He set into motion; after a moment, Eleanor and Martel followed after.

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The journey through the tunnels felt long and uncomfortable; Martel kept glancing over his shoulder, even if his flame did not provide much light in that direction. Besides, he knew that he would feel the spirit's presence if it approached them; still, he could not help but constantly look. He only breathed easily once they climbed up the hatch and stood on the streets of Morcaster again.

"We are never doing this again," Maximilian declared.

"I do think we misjudged the situation," Eleanor acknowledged. She looked at Martel. "I am sorry. This is beyond us."

"So we tell our teachers?" Martel asked.

"No." Maximilian shook his head vigorously. "They will feel bound to inform the Inquisition, as creatures born of magical deviancy falls under their purview. And the three of us will be permanently linked to this abomination. Do you understand what that would do to my reputation?"

"But we fought the damn creature," the fire acolyte argued.

"Irrelevant. We walked around the catacombs where no decent people would ever go. You yourself said you saw necromancy down there before. And when they ask how three acolytes survived this encounter? They will assume only maleficars could have the powers to do so. And if you mention your little pebble with Tyrian runes, they will simply add that to their list of suspicions!" Maximilian looked at them both. "I am not risking my future for this, living the rest of my life under the scrutiny of the Inquisition."

"I fear he is right," Eleanor admitted. "They will never permit someone tainted by even the slightest suspicion of maleficus to become a legate. I am sorry," she repeated, turning her eyes on Martel. "You said the inquisitors already knew to search the sewers for their quarry. They must know about the catacombs as well. We can tell them nothing new."

Martel felt confident that the inquisitors had no idea of the monster that stalked the catacombs, but at the same time, he had no desire to be the one informing them. He knew the others were right; the mage hunters would only be suspicious of him as well. With a sigh, he let his shoulders drop. "Let's go home."

None of them noticed that across the street, a man dressed in a blue uniform narrowed his eyes, looking at the three young wizards leaving the alley.

### Chapter 333: Low Spirits

#### Low Spirits

Most of the night had passed by the time the trio returned to the Lyceum, and they quickly split up, each seeking their own bed. Still tired when he woke, Martel went through his Solday chores while thinking about the catacombs.

He felt powerless. He had no idea how to defeat the monster they had encountered. Yet doing nothing seemed wrong.

He could tell the teachers and simply leave Eleanor and Maximilian out of it. It did not matter if the Inquisition turned their sights on Martel; they had done so before and come up short. And he had no promising career as a praetorian or prefect that would be sabotaged by it.

Of course, it would undoubtedly lead to him being confined to school grounds. Mistress Juliana had threatened as much after the whole affair with the berserker, and Martel knew this would cross the line. Was he ready to spend the remaining year within the Lyceum just to feel like he had done the right thing, even though there was no guarantee his teachers or the inquisitors could actually handle what haunted the catacombs?

When his labours were done, Martel had not reached clarity. Perhaps more information might help him. At the very least, he decided to go to the harbour. If Julia was back home, he could stop worrying about her and perhaps think more clearly on the matter.

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Julia did not answer her door. Her neighbours had not seen her for days. But given that she generally avoided being seen, it meant nothing conclusively. She might simply be doing errands still, and Martel had been unfortunate to miss her. That was the hope he clung to, anyway.

Running his fingers over the cracked rune token in his pocket, Martel decided to seek elsewhere for knowledge.

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"Remember when you gave this to me?" Martel showed the stone to Regnar, who accepted it.

"Aye. I did a service to a powerful skáld, who gave me this in return. Strong protective runes lay on it, he claimed." The hedge mage gave the acolyte a questioning look. "What did you do to crack it?"

"Training at the Lyceum gets hard sometimes. I'm guessing this means it doesn't work anymore?"

"I wouldn't count on it, no. But I never really knew what it did in the first place." Regnar gave a grin.

"You don't have any others, I take it."

"No." His eyes narrowed, studying Martel. "What's this about?"

"Nothing. You have your own concerns. Are you ready to leave? I don't know how patient that Lady Pearl is."

"Just about, yes. Got wagons and draught animals ready. We'd be gone this morning if not for Ian."

"What about him?"

"Boy got mad when he found out we were leaving. Did a runner," Regnar explained. "He's out somewhere, sulking on the streets. He'll back when his hunger is greater than his anger, I reckon. We'll leave this afternoon, probably."

"Where to?"

The hedge mage shrugged. "Where the wind blows." His expression changed into a grin. "That's just something we tell the audience. It's summer, so weather is good up north. We'll head to Aquila."

"I wish I was going with you. I wouldn't mind seeing that city."

Regnar gave him a curious look. "You know, if someone doesn't wish to be found by the Imperial administration, a wandering troupe is an excellent hiding place."

For a moment, Martel was tempted. No going to war. No arduous training in how to kill others. No concerns about the duke of Cheval, the Nine Lords, the Night Knives, or anyone else in Morcaster. With his magical skills, even if still undeveloped, Martel figured he could always make a living no matter where he went.

But it also meant breaking his contract with the Lyceum, leaving him in deep debt for his tuition – which would transfer to his family. "Thanks, Regnar. Send me a message when you're underway. I'll see you next time you're in the city."

"That you will, lad. That you will." With a glint in his eye, the hedge mage placed his pipe into the corner of his mouth.

