

Firebrand 341

Chapter 341: The Burdens of Gifts

The Burdens of Gifts

On Glunday, they continued practising their fights with blindfolds. This time, Moira harshly reproached any who found the exercise amusing and threatened further detentions to anyone who did not take their training seriously. This quickly put a sombre mood over the acolytes, and Martel focused to the best of his ability. Even if his schedule felt less busy these days, he had no desire to waste an evening in the Circle of Fire being bombarded with spells from his teacher.

In the evening, after supper, he met up with Eleanor in the entrance hall. They left as soon as they spotted each other; it would be a long walk to the Basilica and back again, and given the late hour, they had little time to waste.

Although Morcaster had already celebrated spring, it had still been cold last fiveday. This evening, despite the sun setting soon, it felt decidedly warmer, as if the season had finally arrived. Martel still wore his cloak, but only intended for the return journey after sunset; for now, he carried it over his arm.

They kept up idle conversation as they walked, weaving around the carts and people filling the main street running through the city. Martel remembered the first time he had walked this way when he arrived in Morcaster; the sheer scale of everything, especially the number of people, had felt overwhelming. Now he was almost accustomed to it, and talking to Eleanor made him forget about it a moment later.

Finally, the Basilica came into view. Its towers rose taller than any other building in Morcaster, majestic and elegant. "You must have seen it often," Martel remarked. "Living here and all."

"I suppose, compared to most people. Mostly for solstice ceremonies, though I have not attended any since joining the Lyceum. And even before then, my family mostly went to the Temple of Saint Cuthbert for ceremonies and rituals. It lies near my family's residence."

Around them, as always, the crowd became increasingly clerical in nature. This was the temple district, filled with shrines, monasteries, and convents, along with priests and priestesses, monks and nuns. Martel had never given it much thought, assuming they were all more or less of the same kind. "I'll be honest, I don't even know if the temple back in Engby is dedicated to anyone. I don't recall Father Julius ever saying much on the subject."

"Some temples are simply dedicated to Sol," Eleanor said. "Or Luna, though that seems rare. I know the Maidens of the Moon have a convent in Aquila, but I am not even sure they have a chapter here in Morcaster."

Whether or not they did, Martel intended to steer clear of them and other members of the cloth. As they crossed the square in front of the Basilica, Martel remembered the zealous preacher agitating people against magic and any wielding it. Or his brief encounter with the Sisters of the Sun, which had still proven too long. No, leaving an offering for his father's soul would be the extent of Martel's religious duties. Though he had to admit, they had a flair for names.

As on his previous visits, the Basilica took Martel's breath away. The sheer amount of labour and craftsmanship dedicated to decorating every surface with statues and patterns made him

flabbergasted that humans could create such. He wondered if stonemages had been involved in shaping some of all this. Not for the first time, Martel wished his gift lay with another element than fire. If fate had given him the ability to create such beauty, Martel would have felt overjoyed, spending every day in pursuit of this.

But if not given to him, perhaps Martel could lead others to it. Sparrow was clearly gifted with earth; perhaps if he set her on this path, her work would one day adorn the temples of Morcaster.

"You look so pensive," Eleanor remarked as they crossed the threshold to enter the Basilica. "What is on your mind?"

"Just wondering about all the effort that went into this place. I figure they used magic to hew the stones and even the sculptures."

"Probably. It would have taken centuries to build something like this otherwise."

Martel nodded a little to himself. "Do you ever wish you had other abilities? For instance, that you could create something like this."

Eleanor bit her lower lip; her turn to look pensive. "Sometimes. Similar to when I hear a bard sing a beautiful tune, or see the painting of a great artist. I wish I had those abilities too." She gave a shrug. "But magic is a gift no matter how it manifests. I can run longer and faster than any without. When I move swifter than the eye can blink, when all my movements flow, like everyone else is swimming through water while I remain unencumbered... I would not trade that feeling away. I imagine we all feel that way about our particular talent."

Martel felt like an exception to that, though her words made him consider it again. Fire seemed the least valuable element to him, useful only for destruction. Yet standing in the belltower of the Khivan church, drawing the conflagration to him – despite all the pain, how much it had burdened him, it had also been a brief sensation of ecstasy. For a moment, he had felt the power of fire, floating through the air, unburdened and free, full of life. Perhaps she was right. "You do look graceful when dancing," Martel replied, realising he had not spoken for a little while, and his tongue grasped for the first thing that came to mind.

Eleanor made no answer to this other than half a smile, and they progressed up the Basilica to reach the altar of Sol and his attendants. From his pocket, Martel dug out five silver coins.

His filial duty complete, Martel waited while Eleanor paid her own respects to the deities of Aster. Once she rose from the altar as well, they turned around and left. Soon engrossed in conversation again, Martel paid little heed to the yellow-clad nun observing him walk out of the Basilica.

Chapter 342: Curb Your Reaction

Curb Your Reaction

About a fiveday passed without incident. With nothing happening of particular note, Martel stayed mostly at the Lyceum, attending to his schoolwork. He paid a visit to Julia, providing her with a few coins and some pilfered food, but otherwise he remained a dutiful student with no concerns other than school.

As Manday came around, his favourite of the fiveday, Martel went to the Hall of Elements as usual. He had spent some evenings practising his elemental bolt spell, getting the final component right.

"Martel, good to see you."

"And you, master."

His teacher smiled. "Shall we get straight into it?"

"I'm ready."

Master Alastair conjured up a flame and let it float some distance away. Focusing, Martel swiftly let his magic fill the air in front of him and take shape before hurling it across the space to extinguish the summoned fire.

"Excellent, I must say. You cast the spell without hesitation or delay, and by the feel of it, you've got more than enough power packed in there as well." The balding wizard inclined his head in a sign of respect. "I do believe you have mastered this bit of magic as well."

Martel grinned. "Thank you, master. What's next? The counterspell?"

His teacher laughed. "Very eager, are we. I suppose there's no time like the present. This will be unlike anything you've been taught before, mind you."

"How so?"

"To us, magic is linked to our will. We desire for an outcome and drive our magic to make it happen."

Martel thought about Regnar and what little the hedge mage had revealed about his own style of magic, which seemed more about instinct. A pity the old wanderer had been driven from the city; Martel would have enjoyed exploring this topic more. Forgetting about this for now, he returned his attention to his teacher.

"This spell is different. It is a reaction, meant to be cast on reflex. Now, it can be used with particular potency against enemy wizards, but I doubt you'll have much need of that, unless you're sent to the far North," Master Alastair considered. "Still, that is how I learned the spell, so I'll teach you the same way. And perhaps together, we can find a way to expand its use. If you could learn to cast this spell reflexively the moment a Khivan musket is fired, it would serve you well."

Martel wondered how to achieve that, considering they had no access to such a weapon, but he assumed Master Alastair would have an idea.

