

Firebrand 351

Chapter 351: Birds of a Feather

Birds of a Feather

Looking at The River Pearl, Martel thought about his last visit to the tavern. He and Regnar, two wizards, standing on one side with Lady Pearl and her armed brigands on the other, a small boy's life caught in between. The encounter had ended without bloodshed, but plenty of bad blood. Martel suddenly remembered the supposed curse cast by Regnar on the place; while the hedge mage himself had dismissed it as a bit of theatrics, Martel still felt uncomfortable at the thought of such magic. Moreso as he was about to enter the location. Adjusting his mask, he followed the Keeper of the Pact across the road.

Dressed in his expensive doublet, shirt, and trousers, Martel looked like any celebrant. A mask shaped and dyed to look like a racoon covered half his face. As for his companion, the Keeper wore the kind of brightly coloured clothing that Martel originally associated with him, along with a mask resembling some kind of bird, feathers included.

"Just follow my lead once we're inside," the Keeper declared.

Not really sure what he meant by that, Martel refrained from replying. He had his own task to focus on, trying to pick up any trace of the relic. Though as they passed through the doors with its armed guards, Martel could not help but consider what to do in case of trouble. Blinding sphere of light and scarper as fast as empowered legs could take him away? Or raise walls of fire and make them regret tangling with a battlemage? His decision might depend on the exact circumstances. For now, he accepted that either outcome might happen and tried not to let it flood his mind. He needed to concentrate on his magic now.

Standing in the middle of the Pearl's common room, surrounded by sounds, smells, and above all, the sight of masked patrons and waitstaff alike, the memory of the last masquerade filled Martel's mind. Above all, the music from the Tyrian skáld that filled the space and his thoughts with wondrous music that evoked distant lands and yet the warmth of the hearth. Dancing with Ruby. One hand holding hers, the other on her hip. Her lips smiling and laughing underneath the edge of her mask.

Martel pushed the past away to focus on the present. Masked or not, being recognised remained a risk. The faster they were in and out, the better.

The Keeper did not seem to agree; he grabbed two mugs of ale, handing one over to Martel.

Accepting the tankard, the mage stared through the holes in his mask at his companion. "You really feel we got time for this?"

"My good friend, it's a party!" The Keeper lowered his voice. "Two men, no drinks in hand, but with a determined stride towards the backrooms might draw attention." He resumed speaking loudly. "Relax those shoulders, let the tension out, and enjoy yourself!"

Glancing around, Martel doubted anyone noticed them or cared. Everyone seemed occupied with their own celebration, helped along by the good mood, copious amounts of drink, and the strange little powder that like last time, many of them sprinkled over their tongue.

"Do you partake?" the Keeper asked, noticing Martel staring at someone performing this little ritual.

"No idea what it is."

"A specialty of Sindhu. You'll find the festivities more enjoyable, though I don't recommend it if you have a need to focus on something." His voice remained casual, but Martel understood the warning; it would interfere with their task tonight.

"I'm not interested regardless," the wizard replied. Observing these people, they seemed much less in control of themselves; Martel had no wish for that, on this or any other night. Stars only knew what it might do to his magical abilities, or what spells he would unleash if under such influence.

"Entirely up to you." Even with only the lower half of his face visible, the Keeper managed to convey his sly expression regardless before he took a hefty draught of his flagon.

When they had finished their drinks and the Keeper reached for seconds, Martel's patience had worn thin. "Enough," he spoke quietly. Staying this long seemed a bigger risk than people noticing them leave for the upper floors. Plenty of other people retired in that direction, usually couples. "Let's get on with it."

Without a spoken reply, the Keeper simply smiled and began making his way across the crowded space. Martel followed, mindful of the many hazards that might stain his clothes; people either drunk or dancing, sometimes both, flailed about, often spilling the contents of cups. He had not been bothered by this last time, but now, he found the careless, even inconsiderate behaviour of the celebrants to be an annoyance. Festivities were only fun, it seemed, when in a festive mood.

They reached the staircase that led up and into the complex with its many rooms; some available to the guests, others only for Lady Pearl. Her study, where she conducted her business, lay close by; her private chambers lay elsewhere, though Martel had no knowledge of them.

"I'll cause a distraction. You get into her study and sniff about," the Keeper suggested. Plenty of people in the hallway, some who might notice Martel entering a room where he should not be.

"Go ahead."

Separating from Martel, the jester began a loud and rowdy song. He raised his hands, beckoning for others to join in, even as he walked down the hallway, attracting eyes and pulling others along with him.

Martel waited until the distraction had done its work. One hand against the keyhole of the door to the study, and a tinge of magic pushed all the pins up to unlock it. Quickly, he stepped inside.

The study lay in complete darkness, so Martel conjured a flame. It looked like he remembered from his previous visits. Regardless, he did not need his sense of sight for this. Letting his magic extend in every direction, he took everything in. Here and there, dead pockets reached him; small caches of gold hidden around the room. Other than that, nothing. Certainly no indication of a powerful relic.

Perhaps its presence was masked or suppressed, but if so, Martel had no idea how, nor what to look for. Searching the place seemed pointless for that reason; besides, he felt uncomfortable at the risk of discovery for every moment he lingered. Quickly, he stepped outside again.

Their eyes meeting, the Keeper finished his song. People cheered and applauded before resuming their march towards the empty, available rooms of the Pearl. Some did not even make it that far, exchanging saliva right in the corridor. With a throw of his head, the Keeper gestured for Martel to follow.

"You know where to go?" the mage whispered.

"I've been there before," the Keeper replied with his smile, leading his companion further in.

Eventually, they took a turn away further up to the third floor. The noises of the feast faded away, and they met no others. The surroundings changed as well; paintings of landscapes on the walls of the hallway, and a rug underneath their feet. Finally, the Keeper stopped outside a door.

"Feel free to do what you did before."

Martel stepped forward and placed his hand against the keyhole. Extending his magic through his fingers, nothing happened. He let out a frustrated sound. The lock had to be fortified with gold. Lady Pearl was particular about who entered her chamber, it seemed. "I can't. Not unless you want me to smash the door open."

The Keeper's frivolous smile turned almost condescending, or at least Martel thought so, as the jester pushed the wizard away and took out his lockpicks. Soon after, a click could be heard, and the door creaked open. "I'll keep watch out here. If you hear an owl hoot, get away."

Martel stepped inside. A window allowed some light, so he did not bother with his own flame, even if he could see little. As before, he needed no sense other than that of magic. He let it reach out. Dead areas around the opulent bed with four posters; Martel could not recall seeing such an extravagant place to rest one's head before, and decorated with gold, even.

Small dead pocket at the front of the chest nearby; another lock reinforced, he guessed. Similarly, something inside the wardrobe seemed to have little lines to kill magic; clothes with golden threads, probably.

There. A touch of magic. Like the scent of a rose, sharp and attracting his attention. But not the kind he had expected. This felt nothing like the relic. Lady Pearl had some artefact, apparently, but not his quarry.