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On his way back to the Lyceum, Martel's thoughts returned to his current predicament. Julia was still absent, and however unlikely it seemed that she was in danger, he could not entirely dismiss the notion. At the same time, he clearly had no way to survive meeting the red-eyed spirit.

Looking at the horizon, he saw the moon, a sliver less full compared to yesterday. His knowledge of the maleficar's doings was mostly guesswork; presumably, the wizard took victims for his rituals to be done when the full moon was strongest. If so, it would have happened last night, meaning anything Martel did now would be too late to help the latest victim.

But he might prevent this happening to others. He could tell the teachers, accepting the consequences for himself – or he could try to find a solution on his own.

As time was no longer as pressing, Martel opted for the latter. Once returned to the Lyceum, he made his way to the library and began looking through every tome that might explain to him the nature of spirits, creatures made of smoke, anyone possessive of red eyes, and anything else that seemed relevant.

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Hours later, his search had yielded nothing. Martel had started looking at necromancy, but the library had scarcely any knowledge on this topic, perhaps because it was considered forbidden. He only learned what Master Fenrick had already told him in class; spirits could be created in places where great and violent deaths had taken place. But the description of such ghosts did not match what he had encountered.

Martel tried reading about spirits born of nature, but nothing suggested such could ever be found in catacombs, places of hewn stone and buried bones.

Other than that, he only came across scattered mentions that did not provide him with anything useful. When last bell ended and the library closed, Martel had to accept this would not get him anywhere. Tomorrow, he would have to seek help from another source.

## Chapter 334: Unexpected Spectre

### Unexpected Spectre

With Pelday keeping Martel busy, he managed to catch Master Fenrick just before fifth bell.

"Master, I came across something curious, looking through books in the library last night."

"I'm not sure how it speaks to my confidence in my students that I am perennially surprised to hear any of them spent time in the library," the teacher replied, entering his classroom. "Well, go on."

Following him inside, Martel began his carefully constructed explanation. "I was reading descriptions of different creatures, just to learn more about the effects of magic. The book mentioned a strange spirit, appearing like smoke, but with red burning eyes. Weapons could not touch it, nor did magic seem to make much of a dent."

Master Fenrick nodded a little. "That is to expect with such apparitions. Well, spirits tend to exist for one of two reasons. Either born of human magic, such as ghosts, or arisen in nature for reasons unknown to us."

"This particular spirit was mentioned as protecting a wizard, which makes me assume the first," Martel elaborated.

"A reasonable assumption, but not necessarily correct," his teacher replied with the smile of someone in possession of superior knowledge. "Such spectres make for poor servants, after all."

Rather, if this being was in servitude to a wizard, I would imagine they bound a spirit of nature through some manner of ritual."

Martel had not considered that; he had not even known such a thing was possible. Around them, novices began to filter into the classroom. "So, what kind of nature spirit might this be?"

"You're very keen on this," Master Fenrick remarked.

"I don't like unanswered questions."

"Well, I can relate to that. Though my knowledge of this is purely theoretical, you must understand, smoke and red eyes make me think of fire and air, which would fit how we understand the jinn."

"What's that?"

"A jinni is more properly a spirit of the desert, found in the great southwestern reaches. Now, my students look eager and ready, so it's time for you to be off." Master Fenrick made a gesture with his hand, waving Martel away. With a glance at the novices, a few of them yawning, the acolyte turned away and left.

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Returning to the library, Martel read what he could find about the jinn. Knowledge was limited, as the creature belonged to the lore of the desert tribes, which the Asterian Empire had no direct contact with. Although they carried out trade over long distance, it went through the cities of Sindhu before reaching Aster, and it did not seem like any Asterians had ever spent time among them. Or if so, they had not recorded the knowledge of these tribes.

In the end, Martel found only reiterations of what Master Fenrick had told him. A jinni was a spirit of the desert, which held its own meaning to the local tribes; magic and creatures born of magic changed from place to place, after all. But to an Asterian, this could reasonably be interpreted as a being of air and fire. That explained why Martel's flame spells had done little. It was like trying to extinguish a blaze by adding more fuel. It could be that his water bolts had actually made an impact, then, being the opposite element; he had just not been able to tell because of the strange physiology of the spirit.

Still, Martel did not feel confident facing this creature, just because some of his spells might work. And asking Eleanor or Maximilian along seemed pointless. They were trained to fight soldiers with strength and steel; their powers would avail little here. He would just be endangering them needlessly.

Worst of all, if this jinni was enslaved by the maleficar, it meant he possessed far greater powers than Martel had assumed. And if he could not even defeat the dark wizard's servant, surely he stood no chance against the maleficar himself.

Although it might have been a conclusion Martel should have reached long ago, he finally had to admit the truth to himself: he could do nothing against this spectre that haunted Morcaster.

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Despite acknowledging his limitations, Martel still left the Lyceum after supper. He would check Julia's room one more time, and if she was still absent, he would go back to the sewers. Not looking

for a fight; the moment he felt the presence of the jinni, he would turn and flee. His only aim would be to find Julia or whichever unfortunate soul the maleficar had claimed as his latest victim.

Knocking quickly and briefly on Julia's door, Martel was astonished as it opened. On the other side stood the young girl, looking like she always did. He had half expected to find her bloody and bruised, shivering from dread, if he ever saw her alive again.