"For now, we must hone your magical sense to recognise magic being cast, and which kind," his teacher continued. "Turn around and have your back to me." Martel did so. "I'll draw upon one of the elements. Using your sense of magic alone, tell me which element I chose."

Funny, this reminded Martel of fighting blindfolded in the Circle of Fire. He was glad this seemed to be the only overlap in teaching methods between Moira and Master Alastair.

"Ready? I'll begin casting."

Martel let his magical senses flow out from him, telling him of everything they could. He felt the heat coming from Master Alastair, but little else.

"Well? What do you think?"

"Uh, I'm not sure I have a guess. Earth?"

"Did you guess that for a particular reason, or did you just choose something?"

Martel cleared his throat. "The last one."

"That'll not do. We'll try again. You know where I am even if you can't see me. Focus your magical sense on me. It doesn't matter that I'm behind you and that your eyes face forward. You don't need them," his teacher explained. "Get ready."

"Yes, master."

As much as Martel enjoyed learning a new spell, he always forgot how difficult it would be at first, fire magic excluded. And this felt harder than trying a new spell; it reminded him of his first attempts at Sindhian or Tyrian magic. It required a different way of thinking, of using magic that did not come naturally to him. Except for a few uncontrolled outbursts of magic, usually when Martel had been furious or emotional, he only cast spells deliberately. Trying to learn how to do it as a reaction seemed difficult, and he first had to learn how to sense the right time for it.

With Mistress Rana busy for the time being, his alchemy studies were put on hold; it bothered him a little, since she had promised he was ready for a new recipe, and Martel disliked the delay. Just finding out which one he would learn next was exciting. But alchemy prized patience above all, and until Mistress Rana had time for him again, that would be her only lesson to him today.

Thankfully, even if it had taken him a while to get to this point in his alchemical studies, he figured that in the future, it would be faster for him to progress through new recipes; he might learn something like two of them a month if he did well, which would leave him with a decent book of potions.

Finishing supper, Martel's mind was on the last topic, wondering at the price of actually buying a small tome with blank pages – it would certainly look better than his current pile of notes and parchment. He had already begun walking back towards his chamber when he thought about checking his post. Probably it could wait, but perhaps residual guilt from ignoring one of his mother's letters made Martel go back and check.

A letter written in an unknown hand waited for him. Too curious to wait, Martel opened it at once.

Master Martel,

A matter has arisen where I should appreciate the opportunity to seek your advice. The details are too delicate to entrust to parchment, and thus I ask of you to visit me in the convent garden of the Sisters of the Sun. Just as our last conversation, you will be free to enter and leave with no harm done to you. I await you one of the nearest days and would ask you do not delay more than necessary. I hope you would not disappoint an old man in dire need.

The Friar

Martel immediately glanced around after seeing the signature, as if expecting to be watched. Nobody seemed to pay him any heed. Composing himself, he looked at the letter again. Vague and mysterious, which seemed a common trait of these Nine Lords; probably a necessary trait for the position.

Martel knew he should ignore this. He knew that he always regretted dancing to the tune of these brigands, styling themselves as masters of the city.

But the Friar had felt so different from someone like Tibert, Kerra, or Lady Pearl. The lack of any threats or promises of monetary reward felt like an indication of this.

And yet despite no mention of it in the letter, Martel had ambushed a handful of nuns right after his meeting with the Friar. Maybe they wanted revenge, but the old monk had sworn by Sol to give him free passage and reiterated this promise in the letter. It did not seem like the old monk intended to use this knowledge against Martel, given nothing was said to even hint at this; still, it might be good just to see what he wanted. Even if Martel was in the clear, they might have discovered that the thief was Ruby. Not that Martel owed her anything.

Returning to his room, Martel did his best to ignore the last, perhaps most compelling reason why he decided to comply with the request; he felt curious.

Chapter 343: Brotherly Business

Brotherly Business

Martel spent Soday morning wondering whether he was making a mistake. Given his previous involvement with the Sisters of the Sun, walking into their compound might be considered the height of naivety. Yet the Friar had promised him free leave again, and he had made good on that promise last time. Besides, you needed bait for a trap; the letter had contained nothing of the sort. Just a vague appeal to Martel's decency, so to say. Which seemed very unlike one of the Nine Lords and made the acolyte inclined to trust the old monk had no ill intentions.

Which could be the very reason, of course, and perhaps the Friar was masterfully manipulating Martel.

He would find out soon enough. Ignoring the subtle voice in the back of his mind telling him to stay home, Martel finished his chores and his lunch before setting out towards the temple district.

Unlike his first visit, the gate to the convent stood closed. The building suddenly seemed foreboding, as if telling him to stay away. Perhaps that was the intention with the walls and sturdy-looking doors; the nuns inside probably preferred to avoid visitors.

Yet Martel had been invited, and with no other obvious action to take, he banged his fist against the gate.

It took a little while before a small hatch was slid open, allowing someone from the inside to spy on the street. "What do you want?"

"I'm Martel of the Lyceum." He almost regretted saying it; these religious people did not seem fond of magic. But he had to introduce himself to gain entry, after all, and they could probably tell he was a wizard by his red robes. "I've been invited." He left out the name of the Friar, not sure if saying it out loud would cause trouble.

"Wait here." The hatch was closed again.

Not like Martel had much choice; he doubted even Eleanor or Maximilian could have jumped over those walls, no matter how strong their empowering magic.

A smaller entry built into the large gate opened. "Come inside."

Hoping his instincts had not led him astray, Martel walked past the threshold to enter the convent.

If it was a trap, it could be worse. Martel was seated on a bench in the sun, surrounded by the fruit trees of the outer garden, giving a pleasant scent. Although the sight of the yellow-clad nuns made him a little nervous at first, they all ignored him, going about their business. One of them approached and gave him a cup of diluted wine to drink while he waited.

The old monk appeared. Curiously, unlike his more public appearances, he did not wear the velvet robe as before, but one made of undyed wool. "Master Martel of the Lyceum. I appreciate that you would accept my invitation."

Martel got on his feet, bowing his head in greeting. "You're welcome," he muttered, not sure what else to say.

"I shall be honest with you and tell you what I know. If this reflects ill or well on me in your opinion, so be it. I see no point in playing coy," the old monk declared, sitting down on the bench.

A refreshing change, assuming it was true. Martel returned to his seat.

"After our first meeting, I became intrigued. I've had my people look into you. They told me of an enterprising young mage, involved in many affairs. To be expected from someone who would appear in the Undercroft before the Nine Lords, of course, but other things surprised me. The people of the copper lanes think of you as their champion. The Khivans consider you the only good mage in a world they see as corrupted by magic. And I hear you even pay your respects at the Basilica. Not many young people do these days."

Martel sat, trying to digest this. The monk just admitted to spying on him, which explained why he thought the acolyte might become angry.

"When I meet people in my capacity as the Friar, they are nearly always motivated by either power or money – which often equate to the same thing, of course. You seem to be one of the few exceptions."