For a moment, Martel was tempted. Whatever it was, it had to be valuable and powerful. Given how some of her coin had to be earned through illicit means, Martel did not feel guilty about relieving her of something like a magical artefact.

But he was no thief, even if she was. And he had not come for this purpose. Besides, this was the last place he wanted to linger. Turning around, Martel left the chamber.

He had barely stepped across the threshold before he thought that he heard the sound of some sick fowl. What kind of bird sang in the middle of the night anyway?

Oh. The feigned hoot of an owl. Martel only remembered once it was too late; as he entered the hallway, closing the door to Lady Pearl's chamber behind him, his eyes met Ruby's.

Chapter 352: Practically Minded

Practically Minded

Martel stared at Ruby. The unexpected encounter left him flatfooted, and no doubt guilt was written all over his face; he could only hope his mask hid it, just how Ruby's concealed her expression from him.

He dared not speak, afraid that she would recognise his voice. Could he get away with simply leaving, or had she seen him walk out of Lady Pearl's chambers?

Wordlessly, Ruby approached him. There was nothing hostile in her movements, no sign of an attack, so Martel did not react. Almost tenderly, she took his hand and pulled him along with her.

Confused beyond description, Martel saw no recourse but to follow. Moments later, a guard came around the corner and walked down the hallway towards them. "Hah, trapped one, did you?" he jested, to which Ruby only laughed. "Enjoy your night, little birds!"

They reached another door, which Ruby quickly opened before she dragged Martel with her into the chamber. The guard's raucous laughter only died down as she closed the door.

Releasing her hold on his hand, she turned to face him. "Martel, care to explain?" She stared at him, placing her fists against her hips in an accusatory stance.

"Oh, so you did recognise me."

"No, I am in the habit of dragging strangers into my chamber the moment I meet them. Of course I did!" Even wearing her mask, anger could be seen on her face. "You think because you hid your cheekbones, I wouldn't know that gangly frame of yours?" She raised her head to look him straight in the eyes. "I'd recognise those blueberries anywhere."

Martel removed his mask; keeping it on felt sheepish. And while he did not feel that he owed Ruby any explanations, given that she could call the guards and make this situation a lot more difficult to handle, he needed to give her something. "Something was stolen. Of a magical nature. I was looking for it, that's all. I haven't taken anything."

Ruby stepped closer and stuck her hands into his pockets. She rummaged around more than was necessary, he felt, almost grabbing at his waist through the fabric. "What are you looking for?"

"It doesn't matter. It's not here." At least as far as Martel knew.

"Tell me."

If he did and Lady Pearl had it, she would know to hide it better. And even if innocent, word spreading of the relic's disappearance might upset the delicate peace between the Nine Lords. Exactly what Martel was meant to avoid. "I can't. It's not my secret to tell."

"I could call the guards on you."

"I favour my chances, in that case."

They stared at each other, neither willing to yield. After what seemed like an age, Ruby removed her mask. He was struck by how pretty she looked, much like the first time he had seen her. But he knew not to let that distract or waver him.

"I suppose I know the value of keeping secrets. You can wait in here a while. The guard will wonder if you leave so soon. Maybe even think you're on the third floor for other reasons than my charms."

"Considerable though they may be."

Ruby gave him a surprised look before she laughed. Truth be told, Martel was taken aback as well; the words had simply slipped from him. "Master wizard, every time I think I have you figured out, you prove me wrong."

"I admit, so do you. Why are you hiding me rather than yelling about an intruder?"

She bit into her red lip. "You helped me escape the Sisters of the Sun. This makes us even."

Fair play. He finally took the time to look around. The moonlight from the window provided scant illumination, so he absentmindedly summoned a flame to illuminate the room.

"Mages." Ruby shook her head. "You don't even think about it. All the things you can do, no different than taking a breath is for me."

Martel felt like he was supposed to apologise, though he could not say what he was meant to be contrite about. "I guess." He sat down on her bed; simple and straightforward furniture, unlike Lady Pearl's. Still a softer mattress than anything he had ever tried, though. In general, the room lacked decorations. Everything seemed practical. Even the dress Ruby wore had been tailored to allow her good movement, just like when she had fought the Sisters.

"I heard about you and the actors. Why did you help them?" Ruby, still standing, gave him an inquisitive look.

"They're my friends. They needed it."

"But they'll never be able to repay it. Neither with coin nor actions. You risked your life, you made an enemy of Lady Pearl, all for people who'll never help you the same way if you need it."

Martel returned her stare, wondering if she was making some kind of joke. But she seemed entirely serious. She only saw the value in somebody according to what they might provide her with. If he did not have magic, she probably would never have glanced at him twice. "I think it's safe for me to leave now," he remarked. "Thanks for your help."

"We're even, wizard."

He nodded in confirmation and slipped out of her room.

Martel left the Pearl straight, choosing expediency over subtlety. If anybody noticed him and wondered why this tall racoon made such speed towards the doors, they failed to intercept and question him in time. Soon after, Martel could walk down the street, leaving the masquerade behind.

"Good, you made your exit. I was wondering how long I should bother waiting." The Keeper appeared from an alley.

"You didn't consider more helpful actions besides waiting?" Martel wondered if this jester had the same attitude towards aiding other people as Ruby.

"You're a mage, and I am a lowly raconteur." The Keeper smiled and gave a bow.

Martel was not going to bother asking what that meant. He began walking, leaving it to his companion to keep up. "I didn't find any trace of the relic. Either it's hidden somewhere we can't find, or she doesn't have it."

"The former is always a possibility, though we can't search the entire Pearl. Rather than stare ourselves blind, we should consider another culprit."

"I suppose. Any ideas? That's your area of expertise."

The Keeper smacked his lips. "Nothing substantial. Plenty of possible suspects, but trying to investigate them all would take ages. And probably end up revealing the theft to the Nine Lords. We need to narrow it down."

"I guess I can try to look more into the magic of it. Even if Lady Pearl isn't guilty, it was a reasonable thought that someone bought a rune token that unlocks the chest with the hand. I'll see if I can find out more about how to overcome Archean magic," Martel suggested. He did not actually have much hope this would work; he had already questioned his teachers, who provided little insight. But he could not think of any other avenue to explore.

"Very well. We'll be in touch. Keep the mask." With a wink, the Keeper steered down another street, leaving Martel to walk home alone.

Chapter 353: The Archean Connection

The Archean Connection

While the masquerade had not exactly been a night of leisure and pleasure, nor had Martel's fears of fighting or fleeing come true. He felt pessimistic about the odds of actually solving this crime or finding the relic, but in the end, this was not his headache either. He had done what he could; in Martel's mind, he had fulfilled the terms of his agreement with the Friar. Let the old monk and his jester worry.

Focusing on his own matters, Martel went to his Pelday lessons in the Circle of Fire. Training his ability to sense heat had paid off; literally, as his fight in the Chamber of Earth had shown last Pelday. Training with the other acolytes now, he hit almost every spell with unerring accuracy. He almost revelled in the sensation, feeling like an expert marksman. There would be no hiding from his spells. If Martel had been powerful before, he had taken a big step towards truly becoming a battlemage.