"Julia," he breathed, stepping inside. She closed the door behind him. "You're alright."

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I've – I've been here a few nights now, and you were gone. And I just thought..." Martel began to laugh at himself, feeling silly.

"Well, yeah. If I need water or something, I don't go during the day. Too many people."

"Right. That makes sense. Though the neighbour's girl said she saw you going to the sewers."

An expression ran across Julia's face. "It's not polite to spy on people, my mum always said."

"Alright, true enough. But why would you do that?"

The girl shrugged. "Even inside this room, I can always hear other people, walking outside my door, or shouting through the walls. I just like going where there's nobody else."

It seemed a strange place to seek solitude, given the filth and stench, but she was obviously accustomed to it. "I see. Well, I'm just glad you're fine. I was worried."

"Don't be, silly head. I know how to take care of myself."

"I can see that. Oh, I meant to ask – did you try the sleeping potion I gave you?"

"Oh, I did. It worked great. I slept wonderfully."

Another surprise; Martel had figured she would hoard it. "That's good to hear. I'll see if I can learn the recipe and bring you more, if you want."

She gave one of her rare smiles. "I do."

## Chapter 335: Faithless Gems

### Faithless Gems

After the harrowing fight in the catacombs, combat training at the Lyceum felt downright dull. They no longer fought fire acolytes against mageknights – presumably, Moira had made her point – and instead trained with some of the warriors acting as defenders for the elemental mages. Being in line to become an officer rather than serving as a protector, this sometimes pitted Eleanor against Martel, which had begun to trouble him. Thanks to his rigorous training, Martel's spells could pack a hefty punch; he knew hitting Eleanor with even just a fire bolt would cause considerable hurt, if only short-term. But if he tried to restrain himself and use a weakened form of his spells, she would simply shrug off the attack and continue against him. She had no such scruples as he did, apparently.

To his right, another mageknight attacked Martel directly, but the warrior left himself open for a fire ray that made him regret showing up for class. The threat vanquished, Martel turned back towards

his left where Eleanor duelled Julian, serving as his protector. She deftly outmanoeuvred him, and he landed on his back, out of the fight. Martel had one moment to land a spell before Eleanor regained her balance after her attack and went after him. He hesitated. It cost him.

She disarmed him of his staff and placed her blade against his throat. He hung his head low in defeat, and she gave him a smile before removing her weapon. "You will have to be faster than that next time," she teased.

"I say," Julian growled, back on his feet. "Not a single spell from you to help me in my fight."

"I didn't realise you'd need help straight away," Martel countered.

Walking up to them, Maximilian laughed hearing Martel's retort. "Nordmark has you marked! Though no shame in losing to Fontaine. She may be the best warrior here, myself excluded."

Eleanor shook her head with an exasperated smile, walking over to the water barrel.

"I think I'd put money on her in a fight against you," the fire acolyte admitted.

"Friend, you wound me." The mageknight looked shocked before his expression turned to a grin. "Though I cannot complain. Any woman less would not be worthy of Maximilian of Marche."

Somehow, Martel felt irked by the remark, though he could not say why. He had woken up in a strange mood; relieved that Julia was safe, yet ashamed that he knew about the maleficar in the catacombs and could do nothing. Maximilian's comment had nothing to do with that, but maybe it bothered him because it served as a reminder of the future; at some point, his only two friends in Morcaster would be together, while Martel would be alone, sent far away.

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A message reached Martel as he passed by the entrance hall after classes. He could guess the sender, but not the contents.

Martel,

Need you at the

Four Flagon Tavern.

Regnar

Strange. The troupe was supposed to be on their way to Aquila already. Their continued presence in Morcaster, along with the note, gave reason for alarm. Worried what this all meant, Martel saw no cause to delay; he grabbed his cloak and immediately set out for the bridge district.

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Arriving at the tavern, Martel found it empty. It seemed that Lady Pearl had gotten her wish to see it closed. He continued downstairs to the theatre, where he noticed most of the troupe, including Regnar. Everything that could be picked up and carried away had been done; only the benches and the stage itself remained. As for its erstwhile performers, some of them sat with gloomful expressions while others paced around anxiously.

"What's going on?" the acolyte asked.

"Ian's been taken," it burst from one of the actors. "Those bastards!"

"What? By whom?"

"Who else but the self-appointed ruler and tyrant of this district," Theo spat.

"He ran away, but we figured he'd be back," Regnar added. "When that didn't happen after a day, we ceased our preparations and began looking for him instead. I don't know if those thugs took him in the first place, and that's why he never returned, or maybe they saw us searching and guessed our purpose. In either case, they got him."

"But you already wanted to leave," Martel argued. "Why would they take Ian?"

"Leverage. She wasn't convinced of our intentions," the hedge mage explained and hauled out a note. "We've been told to get out if we want to get the boy back. If we're not gone tomorrow morning, we won't see him again."

"I already told them you would leave," the acolyte exclaimed. He had impressed this on Ruby; why would she not believe him? And while his opinion of her had not been stellar, he could scarcely believe she would threaten a child. "So, what will you do?"

"What we already planned to do. We'll pack our carts and get going tomorrow morning. Too late in the day to start our travels now. Hopefully, that'll satisfy this wench and give us our boy back," Theo said.

"Alright." Not much else to do. "What do you need from me?"