Martel considered that. He was unsure whether this was true. All of his involvement with the Nine Lords had been because he needed coin; though to be fair to himself, he needed that money for others rather than his own gain. Still, it seemed wise to let the old man talk as much as possible, learning what he could.

"I do have my suspicions how that thief was able to escape my otherwise capable sisters of the yellow cloth," the Friar continued, "on the night of our first meeting. But as no serious harm was done to them, I am inclined to let that matter rest."

So he did suspect Martel's hand in Ruby's escape. But either he meant what he said, or lack of evidence kept him from pursuing it.

"All of this is to say that I require help, and I believe you are in a unique position to offer it. Furthermore, I believe you may even be willing to aid me simply because it would be the right thing to do – though of course, your help would be received by my gratitude and friendship. While boasting does not become a man of vows, I dare say that I am a good friend to have."

He had a lot of faith in Martel; a necessary attribute to possess as a monk, perhaps.

The Friar smiled. "All this time, you've kept quiet, letting me talk. You truly are a child of Glund. Without knowing, I would guess that to be your star." Martel's expression must have given away the truth, for the old man began to laugh. "The riddle of three proves true once again."

Becoming a little impatient with all the cryptic talk, Martel figured he could speed things along. "What kind of help do you need?"

"Yes, to the heart of the matter. A holy relic was stolen from a shrine in the city. But to understand this, I must first ask – you are aware of the Pact of the Nine Lords, yes?"

Martel nodded.

"That oath has helped stem the violence that so easily overflows in this city. Of course, part of it is practical. Step out of line, the other Lords will destroy you. But still, an oath must be sworn by something holy. Or better yet, upon something holy." The Friar gave Martel a knowing look.

"The stolen relic – it's the one you used when you swore the Pact?"

He nodded. "Now, its disappearance does not invalidate the oath. But as you should know, the harbour has a new master. At summer solstice, we must renew the oath to include him. Another relic could be used, perhaps, but I fear these events are connected. Stealing the one we used last might be a pretext for someone to question the oath itself, delay the proceedings, and in the end, overturn the Pact."

"So, you want it found. But why me? You must have plenty of resources." Hard to imagine a man like the Friar could not call upon someone better.

"Yes, but as said, you may be uniquely qualified. This investigation requires magical talent, for reasons you'll discover, and any mage I might call upon is well known by the others. If the trail leads to the other Nine Lords, they would be seen as my agent, violating the Pact. You, however, are already known to have crossed the districts. You can appear as a neutral party."

Martel looked at the old man. He could refuse. In the end, he was not responsible for keeping the peace between these criminals. But he suddenly realised how the Friar's friendship might be useful to him. "I'll do it if you'll do a favour for me in turn."

"Which is?"

"In the catacombs underneath the city, by the sewers, I believe a maleficar hides. He is protected by a jinni, a spirit of the desert. Far too powerful for me to face. Can you get the inquisitors to scour the tombs and find him? They should arrive in force and send their very best." As much as Martel loathed depending on those zealots, their golden weapons might stand a chance against the jinni.

The Friar stared at him for a while. "Not at all what I expected. We are familiar with the catacombs, of course. They are a perennial thorn in the side of the Inquisition, unable to permanently quell the necromantic energies that plague the place. Very well. I have no qualms granting such a favour."

"In that case, I'll do what I can. But I can't guarantee success. I've never tried to investigate a crime before."

"Of course." The monk took out a scrap of parchment. "You will not be alone. I took the liberty of writing this down when I heard you had arrived for our meeting, anticipating a positive outcome. There's a time and place for you to meet someone who will assist you." He handed it over.

Martel accepted it. "Who is it? How will I know them?"

The Friar smiled. "He'll recognise you."

Chapter 344: Keeping Up Appearances

Keeping Up Appearances

Fighting with the blindfold on was sufficient challenge on its own, and Martel did his best to focus on the training rather than be distracted by his thoughts regarding the meeting with the Friar. Yet as soon as he left the Circle of Fire after his morning lesson, his mind went over the matter again.

This proved mostly futile, as he knew too little to even speculate. Any of the Nine Lords, other than the Friar presumably, might have their own reasons for stealing the relic. And without knowing anything about how it had happened, Martel could not even begin to guess at how to conduct the investigation.

His lessons done, Martel returned to his room and found the small note given to him by the Friar. He noticed the appointed hour was in the evening; the old monk, one of Morcaster's Nine Lords, respected Martel's need to attend school, at least, which felt almost comical to point out.

Restless from his speculations, Martel decided to be on his way. Arriving early to the meeting place would not be bad either, giving him some time to look around; although the Friar seemed genuine in his intentions, Martel had finally learned not to let his guard down. Even if the monk proved reliable, hunting thieves working for another Ninth Lord could prove dangerous.

As it turned out, the note sent Martel to a small tavern so difficult to find, he only just arrived in time. With last bell ringing from a nearby temple, he walked inside and glanced around. The only people here appeared to be locals, workers of one craft or another, gathering for drink or a meal at the end of the workday. If this was an ambush, Martel was impressed by their disguises.

Having eaten at the Lyceum, Martel got himself an ale and sat down on a chair. He drew plenty of stares, clearly standing out, but people quickly resumed their own conversation.

It took only a brief while before a man stood up and walked over to join Martel. "You're punctual. I appreciate that."

"Likewise." As with the Friar, Martel figured it best to say less and hear more.

"You don't recognise me, I imagine. But even if we had never met before, I'd know you to be a wizard from a mile away." The man gave half a smile, similar to Kerra's, hovering between friendly and condescending. Martel immediately took a dislike to him for that.

"When did we meet?"

"Ah, a certain place below our feet, in a circle surrounded by nine illustrious citizens of this city. I use the term lightly – I can't imagine the Khivan is actually a citizen of our glorious Empire."

Martel frowned, glancing at the man seated by his side. He did not recall seeing this guy at the meeting in the Undercroft, but there had been lots of people attending the Nine Lords. He felt sure that this fellow was not one of the actual masters, though.

"It would be my wont to play this game a while longer, but wizards are not known for their patience in parlance, so I shall speed your memory along. Imagine me wearing the brightest clothes like a jester fit for an emperor."

Martel's furrows deepened in his brow. "You're the Keeper of the Pact?"

He grinned. "I would give a bow equal in elegance to the title, but as we are seated and trying to remain inconspicuous, I shall spare you such fanfare. Aye, I hold that title along with associated privileges and duties."

He certainly sounded like the Keeper, Martel admitted, and it made sense that he had an interest in discovering the truth about the theft of the relic. "I didn't recognise you dressed like a spice peddler."

The Keeper laughed. "Well riposted. Indeed, my patchwork uniform is chosen partly to serve as distraction. Should any outside our circle of knowledge ever spy upon me during such gatherings, they're inclined to remember only that and little else."

Considering Martel had not recognised him at all, he had to concede that point. "Alright, so tell me about the stolen relic."