His good mood lasted until a message found him.

Martel,

Please meet me in the tavern

across the square during sixth bell.

The Keeper must have found something. Martel was tempted to ignore the message, but he still felt a little obligated to see this through. Plus, if they did find the relic, Martel had been promised a chance to study it. Worth going to the tavern, at least, and seeing what the Keeper wanted.

As the young mage stepped inside the drinking hole, his eyes quickly glanced over the many patrons to find his acquaintance. He almost did not believe his own eyes as he recognised a young woman with red lips, sitting casually at a table with two mugs in front of her.

As she made no attempt to hide herself, Martel figured she wanted him to approach her. He realised why the note had not been signed. Crossing the room, he stopped in front of her. "What, did I forget my gloves in your chamber?"

The corner of her mouth tugged upwards. "Have a seat. We've got something to discuss."

Martel disliked doing what she wanted, but his curiosity proved stronger. He sat down and pulled the extra cup of ale towards him. "Which is?"

"On your way home, I noticed you had a companion."

Martel cursed silently. He had not considered Ruby following him. She had helped him, after all, acting the part of an ally. "What about it?"

"I spent half the night wondering why the Keeper of the Pact would be in cahoots with a young wizard. I couldn't grasp what you'd have in common. Until I remembered what you told me."

Martel refrained from replying and simply drank from his cup.

"Something magical was stolen that requires a mage to track down. What could be stolen that the Keeper would care about?" Ruby's smile infuriated Martel, so he looked away. "A certain relic, perhaps."

"Look, is there a reason we're meeting? Honestly, I don't care about any of this. I traded a favour for a favour, and I consider my involvement done. You want something, I'm not the person to see."

"That's disappointing. Here I am, come to offer my help." Ruby's expression turned sickeningly sweet.

"Why?" Given their conversation last night, she clearly did not offer this out of charity.

"Because if somebody has taken the relic, I want to know who and why."

Martel knew how deceptive she could be, but her answer made sense. Clearly, Lady Pearl was under pressure; the Keeper had already presumed she was involved in the theft, except as the culprit. But her role might be that of victim, assuming one of the Ninth Lords intended to abolish the Pact and go on the offensive in the bridge district.

Even if this was some ploy, it might still provide Martel an opportunity to find the relic where he otherwise had none. And with his magical prowess constantly improving, he did not feel worried.

"So, what do you suggest?"

"I'll help you in your investigation. Do you have any clues as to who's done the deed?"

"Not really." Even if Martel assumed her offer was sincere, he knew he had to be careful what he revealed. Working with Ruby was one thing; trusting her was something else entirely. "The thief was able to open a magical lock that I don't think any wizard in Morcaster could get by. Which made me think of the Tyrian bard, who so helpfully provided you with a rune token for your own activities."

Ruby smiled, as if proud. "This lock, what manner of magic is it? Also Tyrian?"

Martel was a little surprised she knew to distinguish between the schools of magic. "No. Archean."

She nodded a little. "That's rare. Finding a northern bard to scribble some scratches isn't hard if you got money. But Archean magic, you need more than coin. You need the right connections."

"To what?"

"Trading in such artefacts is costly, difficult, and carries an element of risk. Not many in Morcaster who do. Fortunately for you, as the righthand woman of a Ninth Lord, I know such a fellow."

"And you can introduce me?" Martel asked.

"More like, I'll bring you along when we ask the guy if anyone's traded Arcean magic."

He spent a moment to consider her proposal. Despite his misgivings about the nature of her assistance, he knew he needed help if his investigation was to progress.

"If you're wondering about the Keeper, feel free to discuss this with him. But as a free reeve, without the backing of a Ninth Lord, don't expect him to have the sway needed to arrange such a meeting. You need me for that."

"According to you, that is." Despite his retort, her words made sense. If the Keeper knew about this trader in artefacts, he would have brought it up as an obvious lead to investigate. "When can we do this?"

"I'll ask for a meeting. Probably tomorrow or the day after." Ruby gave a sly smile. "This'll be fun."

Martel did not reply other than to finish his cup. Setting it down, he dug out some copper coins.

"No need to pay. We'll consider it my treat," she suggested, still with that smile.

"No thanks." Martel was not going to be indebted to her if he could avoid it. He got up and walked out, leaving three pennies on the table.

Chapter 354: Secrets of the Trade

Secrets of the Trade

Martel did his combat lessons as usual, trying not to think about Ruby, which meant that he ended up doing exactly that. He disliked that despite her actions, her duplicitous nature, he still thought about their time together at the first masquerade in the Pearl, dancing and laughing; back when her smile had only held charm in his eyes, unlike now, where he assumed it meant another ploy.

Such as this latest scheme with the artefact trader. Ruby's help came at a cost, he was sure; the only question remained what it might be. Did she need him for something, or did she plan to somehow hoodwink him?

While Martel felt suspicious that the latter might be the case, he could not imagine what her deception might be. The only way to find out would be to play along and keep his wits about him. So when a message from her awaited him in the entrance hall, detailing a meeting tonight, Martel decided to join.

She waited for him near the Lyceum's entrance at the hour appointed in her note. There was a chill in the air, and Martel pulled his cloak around himself as he approached her.

"Our man responded swiftly. Probably the thought of coin spurred him on. Come, his place is in the market district." Ruby turned and began walking in that direction, Martel falling in alongside her.

"He might be disappointed when he finds out why we're there, making him unlikely to help us," Martel pointed out.

"I anticipated as much," she claimed. "I have a good handful of eagles to turn his frown into a smile." She patted a purse hanging on her belt.

"You think ahead and towards every purpose," the mage muttered. "Which begs the question why you asked me along? You didn't need me to get this meeting arranged."

"As much as I have my doubts about you wizards, it's hard to handle things without you when it comes to magic," Ruby admitted. "If our good merchant tries to make up stories, I assume you'll know."

Much like the Keeper also needed him. While Martel remained on guard, he accepted this might be the answer. "Very well." They continued deeper into the market district.

Ruby took them down several alleys, which did not seem the most direct route; either she was trying to keep Martel confused about the route, or she thought they might be followed. Regardless, they finally stood outside a small, unassuming house wedged in between two shops.

"No sign." Martel looked at the surface of the building and above the house.

"He doesn't announce his trade," Ruby replied, knocking repeatedly on the door in a strange rhythm before finally standing back.

They waited a little while before shuffling feet could be heard and the door became unlocked.

"Come inside."

As Martel did so, he found himself inside what seemed an ordinary home. Not the cheap kind in the lower district with the entire floor being one room; instead, chairs of good make surrounded a table with chests and drawers lining the walls. A kitchen could be spotted through an empty door further back, where an old woman laboured.

"She's deaf," the owner of the house remarked, noticing Martel's gaze. He closed the door to the housekeeper. As for him, he was short with beady eyes and thin hair. In his woollen robe, dyed green and embroidered, he looked the part of a small-time merchant. He extended towards the chairs around the table; once Ruby and Martel sat down, he did so as well. "Your message mentioned you had an interest in a purchase, but nothing more." He looked at the woman present.