"Once we're underway, Regnar will go to the Pearl and collect Ian. He suggested you might be good to bring along, in case they plan any trickery," the storyteller explained.

Martel nodded. From what he had seen of Regnar's spellwork, it was subtle rather than offensive; useful for supportive purposes, but no substitute for what a battlemage or mageknight could bring to the table. And if they refused to release the boy or had harmed him in any way, Martel would gladly burn the Pearl to the ground. "I'll be there, as early as I can. And we'll get Ian back for you."

Theo nodded with an unhappy smile. "You're a friend to the friendless, Martel. We won't forget."

The acolyte took a deep breath. He wanted to go now, march over to the Pearl and demand Ian's release, but he knew that was only his impatience talking. If Lady Pearl got what she wanted and saw the troupe leaving tomorrow morning, she had no reason to harm the boy or keep him captive any further. Exhaling, Martel nodded to himself before looking at the despairing faces around him. "Tomorrow at the Pearl."

## Chapter 336: Theatrics in the Tavern

### Theatrics in the Tavern

The two bells before he could leave felt like some of the longest that Martel had yet to suffer through. He was restless both hours working in the apothecary, and he could only put the least amount of necessary effort into his spells during his lesson in fire magic. If Moira berated him for this, he barely noticed; he was used to her barbs by now, and his fears about the current situation overrode any indignation he might otherwise have felt.

While Martel did not know the boy particularly well, Lady Pearl threatening Ian went against all his instincts. He understood that she worked on both sides of the law, but harming a child felt too far even for a criminal; even for a Ninth Lord. Martel wondered if, once he finished training as a

battlemage, he would be powerful enough to intervene in a situation like this, instead of now where he just had to play along.

As soon as the bell rang to set him free, Martel left the castle. While he understood the immense value of his education at the Lyceum, at times like these, he almost resented the school for binding him with its rules and schedule. If he were his own master, he could have left this morning and overseen the release of Ian immediately rather than having to wait.

He tried not to think about the fact that once he left the Lyceum, he would simply exchange it for another master that would own the next twenty years of his life.

On the main street that led to The River Pearl, Regnar awaited him. Slowly exhaling smoke, the hedge mage finally removed his pipe and gave Martel a serious look. "Ready?"

Martel nodded. "Let's get your boy back."

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A short while after, two wizards entered the Pearl. This early in the afternoon, few customers could be seen inside the place. Those present did cast lingering looks at the newcomers, remarking upon their contradictory appearance. One very young, the other rather old. The former dressed in impressive-looking red robes, the latter wearing an almost ragged and often patched coat. The taller of the pair looked almost angry with an air of danger surrounding him; the other, a pipe hanging from his mouth, seemed more wily and harder to determine.

As for the staff, they stared as well, though their expressions were nervous rather than curious. One guard disappeared into the back while the serving girls kept their distance. Martel noticed that for once, nobody approached him with offers to satisfy his desires for one thing or another.

Soon after, Lady Pearl appeared with a few of her female attendants, all of them armed and wearing plenty of golden jewellery. It took Martel a moment to spot Ian as well due to his short stature, walking alongside the bald proprietress, who kept a firm grip on his shoulder.

"Regnar!" the boy called out, making Martel clench his fists. He did not see Ruby among Lady Pearl's retinue, which almost disappointed him. After their last exchange, he wanted to look her in the face and ask her to justify this.

At the boy's outburst, Lady Pearl renewed her grip on him, and the whole little procession came to a halt some ten paces away. "I'm told you wandering rats finally cleared out of my district."

Removing the pipe from his mouth, Regnar gave Ian a reassuring look before turning his gaze on Lady Pearl. "My companions have all gone, yes. It's just me left. Now release the boy to me." His voice sounded cold with nothing of his typical joviality. Martel knew that for all his harmless appearance, the man was still a wizard; it felt unwise of Lady Pearl to provoke him. Glancing around at the room, he wondered if she did it for the sake of her own people, to demonstrate her power. Or perhaps she simply figured she could get away with it, and it amused her to do so.

Lady Pearl looked down at Ian by her side. "This little rascal. We found him trespassing. You really should teach him better."

"I wasn't doing anything –" A hand across his face silenced the boy.

"Quiet when the adults are talking, dear," the bald woman chastised him. "And if you were about to call me a liar, be grateful I interrupted you beforehand."

"The boy has learned his lesson," Regnar said. "You won't see any of us in the bridge district again. Now, may we leave?"

Lady Pearl looked from the hedge mage to the battlemage. "That goes for you as well, darling. You are not welcome here anymore." Her voice, which had been soft, almost teasing, became harsh. "Must I explain the consequences if any of you return?"

Martel was dearly tempted to reply affirmatively. What exactly did she think she could do against a battlemage backed by the Imperial administration? But he understood this was as much theatre as what had taken place in the basement below the Four Flagon Tavern. Lady Pearl had picked a fight with the troupe, including him, and she needed everyone to see her emerge victoriously. "We understand. I won't be back."

Mollified by their assurances, she released her grip on Ian, who ran forward to wrap his arms around Regnar. "Let's go."

The two mages and their young companion turned around and walked out of the common room, followed by stares, whispers, and laughter, some of it sounding relieved.

Once outside on the street, Martel continued walking only to find Regnar standing still. Frowning, he looked at the hedge mage.