"To business, then. Very well." The Keeper's expression grew serious. "Some fivedays ago, the Hand of Saint Laurentius was stolen from the temple of same name, not far from our current location."

Martel blinked. The relic was someone's actual hand? He had heard about relics being pieces of dead saints, but it still felt strange to be chasing down someone's severed hand.

"The inquisitors investigated and proved lacking, as one might suspect. The temple was breached in part using magic, and while they might be adept at combatting it, they have limited knowledge otherwise."

"So that's what you need me for."

The Keeper nodded, his half-smile returning. "To us, magic is greatly unknown. There might be clues we are not even aware that we are missing because we lack the senses to search for them. The Friar did summon another mage to the place of the crime, of course, and she told us what little she could determine."

"Wait, so what am I supposed to do?"

"Another pair of eyes cannot hurt. Especially since you'll be going on the hunt with me, which the Friar's acquaintance could not. I've arranged for the temple to be empty tomorrow eve that you might inspect the crypt with me," the Keeper explained. "The other mage said that she could sense the lingering presence of the relic. As charm is my only magical skill, I cannot understand how that works, but it seems prudent you are given the same opportunity to investigate."

How odd. Martel did possess magic, and he could not guess at what this other mage meant either. "Fine. So we'll go there tomorrow? The Temple of Saint Laurentius, you say."

"Indeed. I have my suspicions on who might have perpetrated this theft, but I shall keep them to myself until you've had a chance to see the crypt. I do not wish to unduly lead your thoughts down a specific path."

Despite his love of longwinded talk and almost buffoonish behaviour in the Undercroft, Martel got the sense that this Keeper was a shrewd fellow after all. Definitely not to be underestimated. "Very well. Anything else I need to know?"

"Not at present. The temple is located in the district of the Basilica, as could be expected. Not far from the convent of the Sisters of the Sun. Be there at last bell tomorrow, and we'll begin our investigation in earnest."

A long walk tonight for little gain, Martel thought; they could have held this meeting and inspected the crypt on the same evening. But he guessed that both the Friar and this Keeper moved slowly, one step at a time; each of them had now had an individual face to face with Martel, letting them assess him.

Or perhaps they needed time to set up the ambush at the crypt. Regardless, Martel got up and left.

Chapter 345: Need a Hand

Need a Hand

As soon as he had finished supper, Martel left for the Temple of Saint Laurentius. His reasoning was the same as before; arriving early could not hurt. And it might take a while to locate the shrine, just as yesterday.

Walking across Morcaster on a pleasant spring eve, Martel considered one thing he might do to alleviate his own fears about any kind of betrayal. After all, both the Friar and the Keeper seemed the types to take oaths seriously.

The Temple of Saint Laurentius looked unassuming, partly due to its surroundings. It certainly dwarfed the temple back in Engby in terms of size and ornaments. But in the temple district of Morcaster, with the Basilica a stone's throw away, the shrine looked almost humble in comparison.

The Keeper stood outside, leaning up against the wall by the entrance. His mouth formed a knowing smile seeing Martel before he pushed himself away from the wall to approach the acolyte. "Place's empty. We've got it all to ourselves."

"Lead the way."

The unusual pair entered through the door. Inside, Martel noticed how this temple differed from most. Instead of an altar, the middle simply had a staircase descending into the ground, reaching a door. The Keeper pulled out a key and went that way, Martel following. "This is just an ordinary lock. Wouldn't have been much trouble for an experienced thief," the strange fellow explained as he unlocked the door.

Having seen Weasel at work with his picks, Martel could well imagine this posed little difficulty. He was still waiting to find out how this related to magic.

They continued past the now open door to enter what felt like a crypt. The walls were austere, simple stonework in stark contrast to the gilded ornaments on the main floor. Right ahead stood a sarcophagus with the stone lid carved and painted into the likeness of a man; the only splash of colour visible by the lamp held by the Keeper. The stone hands held a small chest.

"That the saint buried in there?" Martel asked, pointing at the coffin. "And the relic inside the lockbox." Rather strange to keep his hand separate from the body.

The Keeper laughed a little, raising his lamp. "Not quite. Nothing but the saint's hand remains. This is an empty tomb, made mostly out of respect. The coffin holds nothing. But you are right about the former placement of the relic."

So they did not keep the guy's hand away from the rest of him; that made a little more sense, though now Martel wondered at the story behind his death, which left no corpse other than one extremity.

He summoned his own flames, brighter than the lamp, sending them around the room to provide proper illumination.

"Useful," the Keeper mumbled, extinguishing his own source of light.

Almost as if his own use of magic made Martel sensitive towards it, or maybe it just reminded him to use that sense, but regardless, the acolyte became aware of something intangible. Like a faint scent, except it was his preternatural gift rather than his nose informing him.

He felt a shiver down his spine as he remembered the other time this had happened to him – sensing the dreaded presence of the jinni in the catacombs.

However, this sensation felt different, practically the opposite. Martel found it hard to describe; like the sound of firewood crackling in the hearth, or the smell of onion soup simmering over the cooking fire. It made him feel calm, at ease.

"The other mage had the same expression you do now."

Martel became aware that the Keeper was studying him intently.

"I wish I could understand what you feel, what you sense. She described it to me as the smell of cinnamon and honey cakes."

Martel might have thought the odd fellow was ridiculing him, but no jesting tone lay in the words, and the Keeper watched him with a serious expression. "I guess I understand what she meant," the acolyte finally said. "Anyway, tell me about the theft."

"Yes. As said, getting through the door would be easy. The real security lay in the chest containing the relic."

Martel approached. He sensed other magic at work; it did not invoke any feelings in him, but seemed neutral. Looking at the chest with its vaulted lid, which had a curious little hollow on top, he recognised Archaean script. He could even read it. 'Lock'. He assumed the magic imbued in the letters did just that. "Did they use gold to force the chest open?" Martel was unsure how it would work when gold met an enchantment like this; he would have to ask Master Jerome to tell him more.

"That would not work." The Keeper reached out to jangle the lid of the chest, showing it to be tightly shut. "You see, when you close the box, a hasp falls down to keep it that way. It is not

magically locked, but nor is there any keyhole to pick. Only when the right wardstone is used, it pulls the hasp back up, unlocking the chest. You could throw this into a barrel of gold, and nothing would happen."

Intriguing design, and clever. So magic did not lock the box – it only unlocked it. "Do you have the wardstone?" Martel asked, trying to sound as if he knew a lot about them and had often seen such artefacts.

The Keeper pulled out a small, grey pebble. He placed it on top of the chest in the little hollow, and an audible click could be heard before he pulled the lid open.

Immediately, the pleasant presence of magic increased tenfold. This relic was clearly an artefact of its own kind, able to leave such a lingering impact. Martel realised he needed to know much more, and he was already fascinated by what magic caused this, though it would have to wait until he returned to the Lyceum. "Interesting how this works." Martel reached out to take the wardstone. He looked down to see the word 'Key' written on it. The Archeans seemed pretty straightforward people.