Meanwhile, Martel let his magic sense sweep out in every direction. No sources of heat other than the people he knew to be present, except what he assumed was a cat upstairs. No immediate dead areas suggesting golden weapons. Even Ruby did not wear any golden jewellery; she must trust him, though Martel chastised himself for not checking her when they first met.

He did notice the aura of magic; the trader wore bespelled garments or trinkets. To be expected from a merchant trafficking in such items. Martel could not determine what they did, which made him wonder if his magic sense could be trained to do so.

"That's true, though I played it coy," Ruby confessed with a smile to sweeten the admission. "Rather than make a purchase, we wish to inquire about those already made. We're looking for a particular artefact."

The trader frowned. "Bought by somebody else, you mean? You must understand, with the Inquisition always hounding those trading in magic, I must protect my customers."

Ruby raised an eyebrow. "Surely you know we are not inquisitors."

"I know you come at the behest of Lady Pearl, but I know nothing of him." He looked towards Martel.

The wizard conjured a flame to dance over the knuckles of his fingers, like he had seen Regnar once do with a coin. "I'm the furthest thing from an inquisitor."

"Hm. Indeed. Still, my customers rely on my discretion."

Ruby emptied her purse onto the table. "We don't come emptyhanded."

The trader licked his lips, but he did not touch the coins. "Even so – you can imagine what Lady Pearl would do if I talked about her business with me. Any of the Nine Lords would react the same."

"We shouldn't get ahead of ourselves," Martel interjected. "What we're looking for, it might not have passed through your hands. How about we determine that first?"

Their host looked from Martel to Ruby, and the latter pushed several of the coins towards him, which he accepted this time. "I suppose I can use my expertise to your benefit in a more general manner. What is it you're looking for?"

Ruby glanced at Martel, nodding in encouragement. "Something strong enough to overcome Archean magic. A lock, specifically. It has not been damaged. It works as before, using the right wardstone. But something was able to – replicate the effect or fool the magic governing the lock."

The trader frowned. "Was this lock and key unique?"

"I assume so. I've never seen the like before," Martel replied.

"And you are well-versed in artefacts with extensive knowledge and experience?" The beady eyes glanced over the mage's beardless, young face.

"No, not really," he had to admit.

"I thought as much. This lock and key, being Archean, I assume it was enchanted with letters?"

"Yeah, it was." Well, the guy knew his trade. Martel wondered if he actually possessed magic; he had given no sign of being a wizard, but as Martel or someone like Sparrow proved, people with magical talent sometimes avoided detection.

"And these letters, was it a unique name?"

Martel frowned in thought, not understanding at first. His memory travelled back to the shrine, seeing the words inscribed on the wardstone held by the Keeper and the chest. "It just said 'lock' and 'key', as I recall."

The trader smiled. "In other words, the simplest kind of Archean enchantment. Certainly rare, given the fate of that city, but not impossible to find. Your lock doesn't have a unique key. Thus, another wardstone with the same simple enchantment would work just as well."

Martel almost laughed as he realised the truth. The chest and wardstone, which to him seemed like powerful enchantments, were in fact the simplest kind done by an Archeon wizard. The equivalent of locking your door with a rope and simple knot, knowing only another wizard would ever be strong enough to untie the knot. No wonder the words on the chest and token had simply said 'lock' and 'key'; the least amount of lettering needed to make the enchantment work, no doubt.

"Which brings us to our next question," Ruby said as Martel fell quiet. "If any such Archeon wardstone would work, who might have one?" She studied the trader's face. "Has any passed through your hands?"

He licked his lips again. "As it so happens, yes. Now, if the buyer had been a Ninth Lord, I would obviously never have revealed this."

Ruby smirked. "Obviously." She began pushing the coins on the table towards him, one by one.

"In this case, my customer was a member of House Thierry. He did not say his name, but their crest was embroidered upon his handkerchief. He sneezed and had to wipe his nose."

"Very observant of you," she remarked.

"Given the volatile nature of my trade, paying attention keeps me alive and wealthy."

"No doubt." Ruby pushed the remaining coins over to his side. "You have my thanks." She got up, and Martel followed. While he would have pushed the trader for more details on this mysterious buyer, he accepted following Ruby's lead. And certainly the visit had paid off.

They left the house and began walking down the street. As earlier, Ruby chose a route that went in and out of winding alleys; unfamiliar with this area of the market district, Martel found himself confused by their surroundings and had to simply follow along.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"You bring this information to your friends, I bring it to mine. Our business is concluded. To mutual satisfaction, I would say."

"For once."

She winked with a smile, though her expression held a hint of contempt or perhaps superiority.

"Farewell for now, wizard." She took a sudden turn down a street, increasing her pace.

Martel watched her leave for a few moments before orienting himself. Once he got his bearings, he began walking home to the Lyceum. On his way back, he realised that he had never learned the trader's name; glancing over his shoulder, he doubted that he could find his way back to the man's house.

His visitors gone, the trader collected the silver coins from Ruby. He walked upstairs to reach his study and dropped them into a drawer before he sat down by his desk. After tearing a piece of parchment into smaller scraps, he grabbed a feather pen and dipped it in ink.

Pearl's woman came

mage with her, red robe

young, eighteen or so

tall, dark hair, blue eyes

told them as agreed

After blowing on it briefly to help the ink dry, the merchant got up and walked downstairs again. He stepped outside his house, glancing to either side; nobody was in the alley. He walked for a little while, reaching the end where some urchins sat on the street, playing knucklebones.

One of them looked up expectantly as the trader approached, who in turn extended his hand holding the missive and a penny. "For Lord Ironside."

The child nodded, accepting both message and money before running off.

Chapter 355: A Trail of Webs

A Trail of Webs

During the lessons in the Circle of Fire, the acolytes continued to train their ability to sense heat and use it to land spells. Martel felt fairly confident that he had honed this skill to its limit; even with the blindfold on, he could accurately tell where everyone else in the room stood, sometimes even predicting their movements. He only missed if they proved faster than him, dodging or flinging a fire bolt his way that disturbed his aim.

So while Martel did not feel like he learned much from today's classes, it did not bother him much either. He had many – too many – remaining lessons under Moira's tutelage before he would graduate the Lyceum; he did not mind if he could take it easy on occasion, enjoying that his natural gift made him master fire spells much quicker than the others. He had no doubt that his teacher would soon inflict some other cruel but effective exercise on them, so he would enjoy this interlude while it lasted. These easier lessons also kept him safe from getting detention, as he could not possibly be the worst performing student.

In between his lessons, he left the Lyceum to buy an oatcake. He had progress to report to the Keeper; what the odd fellow would do with that information, and whether Martel would do anything beyond his efforts hitherto, was another matter.

The Keeper waited for Martel at the same table as their previous meetings, along with two cups of ale. In his ordinary garb, the jester-like man looked almost normal; only his sly smile betrayed the personality beneath. "I didn't expect to hear from you, at least not so soon after our last outing."