Pushing Ian away a little, Regnar raised his hands and pointed them with palms outwards at The River Pearl. "Spirits of the Nether, I call upon thee. Ascend from the depths to take nest within this place. Let joy be smothered and grief unleashed. Let health falter and sickness grow. Let life wither and darkness triumph," he chanted with eyes wide open. As he finished speaking, he shut his eyelids fast, taking deep breaths. "Let's get away from here."

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They walked for a while in silence. Ian held Regnar's hand, and the hedge mage seemed his old self again; still, Martel kept looking at him through the corner of his eye. Finally, he felt it necessary to say something. "What was that?"

The hedge mage snorted in response with a chuckle of laughter. "Just a few lines from one of our plays. I didn't want that old hag to think she could get away with this."

"It sounded like a curse," Martel mumbled. In fact, although he had never witnessed an act of maleficus, he figured it would look something like that.

"That's the point. I didn't want to do it to her face – it would have started a fight. But the people out on the street, they noticed," Regnar claimed. "They'll spread the word of the crazed old hedge mage, cursing that place. Soon, every bit of ill luck that happens there, even just a waitress tripping over her own feet, will be attributed to this spectre I've conjured. People will feel uncomfortable, they'll prefer going other places, and that hag will know our revenge."

"Seems like a lot for just a rumour to accomplish," Martel considered. If truly no magic lay in the words spoken by Regnar, he could not imagine they would have such power.

"It's not all. When we return to Morcaster, we'll bring a new play with us. It'll have a villain, a bald woman, who meets a cruel fate," the hedge mage promised. "A fate shared by any who drinks at her tavern. I tell you, lad, we won't let this rest."

"She'll be sorry," Ian declared. "I'll never forgive her."

Martel took a deep breath and exhaled. While he understood their sentiment and could even agree with it, he suddenly felt it like a burden; another strife, another reason for fights to break out and children be endangered. "I guess as long as you do it outside the bridge district." He looked ahead as the road split, leading north towards the gate or west towards the Lyceum. "Stars watch out for you."

"Same to you, lad. Thanks again for your help," Regnar told him. Ian gave him a hug, and they parted ways.

## Chapter 337: North, South, in Between

### North, South, in Between

Besides his typical relief to have the hardest part of the fiveday done, Martel enjoyed this Manday more than usual. No concerns about Julia, no descents into the sewers waiting, no fears for his friends – just learning new and exciting forms of magic, whether Asterian, Tyrian, or Sindhian with his favourite teachers. For a moment, Martel wistfully imagined if every day of his life could be like Manday.

Staring at the parchment while in Master Fenrick's class, Martel imagined the rune clearly in his mind before he finally moved the charcoal to draw it. The lines could be straighter, but it resembled the symbol, at least. Moving to the next part, Martel imagined a bond between himself and the sign. He thought of danger, trespassers, invaders, anything he would need to be warned about. Finally, he raised his hand to hover above the rune and uttered a simple word. "*Vara*."

Briefly, the symbol glowed. For a moment, Martel felt as if his fingers touched the parchment, even though his hand remained in the air. An odd sensation, though it disappeared along with the magic shine to be replaced by a sense of triumph. The rune had responded to him. He had managed to activate it, however shortly.

"Oh, well done!" Seated next to him, Eleanor beamed a smile. She sat with her own parchment and symbol, drawn more neatly than Martel's, yet entirely dormant. "You are ahead of everyone else, I believe."

The fire acolyte looked around at the other mageknights to confirm; nobody else seemed to have made any progress with activating their rune. Alerted by Eleanor's outburst, several of them returned Martel's glance, often with envy or frustration.

Master Fenrick came over. "Show me."

Trying not to feel pressured by his teacher's presence, Martel cleared his mind to focus on the rune. Once he felt ready, he held out his hand. "*Vara*."

The light of magic appeared again, if fainter than before. Maybe because Martel had spent less time preparing himself, or feeling Master Fenrick's eyes on him made the acolyte a little nervous. Still, it had worked. For the shortest of moments, he had felt the connection again.

"Good," his teacher mumbled. "But don't think you're done. If that rune is ever going to serve any purpose, it'll need to remain active for hours. Back to practising."

"Yes, master." Martel bowed his head in acknowledgement and resumed the exercise.

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Encouraged by his first sign of success with Tyrian magic, Martel still smiled thinking about it as he entered the Hall of Elements, hours later.

"We're in a good mood today, I notice," Master Alastair remarked.

"I was able to activate a Tyrian rune today," the acolyte explained. "For the first time. I thought it might be several fivedays before I got that far. Learning the Sindhian methods certainly did."

"I see." The teacher nodded a little. "I do find it interesting that you're able to wield these different kinds of magic to no detriment. One might have wondered if doing so blunted your skill in either, but you seem as sharp as ever with Asterian spells."

"That's good to hear." Martel's smile widened.

"Tyrian runes... Considering my experience with the northerners, I would never have imagined we'd teach their lore here at the Lyceum. Or see their signs around the castle, pushing water around and whatnot."

"It's a new practice?"

"Aye, indeed. Master Fenrick introduced it. He's the first Asterian mage to learn any of their lore, at least from what I know. He convinced us all of the many uses, including students knowing the most basic runes."

Somehow, Martel had figured that the Lyceum had been the same way since it was established as a school. Strange to realise how much it must have changed just since Master Alastair was a student here.