"The chest is many centuries old. Made by Archean wizards, which you probably surmised. Its design makes it impervious to gold, and no Asterian mage would possess the power to dispel or suppress its magic, I was told."

Martel looked at the Keeper. From what little the acolyte knew, it rang true, but best to confer with Master Fenrick. "The most likely solution would be that someone stole the wardstone, used it to get the relic, and returned the wardstone undiscovered."

"Why would they bother returning it?" came the reply. "Besides, it seems unlikely. The wardstone is normally in the Friar's possession. On the night of the theft, he was far from the shrine. It would have taken many hours for anyone to steal it from him, come to the temple here and take the relic, and afterwards return the wardstone. He would have noticed its absence."

Martel scratched the back of his neck, unsure what to say. He could not imagine any Asterian mage able to overpower the magic of the chest, or able to create a second wardstone; this seemed like a type of Archean magic too different from their own. But he could be wrong, of course. "I'll need to investigate this. Ask around to see what I might learn."

The Keeper nodded. "Understandable. When you have something to discuss, contact me."

"How exactly do I do that?"

The strange fellow smiled. "Across the square of the Lyceum, a young girl sells oatcakes. Buy one from her and wait three bells. I'll meet you in the nearby tavern with the sign of a silver tankard."

Martel tried to keep his expression blank upon hearing that. "Sure. I love oatcakes."

Chapter 346: Tricky Courage

Tricky Courage

While his hands did the monotonous work of preparing ingredients in the apothecary, Martel's mind considered his trip to the temple yesterday. It had been fascinating for several reasons, though few of them had anything to do with the theft. The acolyte was deeply curious about the relic, its history, and what kind of power it possessed to leave such a lingering presence. He also wondered at the

enchancements done by the Arceans; it seemed predicated on using writing, similar to Tyrian runes, and for once unlike how Asterian magic worked. At least, Martel had never heard about Master Jerome using symbols of any kind for his enchantment work.

That at least showed a path forward for his investigation. If he could understand better how the chest had been enchanted to become unlocked, maybe Martel could figure out how the thief had done this. Discovering the method might lead him to the actual thief. Secondarily, he figured that asking Master Fenrick about the nature of relics might also yield a clue of some kind.

Someone cleared their throat in the manner suggesting they expected to be noticed. Torn from his thoughts, Martel turned his head to see the alchemist of the Lyceum staring back at him with crossed arms.

"Glad I am worthy of your attention," she remarked.

"I beg your pardon, mistress," Martel quickly said, placing his tools on the worktable.

"No matter. Here is a list of ingredients for you to study. We'll do a new recipe tomorrow."

Eagerly, Martel reached out and grabbed the piece of parchment. This meant his whole evening was spoken for; the list contained many items, not all of them herbs. He would have to conduct his questioning when he had a spare bell this afternoon.

Martel's plan quickly met an obstacle; just because he had free time, it did not follow that the same was the case for his teachers. Master Fenrick had classes, including in the evening, teaching astronomy. As for Master Jerome, he was busy on a big project, spending half his time out in Morcaster assessing materials and discussing it with other craftsmen.

A little annoyed at first, Martel eventually accepted that other people had lives too. He had class with Master Fenrick tomorrow; he could try and ask him then. As for Master Jerome, it would be Solday, the day after, where Martel helped him in the workshop, providing an opportunity as well.

This did postpone his investigation for a few days, but in the end, this was not Martel's headache. He had promised to help, but he would not run himself ragged about it. The Friar and the Keeper would just have to wait.

Though among Martel's initial questions, he might still find an answer to one of them. Going to the faculty wing of the Lyceum, the acolyte searched a little until he found the right door and gave it a knock.

For a moment, he figured his plans had been frustrated yet again before he finally heard shuffling feet. Eventually, the door opened.

"Yes?"

"Father Andrew, sorry for disturbing you. I have a question I thought you'd be the right one to answer."

"Ask me in class." The old priest already began turning away, closing the door, though it happened slowly enough to allow Martel an interjection.

"I don't have class with you anymore," the acolyte pointed out. He wondered if Father Andrew recognised him at all.

"Alright. What is it?" A pair of wrinkly eyes squinted at him.

"Yesterday, I visited the Temple of Saint Laurentius. I saw the relic, his hand. I wondered, what is the story behind that?"

"You should have asked the priests while you were there. They'd know better than anyone, wouldn't they."

Fair point, but not an option at the time. "I should have, Father Andrew, I'm sorry. But do you know?"

"Of course I know," scoffed the old priest. "He was a holy warrior who lived some three hundred and fifty years ago. He died in a battle north of here, a place now filled with ruins."

Martel took note of the time; it was before the fall of Archen. Maybe Laurentius had been Archean himself. It did not matter for the investigation into the theft, but Martel felt curious regardless. The old wizards from that fabled city clearly possessed many kinds of magic now unknown; Martel wondered if yet another kind of forgotten spellwork lay behind the relic's strange aura. "What battle?"

"Against a fiend of the Nether. He slew the wicked beast, but as it died, its body exploded with fire, burning away his body, save his hand," Father Andrew related.

This only gave rise to more questions. Martel thought about the statue of Atreus in the courtyard, which likewise mentioned a battle against a fiend. "Was he a mage?"

"No, you wicked boy! You all think only mages can do something like that. No, there's no mention of Saint Laurentius ever receiving any training like that or using magic of any kind. He fought with courage, not trickery."

Yet the relic clearly had some kind of magical properties or presence; otherwise the Keeper would have noticed it the way Martel had upon entering the crypt. And Martel knew of others who might not be trained as wizards and thus had good reason to keep their magical talent hidden. Could this Laurentius have been a hedge mage? It might explain why his hand had acquired such an aura. Hedge magic seemed unpredictable.

"Is that all? I have evening prayers to say."

"Yes, Father Andrew, thank you. I won't disturb you further."

"Quite right you won't." The old priest closed the door, leaving Martel to ponder what he had learned.

The idea of Laurentius possibly being a hedge mage intrigued the acolyte, but he had no way of pursuing this. The only one who might know anything about this would be Regnar, who would not be back in Morcaster any time soon. And anyway, this did not help Martel with the investigation. He would have to wait until tomorrow. For now, just as Father Andrew had prayers, Martel had alchemy waiting for his attention. With Mistress Rana's list in his pocket, the acolyte went to the library.

Chapter 347: Knowledge is Bliss

Knowledge is Bliss

Manday offered an opportunity to learn more about the nature of relics from the Lyceum's human granary of knowledge; though Martel figured it best to wait until the lesson in Tyrian runes had ended before he approached Master Fenrick. Asking questions outside the topic of the class just meant that his teacher would give a curt reply in order to actually begin the lesson. Thus, Martel concentrated on the task at hand. With a piece of charcoal, he drew the rune of warning, following the example of the symbol as shown by Master Fenrick, and practised activating it.