"A trail in our investigation presented itself, which I pursued. Though it requires a bit of explaining."

The Keeper leaned back in his chair and picked up his cup. "Do tell."

"After our outing, as you call it, Ruby sought me out. She knew about our presence at the masquerade. She must have seen us together and recognised us." Martel had not mentioned previously that Ruby had intervened to hide him in her room during the party; no point in bringing it up now. "Somehow, she guessed that we were hunting for a stolen artefact." Mostly because Martel told her.

"Two reasons that she could. Either news of the theft has spread further than anticipated, or she is the culprit."

"Yeah." Martel decided to move the conversation along. "Anyway, she considered it to be in Lady Pearl's interest to get to the bottom of this, and she offered her help."

"In what way?"

"She took me to meet a merchant trading in artefacts, reasoning that he might have sold someone a magical object to overpower the Archean lock on the relic's chest. Which he had. A wardstone of the same make as the Friar's key, thus having the same power to unlock it with nobody the wiser."

The Keeper sat up straight. "You got a name?"

Martel shook his head a little. "Not specifically, but close. He works for or is a member of House Thierry. I didn't get a description though. Ruby ended the conversation before I could ask more."

"No matter." The Keeper nodded a little to himself. "If this information is genuine, we know the spider in the web. It doesn't matter who specifically stole the relic, if we know they did so on behalf of this house, whose allegiance recently has switched from one Ninth Lord to another."

Martel's companion was well-informed, it seemed; to be expected, given his dealings with these criminal leaders. "House Thierry is now aligned with the Comtesse rather than Lady Pearl. And they're rivals. You think she had the relic stolen to seed the ground for breaking the Pact and attacking Lady Pearl?" That was his own thinking, at least.

"Could very well be. Or all of this is a ruse, and Ruby took you to this trader to enact a charade, masking her guilt and making you chase a false lead that conveniently leads to her mistress's enemy."

The mage had not considered this at all, but it did make sense, unfortunately. Certainly, Ruby would be wily enough to carry out such a scheme.

"What is the name of this merchant of magic?"

"Uh, we didn't exchange any. I'm not sure I could find my way back to his place either," Martel admitted.

"A sensible precaution for those in such a volatile trade – or a way to prevent you from questioning the trail placed before you."

"Well, either way, I told you what I learned. Certainly, the man's knowledge of artefacts fit his claims. Whether he's a mage himself, I can't say, but he understood how Archean magic works and how to open the lock in the shrine. He may have lied to me about who bought the wardstone that opened the relic chest, but I believe him when he identified the means."

"Which only proves that he sold the wardstone in question. Whether to House Thierry or Ruby remains an open question."

"Sure, but I've done my part. I have found out the magic used for the theft and even given you the two most likely candidates. The rest of it – the motivation for stealing the relic, finding the culprit, the skulduggery of it all – that's your area, not mine."

"I'll grant you that. I'll get to work and see what I can learn to narrow our two suspects down to one." The Keeper inclined his head with a little smile.

Seeing it reminded Martel of Kerra and Ruby, both wont to use that same expression that hovered between patronising and overbearing. He felt tired of it all. The schemes, the Nine Lords, sneaking

around on behalf of others, always being used for his magical gifts and discarded afterwards. "You do that." The wizard got up, leaving his ale untouched.

"I'll be in touch," the Keeper declared as Martel turned around and left. He gave the jester no reply.

Chapter 356: Blissful

Blissful

Happy to leave all entanglements with the Nine Lords behind, Martel went to his classes on Manday in good cheer. Learning runes, complex elemental magic, and alchemy was more than he ever imagined when he first set out from Engby, yet still it felt exactly like the life of a mage as he had envisioned on his journey to the Lyceum. The fact that he did well learning the runes, probably better than anyone else in the class, only improved his mood.

"By now you should be able to create some manner of effects with the rune of warning," Master Fenrick told them as his bespectacled eyes glanced over the students. "If any of you still have trouble, I recommend you practice on your own time. Meanwhile, we move on to the next useful rune." He held up a charcoal drawing of a symbol. Making sure everyone could see the rune unimpeded, the teacher placed his hand near it and spoke. "*Hér.*"

As the sign glowed, his glasses flew off his head and appeared glued to the parchment with the rune. The acolytes laughed, and even Master Fenrick smiled as he grabbed his glasses, hanging awkwardly in the air, and returned them to his face. "The rune of attraction. Pulls objects towards itself. Might seem odd, but it has its uses. You all enjoy having water that runs up the pipes to the highest floors of your dormitory tower, I take it."

Martel could not quite see how this would be useful to him; he doubted that life in an army camp allowed for extensive pipework between tents. Still, better to learn than not, and at least it came easily to him. Studying the symbol as shown by Master Fenrick, he grabbed his own charcoal and began to draw it.

When the bell rang, Martel had made modest progress. He could channel his magic into the symbol; it glowed in response to his utterance of the commanding word. But nothing more happened. No movement to indicate attraction of any kind.

"Martel, do you have a moment?" Eleanor walked swiftly to reach him as he walked down the corridor, and he stopped to let her catch up. "I have something to ask you."

"Sure, what is it?"

"I am having trouble with the runes," she admitted.

"Really? I thought I saw yours glow."

She waved around the parchment in her hand with the symbol drawn on it. "A little, but nothing more happened."

"It didn't to me either. I don't think you're behind anyone else learning this."

"I am not ahead either," Eleanor remarked with a straight face, and Martel had to hide his smile; it was perhaps the most Eleanor thing she had ever said in such an offhanded manner. "And you have definitely advanced faster than me. I noticed that last fiveday."

"I guess I was fast to getting the rune of warning to work. But not this one – I'll have to practise on my own," Martel considered.

"Which is exactly what I wanted to ask about. Do you want to practise together? I have not been able to make the rune of warning work either. Since you have, maybe you can help me pass the final obstacle."

"Oh, certainly! You helped me so much with Archean, I'd be happy to do the same. Though I would do it even if you hadn't helped me," he hastily added, realising that he had implied his aid came at a price. "I'd do it no matter what."

She laughed a little. "I am glad. I thought we could do the same routine, actually. Solday afternoon in the library for a bell?" She gave an almost relieved smile; Martel was a little surprised to realise that her slow progress must have weighed on her.

"That sounds great. Let's do that." However much learning Archean had troubled Martel, he had still enjoyed those bells in Eleanor's company. It could only be better now that the subject of their studies was something where he had skill.

"Wonderful. I am visiting my sister tomorrow, but next Solday?"

"You have yourself a deal."

"Great." She gave a little wave with her fingers and walked away. Martel continued on his own path, not even aware of how much he smiled.

"Does something amuse you?" Mistress Rana stared at him with the stern expression that Mistress Juliana also wielded. As they stood in her laboratory, her domain of knowledge and surrounded by countless eerie ingredients of strange origin, it all increased the domineering effect she exerted.

"No." Martel wiped his face clean of any expression.

"Then you should not smile without reason. It makes you seem addled in the brain. Now, your last attempts at the blissful sleep potion did not go satisfactorily. You will try again today."