"Regardless, let's get to it. Your control of the spell is coming along nicely. With today's practice, or maybe a few more lessons, I think we can consider it complete." The teacher summoned a flame and let it float into the air, some ten paces away.

Martel focused on the hardest manifestation of the elemental bolt spell, using air. Imagining the wind itself turning solid like a jar, filling it with his magic, he released the spell and his phantasmagorical jar to fly straight into Master Alastair's flame, extinguishing it.

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Mistress Rana held up the bottle, inspecting its contents carefully. An icy blue liquid sloshed within. Martel had made the elixir entirely on his own, as was becoming usual; he no longer needed the teacher to awaken the ingredients or help him distil the potion into a flacon.

Closing her hands tightly around the small bottle, Mistress Rana's hand shivered lightly. "Certainly cold. Well done."

Knowing that she did not praise idly, Martel smiled and bowed his head.

"I shall be travelling for a fiveday or two, so we will have to pause your continued studies until then. But when I return, I'll have a new recipe for you to study."

"I'm happy to hear that, mistress." The acolyte almost hungered for that; every recipe presented a kind of magic otherwise inaccessible to him.

"After all, it's limited how many of these potions of cold the apothecary can sell."

It took Martel a moment to realise she had meant this in a wry fashion, almost like a jest; he could count on one hand how often he had heard such from the stern Sindhian woman before.

"Anyway, clean up your worktable."

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Late in the evening, Martel left the library. He had been studying the volume of Tyrian runes, wondering which others Master Fenrick might teach them. Some of them sounded like they had wondrous properties, not much different from what Sindhian alchemy claimed to accomplish; either seemed to require a dedication to their study, though, perhaps only attainable by the northern bards or the southern alchemists.

Back in his room, Martel lit a flame to give him vision as he changed out of his clothes. The candle on his drawer had not seen use in a long time; it seemed wasteful when he could so easily create his own light.

Crawling into bed, Martel allowed the flame to wither away, and soon after, he fell asleep.

## Chapter 338: Enchanted Talk

### Enchanted Talk

After breakfast, Martel drifted towards the workshops for his regular shift helping Master Jerome. The artificer greeted him jovially as usual. "Your usual spot awaits you," he told Martel with a gesture towards the small laboratory for making ink.

About to continue on his way, a thought occurred to the acolyte, and he turned towards the artificer. "Master Jerome, you enchant objects, right?"

"Indeed, I do. I believe you've asked me that before. Why, do you have a need for hot stones in your bath?" came the laughing response.

"Oh no, I need nothing. I'm just curious. Do you enchant weapons?"

Master Jerome's expression turned quizzical. "I do, for those students who join the legions. Might save someone's life out there. But I don't hand anything out until graduation if you were wondering. That'll have to do until then." He pointed at the knife in Martel's belt; an example of the artificer's craft, though forged without magic.

"Of course." Martel placed one hand above the hilt. "I'm only wondering because I read about monsters and spectres. Like spirits that can't be harmed by ordinary weapons. But enchanted steel might?"

The artificer gave a shrug. "Perhaps. It's not that simple. Enchantment is imbuing a material with a specific property. What kind of spell would you cast to cause harm to a spirit? I wouldn't know how to craft something like that."

"Right."

"You'll learn about this in what, a month or two? When you take your enchantment course with me."

Something Martel looked forward to, both because of the interesting subject and the teacher. Yet he could not let himself get distracted. "What about the inquisitors? Isn't it their task to fight such creatures? They must have weapons to accomplish that."

Master Jerome nodded. "Though I have little positive to say about that lot, you're right. But they use weapons of gold. Equally useful against mages or anything of magical origin." He slapped Martel on the shoulder. "Anyway, I have tasks of my own that await me. I'll come by later to see how you're getting on."

They separated, Martel moving towards the laboratory. He knew that facing the jinni without proper knowledge of how to fight such a creature would be madness, and he had no intention to do so. Still, he could not help but feel some responsibility, knowing about the monster yet doing nothing about it.

Sitting down and getting to work, Martel knew he had to repress that voice making him feel guilty. While his conversation with Master Jerome had been enlightening, it did not change the situation. Given the material, a weapon made of gold would have to be prohibitively expensive. And even if he got his hands on something like that, the jinni still possessed formidable powers, as he had witnessed. With a faint sigh, Martel pushed these considerations from his mind and focused on the task at hand.

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By the time his tasks in the morning were done, Martel had thought of something else. He could do nothing about the maleficar, but he did have a responsibility towards the victims of the villains; one of them, at any rate. It had been a long time since he had visited Sparrow; the last five days had been hectic. While Martel was not officially her teacher, he had nonetheless accepted that responsibility, of sorts; she deserved more attention than he had given her so far. That in mind, Martel left for the copper lanes in the afternoon.

The path was familiar, even if it had been a long while. It made Martel think of the times when he had gone to the slums habitually. Weasel and the urchins, Lothar and the staff fighters, Kerra and all her machinations... not all of it pleasant, but Martel could not deny that the copper lanes had made their impression on him. And reversely, he liked to imagine; he wondered if the people of that district still thought of him as the Copper Mage.

Reaching the house, still looking dilapidated, Martel knocked on the backdoor. One of the children opened and looked at him with wide eyes. "You're back!"

"I am. Is Sparrow around? Ask her to meet me out here, please."