"*Vara*." The rune glowed, as did Martel's face with satisfaction. He felt the almost strange, intangible connection of magic between him and the symbol; similar to how he might connect to a flame or some object in order to move it around, and yet different. The other end of the connection did not attach to the parchment with the symbol, nor the charcoal drawing itself. Rather, it felt like having a rope around his waist with the other end floating in the air on a strong wind; intangible, yet the connection tugged on him all the same, making its presence known.

Master Fenrick, moving through the rows of students, glanced at his work and grunted in approval before continuing.

As the other students filed out of the classroom, Martel quickly approached his teacher before the latter left. "Master Fenrick, I've a question. Can you explain to me what relics are?"

The eyes under bushy brows beheld him. "What makes you ask?"

"I went to the shrine of Saint Laurentius the other day," Martel explained, sticking as close to the truth as possible. "They had his hand in a chest. Even closed, I could practically smell some kind of – power, I guess. I'm just confused about what it actually is."

The Master of Lore nodded a little. "Sadly, the Faith denies any requests to scrutinise their relics. As if we want to take them apart! I just want a closer look," he sighed. "Because of that, my knowledge is limited. But we can infer a few things. Most people cannot sense the mere presence of a relic like you can. What conclusion can we draw from that?"

This would be easier and faster if Master Fenrick simply explained it, but apparently, the teacher in him demanded that he led Martel to the answer. Accepting that he would have to play along, the acolyte easily guessed what was meant. "The effect is magical, since only those with the gift of magic may sense it."

"Indeed. Now, there are two ways that an object may be imbued with magic. Intentionally or spontaneously. Can you give me examples of either?"

"Uh, the first would be enchantment, like what Master Jerome does. The second – as an accident?" Presumably, that was what spontaneously meant, though Martel could not think of a more precise answer.

"Yes, as a by-product when great amounts of magical energies are released. Ghosts wandering the battlefield where mages fought, for instance."

"But ghosts would be evil, wouldn't they?" Martel suddenly thought about the sewers and how the presence of the jinni had felt foul.

"We would think so. Certainly the magic causing them to happen would feel foreboding to us, much like intentional necromancy. Regardless, back to your question. A relic is the creation of a

spontaneous magical effect, but benign. While good and evil seem simple terms for complicated magic, the intention and will of the mages involved do seem to matter."

Martel considered what Father Andrew had told him of Saint Laurentius, dying in battle against a fiend. A heroic act, undoubtedly, and the magic seemed to have infused his hand, however morbid that sounded. "So – magic is definitely involved when a relic is created?"

"If the relic has magical properties, such as the one you described, certainly." Master Fenrick grabbed his scroll case. "Now off with you, lad. Lunch will be soon."

Martel ate his meal in solitude, using the time to contemplate what he had learned. It seemed certain to him that Saint Laurentius had been a wizard, or possibly a hedge mage. Not important in itself, as this hardly helped him find the missing relic, but he was deeply curious about the nature of the magic involved. If nothing else, he felt certain that the saint's hand indeed had magical properties. Considering how powerful a presence it left behind, even when removed from its resting place, Martel figured he could find it if he just came close enough to it, much like a hound tracking a scent. That might help locate the relic, assuming he could discover where to search for it.

Martel's next step would be to discuss the enchanted chest and lock; if he could figure out how it worked, or how to overcome it, it might prove a clue to the identity of the thief. Presumably, few in Morcaster would have the ability or knowledge to fool Archean magic. Tomorrow, he would have his duty for Master Jerome, giving him the opportunity to inquire. For now, he had alchemy.

As the usual prelude to learning a new recipe, Mistress Rana quizzed Martel on every ingredient. One after the other, he gave a full answer until she picked up the last item. "This is?"

"Chamomile." He easily recognised it from the illustration in the herbal tome.

"Used for?"

"Flowers can make an infusion that has a calming effect." As Martel replied, the scent reached him. A memory, only recalled now that he could smell the herb instead of simply seeing its illustration, flooded through his mind. The pit of The Broken Crown, Leatherfist hitting him, the crowd roaring for his blood. The scent of chamomile upon his opponent's glove, used to weaken him.

"And?"

Her voice cut through. This was not the time to let ill memories shake him. "The herb is used for ointment to lessen ache in certain places," Martel replied.

"Care to guess the potion all of this can make?"

One answer would be a tincture to make someone dazed and easy to defeat in a pit fight, but probably not what Mistress Rana meant. "A potion to help someone relax or rest?"

She gave half a nod. "The potion of blissful sleep, we call it. Six hours of deep slumber. I gave you one the other fiveday if I recall. Have you tried it?"

Sort of; Julia had done so on his behalf. "Yes, mistress, it worked great."

"Time for you to learn how to make it."

This was among the slower potions to make, at least judging by Martel's experience of having made two other kinds. The heat had to be low, leaving the water simmering at most, which seemed to be compensated by more time spent stirring and dragging the magic from the ingredients out into the liquid. Martel estimated that three hours had passed before Mistress Rana finally removed the cauldron, tipping the contents into a flacon while Martel distilled the magic along with it.

The end result was a murky, brown liquid sloshing inside the glass container. The alchemist placed her hand around it tightly for a moment. "This is a rather weak result. I am not sure this will actually put anyone to sleep. Certainly not for a whole night. Can you think of why the result is poor?"

Martel frowned. "Too much heat?" She had specified several times during the process to avoid that. "One possibility. Another is that you didn't awaken the ingredients well enough. Have you practised that since last time?"

To be honest, he could not remember. "A little."

"Not enough, clearly. You have only worked with herbs, which is the easiest kind of ingredient. Practise this every day until our next brew, so I can be sure you have made progress." She poured out the content of the bottle into the sink. "Clean up."

After watching the last drops of his work drain away, Martel did as ordered.

Chapter 348: The Usual Suspect

The Usual Suspect

Labouring to make ink in the workshops gave Martel the chance to question Master Jerome as the latter stopped by the small laboratory to check on his progress. As the artificer was about to leave, satisfied with Martel's performance, the acolyte quickly spoke up. "Master Jerome, I've a question about enchantment."

"Again? I seem to recall that's happened before. You know, you'll get lessons soon enough." His eyes twinkled.

"This might fall outside the lessons," Martel explained. "I was at a temple containing a relic, and it lay inside a chest. What's curious is that the chest was locked by enchanted Archean letters."

"And this awoke your curiosity?"

"I just wondered what's different from how we do enchantment. You don't use letters, do you?"

The artificer shook his head. "We cast the spell with the intended effect on the object, weaving magic and material together, in a sense. I've never really studied how the Archeans did it, but it sounds similar to how those northerners do it with their runes. Using a symbol to hold the spell in place."