"Yes, mistress." This would be his third time; he still struggled to get the heat right. He thought about Julia, troubled by bad dreams with no other remedies than what he might procure. He had to apply himself this time that he might actually be able to help her.

"You know everything to do. Get to work."

Martel nodded and grabbed the ingredients laid ready.

Hours later, he could finish stirring. Mistress Rana did not aid him pouring the finished result, letting him practise handling both cauldron and liquid at the same time. It did not trouble him; as he tipped the container, he made sure to pull all the magic inside along with the simmering water and into the awaiting flacon.

Once done, the alchemist approached and scooped up the result of his work. She pressed her fingers around the glass bottle, examining the contents. It reminded Martel of the artefact merchant wearing magical items that he could not identify; he wondered if improving his skill at alchemy and sensing the efficacy of elixirs might also strengthen his ability to identify other kinds of magic.

"Not bad. Serviceable, I suppose." She handed the small potion over to Martel. "For next time you have a restless night."

"Thank you." He accepted the bottle, keeping his smile hidden; he already knew what he wanted to do with it.

Chapter 357: Teaching the Bird

Teaching the Bird

His morning chores at the workshop and apothecary done, Martel found a message waiting for him in the entrance hall. At this point, receiving these brief missives never boded well, regardless of the sender.

Master Martel,

We should talk tonight.

I'll be at our usual haunt

Once sixth bell has rung.

Your friend in bright garb

The Keeper, presumably, whose name Martel had no knowledge of. Not that he needed it. He had reached a decision regarding all of this, and tonight would be his last encounter with the jester of the criminal underworld.

Martel arrived a little late, and his companion awaited him at the usual table. He noticed that for all these clandestinely meetings, Martel was always the last to arrive and first to leave. Probably because these people did not wish for the wizards to follow them; the consequence of a life led in distrust and deception. He would be glad to see an end to it.

"I have made inquiries," the Keeper confided in him. "I do believe that House Thierry is involved rather than Lady Pearl being our culprit. To that end, I have found the ideal opportunity for us to enter their mansion and learn what we can."

"Another mass celebration?" Martel had experienced his fill of those.

"An ordinary party, I fear, but I believe I can get us disguises to see our charade through. It is not for another month, however, which does bother me. But we should keep watch of their estate until then."

"You will have to do this without me." Ignoring the cup of ale placed in front of him by the tavernkeeper, Martel stared at his companion. "I have done enough. I can't keep running all over Morcaster getting involved in these affairs. I believe I have done more than my fair share with regards to my agreement with the Friar."

"I can't find the relic without you," came the slow reply. "I don't have your gift."

"But plenty of others do. I might have been the most expedient choice, but I'm hardly the only one." The young mage got up. "This is where I take my leave."

The Keeper stared at him for a drawn out moment. Martel preferred to pass on good terms, but he would not be dissuaded or allow this gesture to somehow cajole him back into these games of intrigue. At length, the other man bowed his head. "I bid you a fair eve, Master Martel."

The wizard nodded in reply and left the tavern.

With something in each pocket for Julia, Martel ascended the stairs of the insula where she lived. She seemed to be often absent at night, handling her errands in the darkness and solitude of late hours, which he could not blame her for. But he had finished his meeting quickly, and the sun remained just barely above the horizon when he knocked on her door. As predicted, he found her to be home, and he stepped inside her room after she had unlocked the door for him.

"Sorry, I know it's been a while. I hope you haven't lacked anything."

She shook her head mutely.

"Well, I do have something you need, if I remember." Martel pulled out the potion of blissful sleep and handed it to her. "A full night of uninterrupted rest." He glanced at the few alchemical supplies in her room. "And I learned the recipe, so go ahead and use it. I can come back and make more."

The girl had been smiling as she accepted the concoction, but a look of fear crossed her face at his final words. "Don't come too soon. Always people watching in this building, taking note of who comes and goes."

"They're just your neighbours, probably looking because they're bored."

"Maybe. But that still means they have answers for anyone who comes asking about me. This will be fine," she claimed, shaking the little flacon between her fingers. "I'll let you know if I need more."

"Very well." From his other pocket, Martel withdrew a handful of silver coins. "This is just if you need anything, you can spend this how you wish. I'm earning good coin working in the apothecary now. In fact, would you like me to bring you enough money that you can pay for your rent yourself?"

She quickly shook her head, locks flying around her face. "I don't want to talk to the man."

To be expected. Martel smiled. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it for you."

Halfway to the copper lanes, Martel continued all the way to the home of Weasel and, more importantly, his unofficial apprentice. He knocked; when Badger opened the door, he asked the boy to fetch Sparrow.

Soon after, the small girl appeared and entered the alley. "Hullo!" Behind her, staying in the doorway, Weasel watched.

Martel ignored the small chief to focus on his pupil. "Hey, Sparrow. I'm sorry it's been a while since my last visit. Have you had time to practise?"

She nodded eagerly and held out her hand, palm facing the ground. With deep concentration on her face, Sparrow pulled a mound of dirt upwards. It lasted for a few moments before her focus broke, and the earth scattered back to the ground.

"Well done!"

She beamed a smile until Weasel behind her spoke. "So she can shuffle some dirt around. What's the use in that? How's that going to feed us?"

Martel had wrestled with this question; namely, which spells to teach Sparrow. If he instructed her in offensive magic and she used it to kill someone, he would be culpable in part. But magic to keep her safe, help her escape danger, even if just a city guard, seemed acceptable to him. "If you run at me, like you're attacking me, I'll show you, Weasel."

The boy hesitated, clearly suspicious.

"I won't harm you," Martel promised. "But if you're afraid..."

A sneer ran across Weasel's face, and he ran forward.

With a quick stomp in the ground, Martel pushed the earth up in front of the boy's feet, and he fell to the ground. "Useful if anyone is chasing you," he remarked to Sparrow, who laughed.

She fell silent as Weasel got back on his feet, rubbing his nose. "You said it wouldn't hurt!"

"I said that I wouldn't harm you. I made no promises on behalf of the ground."

"Bloody wizards and their two tongues..."

Martel turned to Sparrow. "Your magic can reach further than you think. It doesn't have to be something close to you. Like another arm you can move in any direction."

She frowned. "That sounds weird."

"Magic is strange. But you saw me do it. You can as well. Practise sending your magic into the ground, affecting somewhere far from you. I'll be back and see how well you're doing," the mage promised.

"I will," Sparrow declared. Behind her, Weasel grumbled something unintelligibly.

Chapter 358: Tentative Thoughts on Tutoring

Tentative Thoughts on Tutoring

Changing role from teacher last night to student this morning, Martel entered the Circle of Fire. Just the reminder of Moira in this place made him swear never to treat Sparrow or anyone else under his tutelage, should it happen to others, the way that the Mistress of Fire treated him.

She entered and distributed the blindfolds they used to train their ability to sense heat, except she only carried three. None for Martel. "You children know what to do, and Stars know you need the practice. As for our little fire-touched prodigy, you need something new to train. Maybe in a month or two, the other sheep will have caught up to you."