Martel retreated a few steps into the alley and scratched his boot against the stamped dirt beneath his feet. He had no grand designs on how to train Sparrow; he would simply take it one lesson at a time, starting with encouraging her natural talent.

The small girl appeared soon after. "Hullo!"

Hearing her almost enthusiastic greeting, Martel smiled; she had seemed most timid before, which was understandable given her experience with the maleficar. He was glad if her spirit remained undarkened by it. "Hullo, Sparrow. Have you practised your magic?"

She nodded vigorously. Holding out her hand, she scattered some dirt on the ground in every direction. "I don't even have to think about it. It just happens now, immediately."

"That's good. Constant practice is the key. It may feel boring, but magic doesn't come easy."

"Alright. But what else can I learn? While fun, pushing dirt around doesn't really seem useful."

Martel smiled again. "True. My knowledge of earth spells is limited, but first, let's teach you some more control. That'll be the next step before you can do anything else."

"How do I learn that?"

Martel reached out his hand. He did not have any impressive spells related to earth, but he had sufficient control of the element to use it in basic ways. From the ground, Martel raised up the dirt into the shape of a house, much like the one inhabited by Sparrow.

"Oh!" The girl watched with delight on her face. "I can do that too?"

"Eventually. Right now, you're able to push your magic into the earth, make it move. But to really use it, you must learn how to give it shape and keep it restrained according to your will," Martel explained. "Instead of just pushing your magic down, try pulling the ground up towards you. Slowly, focused, no other thoughts in your head."

With a frown and the tip of her tongue sticking out, Sparrow gave it her first try.

## Chapter 339: Blind Fighting

### Blind Fighting

As Moira entered the Circle of Fire on Pelday morning, Martel reflected on how much he preferred being the teacher rather than the student at times. Especially for this class and its rather spiteful instructor. Martel had almost learned to make peace with that, given his progression in fire magic, but even that seemed gone lately. His flame wall spell was as good as it would be, at least while purely practising under controlled conditions; Martel did not expect to improve that unless he got to use it during actual combat. Peaceful practice could only take spellcraft so far.

"Well, you lot have hardly impressed me with your spellwork, but time is wasting away, and there's plenty you still need to learn," Moira began to say.

Martel ignored the first part, knowing his spellwork was excellent for an acolyte on his third month.

"We'll proceed with something I'm almost surprised none of you have ever touched upon. I say almost, because your capacity for failure is boundless." Ignoring the scowl on every student's face, Moira threw a piece of cloth towards each of them. "Spread out around the room and cover your eyes with those."

His curiosity overtaking his annoyance, Martel did so. The cloth was black and thick, preventing him from seeing anything. It also smelled a bit like fish, which he hoped would not be part of the lesson.

"You'll be fighting all against all. I'll watch if you actually hit any spells. Whoever performs worst, lands the fewest blows, gets detention," Moira explained; Martel thought he heard someone sigh. "Begin!"

Martel turned his head in every direction, which yielded nothing. The blindfold kept him from seeing the others. It took him a moment to realise which sense to rely upon instead. Letting his magic flow from him, it told him the location of several sources of heat in the chamber. No reason to hesitate, Martel released a fire bolt against the nearest. Moments later, he heard Edward whimper. Martel's smile lasted only until he felt the sting himself. Around the chamber, the sources of heat were moving; shaking off the attack, Martel did the same, preparing his next spell.

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Their second lesson contained the same exercise, and almost grudgingly, Martel saw the wisdom in Moira's teachings. If he could hone his ability to sense people through heat, it would make him much less reliable on sight for finding a target in a fight. And unlike other lessons, the fire acolytes had found it almost to be a game, laughing at times when they felt or heard their spell land. Except for Edward – detention awaited him tonight.

Moving through the entrance hall, Martel checked for mail and found a letter waiting for him. If he recognised the writing on the envelope, this was written by Father Julius on behalf of his mother.

Going to his room, Martel opened the letter once alone and began reading.

My dear boy,

I sent you a letter shortly after solstice. Father Julius assures me it would have arrived. The Imperial post is very reliable. I only got anxious because you did not write back. I suppose you must be busy at your impressive school with all your classes. Soon after your last letter arrived, months ago, Master Ogion received one as well from one of your teachers. He told me that your teacher was impressed by your progress and expected you to become an acolyte soon, in record time.

I did not wish to bother such an important man with trivial questions, but I assume acolyte means you are advancing in your studies? Father Julius agrees with me that this is the most likely interpretation, but I should like to hear exactly what it means from you. Especially if that gives you an idea of when you might graduate. I understand that you may not decide your posting by yourself, but surely these people working for the Empire will grant you time to come home and visit your mother before leaving for your important post.

It would be lovely to have you home for solstice, if possible. John is doing so well. Thank you again for sending the money for his medicine. Your other brothers and sisters all send their love as well. Keith has had little work over winter, but it should pick up now in spring. We had a lovely celebration. The travelling bard came around. I believe I mentioned it in another letter. He sang another lament for your father, as beautiful as last time.

Other than that, things are quite the same in Engby. Juliet is still doing well with the brewster. Something happened between Mira and the baker's boy. She no longer talks about him and got mad when I mentioned his name. I know you threatened to turn him into a newt or something, but I saw him with a bruise on his face, so I think Mira handled it on her own. As for William, the less said, the better. That is all. I will write if there are any big developments. So you do not have to worry or wonder about us.