The thought had occurred to Martel, though there had to be a difference. After all, he was being taught how to use Tyrian runes, but nobody used Archean letters for enchantment. Or did they? "Anybody who enchants how the Archeans did?" If someone had that knowledge, they might also know how to overcome such an enchanted lock.

Master Jerome scratched the back of his neck. "Never heard of that. No wizards of Archen left, after all."

"Could anyone have figured out how they did it?"

"I can't imagine so. Anyone with an interest in enchantment would have learned it here at the Lyceum, from me." The artificer gave Martel a scrutinising look. "Something you'd hope to accomplish, perhaps?"

"Oh, no, master, I am happy to learn from you." That part was true; enchantment seemed complicated to learn. Martel would definitely prefer to have an experienced teacher guide him.

"Alright, well, get back to it. This place swallows ink faster than sailors on shore leave can empty a tavern of ale."

His morning chores done, Martel left the Lyceum briefly to buy an oatcake from the girl selling them on the square. He had learned what he could from his teachers; it was time to meet his contact and discuss their next move.

Three bells later, Martel sat in a tavern opposite the enigmatic Keeper of the Pact. It struck him that he had no idea what the guy was called; presumably, the Keeper preferred it that way.

"You wanted to meet?"

"Yeah. I've tried to find out what I could about the relic, the enchanted lock and so on," Martel began to explain. "Not that there's a lot to say. Neither relics nor Archean enchantment are studied at the Lyceum."

"You learned nothing?"

"I wouldn't go that far," the acolyte protested. "As we talked about, the relic seems to leave some magical trace of its presence behind. Considering how powerful that felt even in its absence, I think I can sense it if I just get close. And it's not like I can mistake it for anything else. So if we have an idea where to look, even if I can't see the relic, I should be able to know if it's there or not."

"Very well. I do have some ideas on where we should look."

"Good, because I don't," Martel admitted.

The Keeper gave his half-earnest smile. "We already know of one thief capable of acquiring the means to suppress magical measures and with no qualms about stealing from a sacred place."

"You mean Ruby." It took Martel a moment to realise he had just confirmed what the Friar had perhaps only suspected, and his mouth became a thin line.

"I do. No need to look consternated. None had interest in the stolen will other than Lady Pearl. It was not hard to guess her involvement." The Keeper cleared his throat. "As for the relic, its absence serves only the one purpose of destabilising the Pact. Given her feud with the Comtesse, that would suggest our bald purveyor of flesh intends to strike at her rival."

"I suppose." Martel preferred not to speculate too much about the Nine Lords. He had made a deal with the Friar to help find the relic; otherwise, he had no desire to get caught in between these

criminals. "These two thefts aren't the same, though. At the convent, the magical protection was Tyrian runes. At the shrine, it was Archean enchantment."

"Well, you're the expert, so you tell me. If this Ruby could get her hands on something to suppress a Tyrian rune, could she not obtain something similar for the Archean lock?"

Martel was about to answer in the negative when a thought made him pause. On the surface, these were two completely different schools of magic. He would not expect one to have any influence on the other. Yet he remembered their one similarity, which he had considered earlier. Both used symbols to create an effect. If a Tyrian rune could suppress other Tyrian symbols, might it also do the same for Archean letters? While he initially would have doubted this, Martel knew too little to dismiss it. "It's possible."

The Keeper regarded the acolyte with a satisfied expression. "In that case, I suggest we begin our search. If Lady Pearl has taken the relic – and given its value and importance, it is reasonable to assume she would keep it close – we know where to look for it."

Martel licked his lips. His throat felt dry, and not from lack of sustenance; a half-empty mug of ale stood on the table in front of him. "I am not exactly welcome at The River Pearl."

His strange companion arched an eyebrow. "Curious. But no matter. I did not intend for us to appear as ourselves." The Keeper leaned forward with one of his sly smiles. "Tell me, have you ever attended a masquerade?"

Chapter 349: Blind Windfall

Blind Windfall

The next day, Martel was still unsure whether to agree to the Keeper's plan. Masked or not, it seemed foolhardy for him to enter The River Pearl, given how he had fallen out with Lady Pearl over the wandering troupe. If discovered, it would surely cause a disturbance, to put it mildly. He might have to fight for his life to escape, and he doubted the Keeper would be much use in a brawl.

On the other hand, Martel was a battlemage. He did not fear this tavern lady or her thugs. And if Lady Pearl had stolen the relic, taking it back would allow Martel to get even after how she and Ruby had used him as a distraction to break into the convent belonging to the Sisters of the Sun.

Unable to reach a decision, Martel pushed the thought away. Lady Pearl held masquerades somewhat regularly at her establishment; the next would be this coming Soliday. That left him with a couple of days before he had to decide. For now, he would focus on his spellwork.

In the Circle of Fire, the acolytes stood as last time, all of them blindfolded. Any hint of silliness or nervous energy, like the first lesson doing this exercise, was gone. All four remained entirely still, focusing their magical senses. Martel could almost feel the anticipation build up inside of him, ready to be released.

"Begin!"

At Moira's command, the acolytes unleashed their spells. Fire bolts flew across the space in every direction, each of them using their ability to sense heat to find targets. No rules other than land your spells and avoid being hit. Martel's emotions constantly switched between elation at the former or frustration at failing the latter, only to immediately push such feelings away, resuming his concentration.

At the end, he felt he had done well, though he could not know for sure. Moira did not announce how many spells each acolyte had struck true; they only knew who had done worst, as that student got to spend the evening in detention. Hanging his head, Edward accepted his fate.

Leaving the Circle of Fire, Martel considered what he had learned. While he would never forgive Moira for what she had put him through, he had to admit the usefulness of this particular exercise. By honing his ability to sense heat, Martel felt he could land every spell now. His magical marksmanship, so to say, had greatly increased. He did not even need sight to find his target; as long as he had a straight line, his spells would hit. Which gave him an idea.

He only had to wait a little while until lunch and the opportunity to carry it out. "Max, do you still arrange fights in the Chamber of Earth?" Today was Pelday when the sparring club met.

The mageknight coughed. "Arrange is overstating it. I just make sure interested parties have a chance to square off against each other. Why?"

"Last time, I beat two opponents. I figured we could add a little more flair."

"Those actors have rubbed off on you. Dangerous, Nordmark, when you consort with such people. Still, I am all ears. What do you have in mind?"

"I need you to find me some odds and an opponent. And I got an idea that should draw interest and make those odds go up."

When evening came, Martel appeared in the Chamber of Earth. Rather than a staff, he was only armed with a blindfold. A circle of people gathered around, though still keeping some distance in anticipation of the fight; Maximilian had done well in drumming up interest.

Tying the fabric around his head, it took Martel a moment to adjust from the loss of sight. Soon, he saw before his inner eye a ring of heat surrounding him; every student in the space. Their murmurs also reached his ears, but he ignored those. He only needed to know their movements.

"He has his back turned to me," Julian pointed out. "Is this some kind of jest?"