She always had to twist the knife in someone; at least Martel was not her target, though she tore at the tentative bond between him and his fellow acolytes. They would pay for it next time they had to

fight together against the mageknights, probably, with Moira's bile poisoning the acolytes' will to work together.

With a suppressed sigh, Martel tried not to think about it anymore and turned to face his teacher. Knowing her predilection for handing out detention, no doubt she would do the same here if he disappointed.

"That little spell you got, the ray of fire you shoot out."

"Yes?"

"It's crude. Typical of those who let their emotions control their magic. Unrefined, a waste of spellpower. Much inferior to a reliable fire bolt spell. But since you've developed it, we might as well hone it into something useful."

Martel ended up agreeing with her sentiment, even if he disliked every word she used to express it. "Very well."

She gave him a sharp look. "So glad you approve. I'd never dream of teaching you otherwise."

Taking the hint, Martel remained quiet.

"Use it. On me."

He frowned only briefly before he complied. Deep down, he knew that Moira's own skill in fire probably made her impervious to any damage he might do; still, he was happy to unleash his ray of fire from the palm of his hand, focusing the beam of flames on her torso.

Almost provocatively, and probably intended to be so, Moira stood without reacting. She took the spell straight on as if Martel had done nothing to her, which was probably more or less the case.

"Weak." She all but spat the word. "I'm sure it's impressive for scaring thugs in taverns or even to those meat-headed mageknights, but if you're going to use it when it matters, make sure the other person won't stay standing."

Martel bit his tongue before he yelled at her to give him instructions rather than insults. Presumably, she'd get to it eventually. Behind them, fire bolts flew through the air as the other acolytes practised.

"Use it on the wall. I can't spend all bell here watching your pathetic attempts," Moira sneered. She pointed at the nearest wall. "Go on!"

A little confused, Martel did so. Raising his hand, he shot out a ray of flames straight at the stone wall. It bore plenty of scorch marks already.

"Keep going." Moira turned away to look at her other students.

After supper, Martel went to the library. Searching a bit on the shelves, he found some of the same books as when he first arrived at the Lyceum. They dealt with learning magic; advice he no longer needed, and which had not really helped him much in the first place. But now he looked through them with different eyes; rather than receiving the counsel held in those tomes, he imagined himself dispensing it to a student, be it Sparrow or maybe others.

He imagined himself as Master of Fire at the Lyceum. He would not teach using spite and ridicule as Moira did, nor would the all-consuming focus be on warfare. Martel thought about Master

Alastair's story of wandering through a blizzard, using heat to keep his companions warm and alive through the ordeal. He imagined enchanting stones to keep people's homes warm during winter, or all the other ways that fire could protect and create.

After Martel had indulged himself with such daydreaming, he turned his attention back to the books. He did not personally know any earth spells. He could do some basic manipulation of the element, same as most mages would be able to, but nothing complicated. He was familiar with the earth wall, of course, having seen Flora use it on a few occasions, but that was a far cry from actually being able to cast the spell himself. He could do something similar with his wall of fire, but while the effect might resemble what an earthmage could do, Martel doubted that held true for the spellwork involved.

He thought about whether he knew any earth acolytes he might ask; Flora was obviously not an option. Though it took him a moment to remember, he realised that Nora wore the green, embroidered robe of this group. Since he saw her nearly every day, he had ample opportunity to ask her for suggestions on what spells he might teach Sparrow – without alerting the apprentice to the reason for his questions.

"Nordmark, how dare you hide in here and make me come to this Stars-forsaken place?"

Martel easily recognised the voice. The librarian had also noticed the newcomer; hard to miss him, really. "Quiet!"

Appearing unaffected by the admonition, Maximilian approached Martel. "How about it, tonight? Plenty of mageknights who disbelieve your victory last Pelday. Care to prove them wrong?"

The fire acolyte did not require much time to consider it. As a future battlemage, sparring and training made sense, and the promise of easy money won in wagers did not hurt either. But drained of spellpower from overzealous training of his fire, Martel decided to forego the Chamber of Earth and pursue more peaceful interests where that element was concerned. "Sorry. All worn out. You know how Moira drives us hard."

"Fine. But be careful. Too much reading makes you cross-eyed." His warning delivered, Maximilian left the library; Martel returned to his books.

Chapter 359: Familiar Weight

Familiar Weight

When Reynard entered the gymnasium on Malday morning, Martel immediately noticed a small difference. Usually, their teacher arrived carrying staves for each of the acolytes to practice with. This time, he came empty-handed. "Time for you to try something new," the old warrior growled. "Follow me."

All the students did so as Reynard turned around and left the arena again. He only walked a short distance down the corridor before opening a door to step inside. Martel knew which room this was, though he had almost never had reason to enter. It was the armoury of the Lyceum.

The large room lay in near darkness, and Reynard did nothing to dispel it; perhaps almost on instinct, each of the fire acolytes summoned a small flame to allow them vision, giving an eerie, flickering light making shadows dance on the stone walls.

Large weapon racks filled one wall with all manner of arms. Spears, swords, axes, flails, morning stars, and more meant for melee combat; Martel only recognised some of the instruments of war thanks to Maximilian's occasional lectures on their differences, usually triggered by drunkenness. All of them blunt, presumably, meant only for training rather than actual combat. A handful of bows could be found as well, unstrung, along with arrows. Naturally, the staves used by the fire acolytes also had their place, all resting inside a small barrel.

To the other side, ten armour dolls held gambesons with chain shirts on top. Fewer than the number of mageknights who trained together at the same time; Martel guessed that some of them wore their own armour for practice rather than rely on the Lyceum to provide it.

"It is time for you to learn how to fight wearing proper armour," Reynard informed them, "instead of that boiled cowhide. Off with your robes and leather, and each of you put on a gambeson and chain shirt."

The acolytes looked at each other, all of them hesitant. Martel figured he was the only one with experience in this matter; while he was at odds with the Night Knives, he appreciated how they had taken the time to teach him about this. Grabbing the collar of his robe, he removed his outer garment and the leather armour underneath before getting dressed in the gambeson and mail.

The weight of the metal rings felt heavy, yet familiar. Martel was immediately reminded of his outings with the Night Knives; fighting thugs and brigands, feeling protected by his armour and his companions, unleashing his magic to easily best their opponents. He almost missed it, though it was outweighed by his relief at having put all that behind him. Around him, the other acolytes followed suit, awkwardly trying to handle the heavy shirt.

"Grab a staff and meet me back in the gymnasium," Reynard told them, leaving as the first.

"You cannot rely on your own magical shield nor your protector to catch every single bullet or arrow flying at you in battle," Reynard lectured them as they stood in the arena again, armoured and each with a staff in hand. "Any attack that can be stopped by your armour means one more spell you can spend attacking rather than defending. But first, you must get accustomed to the weight. For this bell, you will duel each other as usual, but with one exception. No magic allowed." His eyes swept over the fire acolytes. "If I detect any of you using the smallest bit of empowerment to lessen the weight, you can expect detention tonight running rounds in this arena in full armour. Understood? Get to it." He made a casual gesture pointing at the acolytes in turn, pairing them up for the sparring.