With love,

Your mother

Martel did not miss the various insinuations towards his negligence in writing back; he would have to send his own reply soon. At least this time, he had plenty of money to pay the post. He could also leave another offering for his father at the Basilica thanks to his earnings from the apothecary; that would make him feel a little less guilty for his lack of letters.

He remembered why he had delayed writing last time he had received a letter; it had been shortly after his graduation to acolyte, and he did not know how to tell his mother that his robe was red. In general, he figured the less she knew about his activities in Morcaster, the better, but he could not hide this forever.

But he could delay a little while longer. Supper waited for him; he would figure out what to write later, once his stomach was full.

## Chapter 340: Incendiary Knowledge

### Incendiary Knowledge

Thoughts about his mother's letter still fluttered in and out of Martel's head the next day, especially since his first lesson in combat magic required little work by his mind. He realised that he was in danger of doing the same as before; delay writing a reply to avoid bearing bad news until he had completely forgotten about it, which would surely prompt another guilt-inducing letter from his mother. Even if Martel was unsure how to best proceed, he probably needed to handle this today instead of procrastinating any further.

Second lesson of Malday always proved more interesting than its earlier counterpart, for better or worse. Reynard had expanded on their previous tactics; rather than a fire acolyte and a mageknight against two of the latter, they now fought in bigger teams with several battlemages and their protectors side by side. Maximilian had explained it to him once; it resembled the tactics of the Khivan formation with muskets firing on the flanks only to retreat behind infantry once battlelines closed.

To Martel, who had no knowledge of war, Maximilian's explanations did not always make sense. He had never heard of gunpowder weapons before coming to Morcaster, and it had required a lengthier discussion along with crude illustrations before he understood the basic principle; it seemed to be similar to a bow, except it shot little metal balls rather than arrows. It did not sound dangerous, but given that the Khivans had fought toe to toe with the Asterian legions for over a decade, it had to be.

A mageknight pushed down the defender in front of Martel. Her triumph only lasted until she realised this gave her no cover from the fire acolyte; she raised her shield in futile protection as Martel's fire bolt struck her knee. The loss of balance kept her from avoiding his next attack as well; a third spell proved enough to make her yield.

"Alright, enough. Get some water in you," Reynard yelled across the gymnasium as the skirmish came to an end. The students got back on their feet, many of them muttering or grumbling. Martel caught a glimpse of Harriet, who had been on the opposing side, and he smiled to himself seeing her angry expression. While not outright at odds with each other, feelings between the two acolytes could not be described as cordial.

"You did quite well." Eleanor appeared, using her elbow to catch his attention.

"Likewise." They had been on the same team, though opposite ends. "Your flank won faster than ours."

They walked towards the water barrels, lining up with all the others. "Amazing how much better a battlemage performs when they have a proper defence protecting them." A few annoyed looks reached them from those mageknights nearby who seemed to take offence at Eleanor's remark.

"Oh, are you busy tonight?" Martel asked.

"I have a few matters to deal with. What makes you ask?"

"Ah, nothing. I was planning to go to the Basilica, leave an offering in my father's memory. I'll just go on my own."

"Well, I have nothing tomorrow evening. Or does it have to be today?"

Martel shook his head, smiling a little. "Not at all. Tomorrow would be great."

"In that case, I would be happy to accompany you." She reciprocated his expression, reaching out to grab a bowl to dip into the water barrel.

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His duties done for the day, and his journey to the Basilica postponed until tomorrow, Martel had no excuses left when it came to writing his mother a letter. Seated in his chamber, staring at the blank parchment, Martel finally took hold of his quill.

Dear mum,

Thanks for writing me. I'm sorry I didn't reply to your last letter. As you guessed, a lot has happened here to keep me occupied every hour of the day. That includes graduating to acolyte. As a novice, I was learning general magic and other skills. Now, as an acolyte, I have begun my training into specialised magic.

I know that I told you I wanted to be a weathermage like Master Ogion, but it turns out, I am better suited for something else. I am very good with magic related to fire, and the Imperial administration wants me to become a battlemage. That may sound frightening, but you should not worry. I will not be at the frontline. We stay in the back, using our spells to provide support for the legionaries doing the actual fighting. So it is nothing to be concerned about. And maybe I can get posted to a legion in Nordmark, which would give me a chance to visit.

I am glad to hear everyone is well, including John. I will save up more money in case he or someone else falls sick again. I will also be visiting the Basilica tomorrow to pray for father. I think I mentioned it to you before. It is the most beautiful building I have ever seen. My friend Eleanor will go with me. She comes from a patrician family, but as we are both mages, we can still be friends.

We also had wonderful spring festivities here. I imagine I told you about seeing a play last year. The same troupe came back, and they performed a comedy that was so funny, I had tears of laughter. It was about a simple farmer who woke up and thought he was an important man, ordering everyone about, and they went along with it while laughing at him behind his back. Maybe it doesn't sound so funny when I explain it. I guess that's where the skill of the actors come in.

I will try to reply faster to any future letters. I will also let you know once I hear about my posting.

Love,

Martel

Setting his quill aside, Martel opened the drawer to pick out four copper coins to pay for the post. Once the ink felt dry, he folded the letter and placed the pennies next to it, keeping everything ready to hand over tomorrow.