Maximilian shook his head. "Not at all. You are free to attack him when you want, from any angle. Fight starts only when you do so."

Carrying an axe as on previous fights, Julian frowned. He had previously fought and lost to Martel when fighting on even terms. Now, he looked at the blindfolded acolyte, standing with his back turned towards the mageknight. "If I hit him in the head, blunted or not, that could crack his skull open." He hefted the axe in his hands.

Maximilian shrugged. "He had better be quick with his shield in that case."

"Just so we are clear, if he ends up in the infirmary, I am not to blame."

"You are not to blame."

Julian stretched his neck. "Very well." Raising his axe, he lunged forward with a battle cry, aiming his fearsome weapon at the back of Martel's head.

Immediately sensing the approaching heat source, Martel turned on his heel and unleashed a ray of fire. His eyes blind, he sensed the stream of red heat leaving his hand to reach its target straight ahead. Although keeping his focus on his magical sense, he still heard the anguished scream from Julian being struck by the spell. He saw the source of heat in front of him diminish, becoming half in size; the mageknight had fallen to his knees. Martel ended his spell.

Removing his blindfold, Martel saw this confirmed; the warrior's weapon lay on the ground next to him. The duel was over. Still whimpering, Julian got on his feet and pulled away. Meanwhile, Maximilian walked over to the fire acolyte. "Well done."

"I would have thought he'd be at least a little wary. Did he think I'd just stand here, blind, waiting for his attack?"

Maximilian shrugged. "Julian does not have much of a reputation for being a thinker."

"I guess that's why he's a mageknight," Martel considered.

With an offended look, his friend crossed his arms. "Such cheek! I would have you know, this mageknight got you odds three to one, earning you nine silver coins tonight."

"I would argue I did most of the work, but I'm grateful." The fire acolyte held out his hand, accepting a bounty of nine eagles. Discounting that three of them had been his own wager, that meant he had earned six silvers casting a single spell. Smiling, Martel pocketed the money.

Chapter 350: Spells and Offers to Counter

Spells and Offers to Counter

In the Hall of Elements, Martel stood with his eyes closed, reminiscent of the Circle of Fire. However, the exercise served the opposite purpose; he had to focus hard to avoid using his ability to sense heat. Each time he reached out with his magic into the surrounding darkness, the temptation was there; he had done it so often, it came so naturally to him. Yet it would ruin what he tried to accomplish; focusing on heat would keep him from noticing anything else. Whatever magic that Master Alastair flung out, regardless of element, Martel needed to not only sense it, but also recognise it.

The acolyte felt the burst of magical energy as his teacher released a spell. It did not feel hot, not even with Martel consciously avoiding searching for heat, so nothing to do with fire. That still left three options, but Martel was stumped on which one. "I don't know," he finally admitted. Guessing blindly would get him nowhere; better to admit his failure.

"We'll try again. Clear your mind as best you can. As soon as you feel my spell, reach for it. Grasp any kind of sensation it conveys."

Martel cleared his throat, waiting. Another release of magic. A strange feeling or memory came to him; how the world smelled after rainfall. "Water?" he guessed.

"Correct. There you are, boy!"

Martel smiled, still keeping his eyes closed. Strange how the feeling of water magic had made him think of that particular sensation. He wondered if it were different for other mages; would they have other memories or impressions of the same spell? The thought of the relic came to him; radiating some kind of magic he did not know, nor could understand, yet he felt it so powerfully all the same.

"Once more. Don't let one success go to your head, lad, we got a long way yet. Ready?"

"Ready, master."

From the opposite side of the hall, Master Alastair released another spell.

Before class, Martel had crossed the square outside the Lyceum to buy an oatcake from the nearby stall. An odd way to give the signal for a clandestine meeting, but tasty, at least. Now, three bells later, Martel sat in the tavern waiting for the Keeper. He had spent most of the fiveday since Solday contemplating the task at hand; would he be willing to risk an altercation and aggrieving the Ninth Lord of the bridge district, just to help another of these underworld masters in their endless games for wealth and power?

"I'll help you on one condition," Martel said as the Keeper joined him.

"No ale for me?" The jester, dressed in ordinary clothes, glanced at the mug in front of Martel. "I thought you had already arranged your reward with the Friar? A favour for a favour, he mentioned."

"You're asking me to enter a place where I'm banned, the very headquarters of a Ninth Lord. To undertake a bigger risk than ever implied at first. Besides, this won't cost you anything." Martel took a deep breath. "Once we recover the relic, I want a chance to study it. I won't damage it or anything. I just want to understand its nature."

The Keeper narrowed his eyes in thought. "I suppose that can be arranged. But you won't be left alone with it. The Friar's not going to risk that."

That almost sounded like an implication that Martel might be suspected of stealing the relic himself if he got the chance; preposterous, and a little insulting, but the acolyte shrugged it off. Not worth an argument. "That's fine. So, the masquerade. It's tomorrow?"

His companion nodded. "It is. You got something to wear that doesn't scream battlemage?" He glanced at Martel's red robe.

"I got something fitting for the occasion, yeah. I don't have any mask though." free webno vel

"I'll procure one for us both."

"What's the plan once we get there? Other than me ambling about, trying to smell the location of this hand?" Martel asked. "The place will be packed with people, including lots of gold jewellery. Maybe even some wearing magical artefacts. I'm not sure how easy it'll be for me to sense the relic."

"I won't pretend I understand the difficulties of sniffing out relics at masquerade parties," the Keeper admitted. "Regardless, The River Pearl is too big for us to look everywhere. Especially since we'll have to be sneaky about it."

"So, what's your suggestion?"

"If it's going to be anywhere in the tavern, it'll either be Lady Pearl's study or her private chambers. I can't imagine she'd let something so priceless languish in a storage room or closet."

That made sense, though it was still an assumption, itself based on greater assumptions. "What if she doesn't have it? She might not be behind the theft. And if she is, she might have gotten rid of the relic altogether."

The Keeper gave a little shrug. "All true. But we have no better lead, so we must investigate her, if nothing else to eliminate her as the culprit. Should the relic be irrevocably lost, there is nothing further we can do – so that's pointless for us to speculate about. We might as well act on the premise that the relic is still in play."

"But what if it isn't? What if it's been sent out of the city or thrown into the sea?"

"That's a headache for me and the Friar to solve, which I doubt you can help with." The Keeper smiled. "You just keep that nose sharp and ready for tomorrow's eve."

Sneaking into the personal quarters of a Ninth Lord, who had banished Martel from her premises. He knew this was foolhardy at best; yet as a battlemage, he would not cower in fear of these thugs. "I'll be ready." At least his previous exploits, breaking into places such as the study of Duke Cheval or the home of Oswald the landlord lent him some experience in these matters. He almost finished the last thought without being reminded of Shadi.

"See you tomorrow." With his typical sly expression, the Keeper got on his feet and left.