Turning towards Edward, Martel held his staff ready. He had gone easy on his fellow students these last months rather than antagonise them, and it seemed wise to continue this course; thus, Martel made a simple strike that even the somewhat hapless Edward could easily intercept.

Martel's staff struck his opponent on the cheek. As the latter moved his staff too slowly to parry. Looked like Martel had to go even easier. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"You cheated! You used magic!"

Everyone looked at them upon hearing Edward's outburst. "No he did not," Reynard growled. "Stop whining and accept the blow – if not like a man, then like a mage."

William and Harriet resumed their own duel while Edward continued to rub his cheek. Given how gently Martel had attacked, he doubted that it hurt much; Edward was probably more affected by the surprise of the attack than any pain. "You did cheat," he mumbled.

"Sorry I hurt you," Martel reiterated. "I didn't need magic, though. I have practised with chain armour before, so I'm used to the weight. Look, how about I only defend, and you just attack me until you are also comfortable with it."

Still grumbling to himself, Edward nonetheless nodded and raised his staff.

Martel's afternoon lesson with the mageknights began the same way; in fact, Reynard informed them that for the remainder of their time at the Lyceum, they would wear chain armour for their combat lessons. The armoury only held just enough; once all the fire acolytes, and those mageknights who needed to borrow one, had picked a suit of armour, every doll stood empty.

"I need four mageknights willing to spar with the battlemages," Reynard announced across the gymnasium. "The rest of you, practice among yourselves for now. We will switch later in the bell." Several of the warriors volunteered, apparently relishing the opportunity to fight the fire acolytes without elemental magic. The Master of War nodded at a few of them, speaking their name as he selected them. "You go, and Griffe, you as well. Fontaine, you make it four. Choose an opponent and begin training."

Eleanor smiled at Martel and raised her sword. Behind her, Maximilian glanced at them both. "Leave a few chunks of Nordmark for me later on!"

Martel sighed. With friends like these... He held his staff up and took position.

Chapter 360: Fingers in the Ground

Fingers in the Ground

Training his fire ray spell felt weird to Martel. It simply consisted of him blasting a flame against the stone wall, but he had to avoid pouring his spellpower into it, or he would drain himself dry within minutes. So he was trying to strengthen the effect without actually using his strength. It was an odd equilibrium to strike, but if nothing else, it helped him get a better sense of when casting or strengthening a spell began to drain him, as opposed to the simpler magics such as the fire bolts, which he could throw around all day. Still, staring at a scorched wall for a full bell made him feel like he was going mad until the boredom finally numbed his mind. The other acolytes glanced at him, though not with the scorn he might have expected; perhaps held back by the knowledge that they might be in line to do the same exercise once they caught up to him.

While also characterised by routines most familiar, Martel enjoyed his spell in the apothecary a lot more. Mistress Rana gave him a new list of herbs to study, which meant that she felt he had done sufficiently well on his sleep potion to learn a new recipe.

In addition, matters between him and Nora finally seemed good again. The whole issue with Jasper extorting them, or her learning about Martel being fire-touched; any residual effects on their friendship was gone. Having alchemy in common helped, and now Martel had something else to discuss with her. "Nora, what's your favourite earth magic?"

"What a fun question!" Apparently, it intrigued her enough to stop her work, setting her tools aside to frown in contemplation. "This is perhaps an embarrassing answer, considering it's the simplest kind. But using magic to sense the earth itself, sticking my fingers into the dirt and feeling it in a way that my other senses can't – I enjoy it every time."

Seeing her hands still, Martel took the opportunity to take a break himself from washing used jars and bottles. "No, I understand. Sometimes, the simplest joys are the best." It held reason that the same way he could sense fire, Nora could feel the earth.

"That's true. And it's very useful too. I use it all the time in our herb garden. It tells me if the soil is rich enough or needs manure, if it's too dry or too wet, whether to be worried about frost and so on. It's one reason why Mistress Rana chose me as her apprentice."

"We have a herb garden?"

Nora laughed. "Of course! Lots of plants that are too rare to just go out and find in nature. Not to mention, it's a full day's journey just to leave the city to go somewhere that actually grows anything useful. It's a small courtyard to the southwest, but it's closed off since students have no reason to go there. Other than me, of course."

Interesting, but not exactly something he could teach Sparrow. The copper lanes did not allow much room or opportunity for vegetable gardens. "What about actual spells? Just curious what an earthmage would find useful."

"Depends on the specialisation, I suppose, but we're a very different breed from you fire folks. It's not so much about casting spells, but more about adding spellwork to our craft. A metalmage uses his magic when forging, a stonemage makes perfect building materials, and so on. If I weren't apprenticed to Mistress Rana, I would probably have ended up as a fieldmage, ensuring good soil for a bountiful harvest."

All admirable pursuits, but perhaps rather too long-term for a young urchin to care about; plus, Sparrow would have to attend the Lyceum to work in any of these capacities, most likely. Abandoning the topic, Martel resumed washing jars.

While his time in the apothecary yielded nothing concerning one waif, it did give Martel an idea related to another. With Mistress Rana already prepared to move forward with a new potion for him to learn, he felt confident in his ability to make the sleeping draught. While Julia had not requested more, Martel figured she would need them sooner or later.

This in mind, he went to market and bought the necessary herbs. Some were expensive; he saw the wisdom of growing them in your own garden. Not an option for him, but thankfully, Mistress Rana paid him for his work, leaving him with plenty of coin for such pursuits.

Soon after, choosing to arrive just before sundown as last time, Martel knocked on Julia's door.

"You're back again soon." She spoke through the crack between door and frame, staring at him.

"I thought we might do a bit of alchemy together. Create another sleep potion for you to have."

"I don't need another yet."

"I know, you said you'd tell me. But how can you tell me anything unless I stop by?" Martel smiled at his own logic.

"I guess." She finally stepped back, allowing him inside.

The few tools and remedies for alchemy stood neatly in a corner. "Ready to be my apprentice?"

Julia nodded, and Martel told himself that he saw the hint of a smile on her face.

"Very good. We need the window open, the cauldron upon that slab of stone, and water. You got enough in your jar?"

She nodded again and began carrying out his orders, turning the small room into a laboratory. Meanwhile, Martel took out the ingredients and drew out their magic in the Sindhian tradition, preparing them for the brewing. "It's weird to see your magic," Julia suddenly remarked. "So different from how – my mum did alchemy."

"True, there's a big difference between Asterian and Sindhian magic. Thankfully, when it comes to making water hot, I don't need to know any southern spells. Bit of fire will do." He gave a wry smile and heated up the cauldron until the water slowly bubbled. And while he doubted that Julia knew or understood much about the different schools of magic, they had a few hours ahead of them to kill while taking turns to stir the brewing potion; letting Julia take the first shift, Martel began to explain Sindhian alchemy.