

Firebrand 361

Chapter 361: Sweet Knowledge

Sweet Knowledge

Brewing potions late in the evening in Julia's room meant that Martel got to bed late, but fortunately, next day was Manday. Rather than exhausting lessons in the Circle of Fire or the gymnasium, Martel could take it easy; especially as his morning chore in the apothecary was replaced by afternoon work in the laboratory instead. It gave him time to go to the library and read up on the latest list of herbs given him by Mistress Rana; when he was done, as always, he looked forward to learning this new recipe and adding another potion to his repertoire. But first, lessons with Master Fenrick and Alastair awaited.

Each of the students sat with their small pile of rune-inscribed parchments in front of them. To stop the lesson, the Master of Lore went down the aisle and had each acolyte demonstrate their ability to activate the symbol. They did so with varying success, none to Master Fenrick's satisfaction, though he gave Martel fewer words of instruction than the others.

"You still have ways to go. Continue practising on your own time. Meanwhile, we shall cover another rune today." The teacher held up his own drawing of the symbol.

Martel had to wonder what exactly the strange, twisting shape meant and how it contained this Tyrian magic; if he had seen this inscribed on a wall or door, without knowing better, he would have assumed some jester was at work defacing the surface.

"This is the rune of repulsion, as we call it. As the name says, it does the opposite of the attracting symbol you learned last fiveday. I know your only thought is how could this ever help you in combat, and otherwise you are indifferent to its uses," Master Fenrick said in accusation as his eyes swept over the assembly of mageknights and one battlemage. "But when your tent is leaky and it's pouring down torrents of rain, you may find this useful after all. Watch." Holding out the parchment with one hand, the teacher held a penny in front of the rune with the other. "*Veg.*" The coin flew away from between his fingers.

Martel laughed with the others; he had not felt reproached earlier by the accusation. To him, magic of any kind was worthwhile. Regardless of origin, regardless of usage, he was only thrilled to learn. He wished that he could stay at the Lyceum forever, always learning; he understood that besides teaching, Master Fenrick spent his time with scholarly pursuits, and Martel envied him that.

The sound of charcoal scratching against parchment woke Martel from his daydream; the other acolytes had begun practising. He quickly followed suit.

With closed eyes, Martel stood at the centre of the Hall of Elements and waited. He vaguely sensed the earth beneath his feet, the water flowing around it, the air that surrounded him, and the flames flickering on the walls. He had to fight the instinct to search for heat, allowing him a form of vision even with his eyes closed; it was an ability most familiar to him since early childhood, and honing it under Moira's tutelage had only increased the urge to use it rather than leave himself vulnerable and blind, so to say.

Something moved. But Martel's ears could not help him determine the element at play and thus the spell employed by Master Alastair; his sense of hearing was not the one he needed. He forgot about sound and tried instead to let magic lead him to the answer. Cool darkness. Walking underground. The taste of rye bread and mushrooms. "Earth."

"Correct."

Martel opened his eyes to see a small pile of dirt raised in front of Master Alastair, trapped in that form by his magic. He smiled.

"But much too slow. If you have to think about the answer, it's hardly a reaction. Close your eyes."

Martel nodded, his expression becoming serious, and he removed his sense of sight to avail himself of his sense of magic instead.

Martel looked at the different ingredients on the table. Something was odd. He counted seven different kinds of powders and plants, but the list given to him by Mistress Rana had only contained six items. In his head, he went through each of them as he had just read up on them this morning; he could still only think of six entries.

The alchemist regarded him and pointed at the first of the ingredients. "This is?"

"Strangleroot." It was well known to Martel, and he rattled off its properties in an offhanded manner while staring at the other ingredients, trying to determine what was amiss.

One after the other, Mistress Rana went through each of the little piles, quizzing Martel as per usual. After six questions and six answers, she finally pointed at the seventh ingredient. A small pile of white powder in a bowl. "Care to guess what this is?"

Martel had to admit ignorance. "I don't know."

"It was not on the list I gave you for the simple reason that it is not well known in these lands. That tome in the library has no entry for it."

Martel exhaled, glad to discover he had not made any error. "What is it?"

"I have heard it called Sindhian honey, though my people call it sugar."

He frowned, silently forming the word with his lips. "This is made by bees?"

To his complete surprise, Mistress Rana laughed. "No. It is made from canes that grow in the soil. But go ahead – taste it. It's not poisonous, on the contrary."

Hesitant, Martel extended a finger to touch the white powder and placed some of it on his tongue. He opened his eyes wide. "It tastes so sweet!"

"Honey without bees, as your people say. Now, can you guess what manner of potion all of this might brew?" She let her hand move across the table to indicate all the ingredients.

"Something to make you feel happy?"

"You might say that, but not quite. This is used for an elixir of fortitude. It is among the most useful recipes, as it strengthens the imbiber and helps them fight off diseases and the like. While specific illnesses do have specific treatments that work better, this little concoction is always useful if you

do not know of any better remedy, or you cannot be certain of what malady plagues the patient. But as it is both expensive – trading sugar from Sindhu is not cheap – and difficult to make, I shall do it with you every step."

Martel could not help but smile; this was exactly the kind of alchemy he wanted to learn. "Yes, mistress."

Chapter 362: Snake Scratches

Snake Scratches

Solday saw the return of a past activity. With his work done in the apothecary and the workshops, Martel made his way to the library in the afternoon. Under his arm, he carried a small stack of parchment, each of them inscribed with a rune, the result of all his work in Master Fenrick's latest class.

Although he arrived just as the bell rang, Eleanor already waited for him by the table on one of the upper floors of the library. Like him, she had her notes from class along with extra parchment and charcoal for further attempts of rune magic. She smiled upon seeing him, and he sat down opposite her.

"I am glad you are here. I tried to practice last night, but it went about as well as it did for me in class. I can feel the magical energy building up, but it does not seem to connect with the symbol as it should. If that makes sense?"

Martel nodded. "It sounds familiar. Like I'm pouring water into a bottle, but I can't control the direction properly, so I miss the opening, and it just spills everywhere."

"That is also one way to describe it," she said with slight laughter. "The question is, how to get this to work? I tried to ask Master Fenrick, but he simply told me to redraw my rune and keep practising. Perhaps that will also be sufficient, but I would prefer having some idea of how to best proceed."

The fire acolyte scratched the back of his head. "I'm not sure, I'll be honest, but we can take advantage of being two rather than one. If you go first, I'll watch what you do, and maybe I'll notice something to help you. After, we switch, and you watch me."

"It is worth a try." She spread out her pieces of parchments and selected one. "I feel like this one has worked best for me." She held out her hand to hover above the rune on the table. "*Vara*."

A slight silvery glow enveloped her hand, but nothing more. Martel squinted his eyes, but neither his sight nor magical sense told him anything else.

"See?" Eleanor said with a touch of frustration.

"That's how it goes for me as well." Martel quickly leafed through his parchments and found the same rune. He held out his hand and muttered the same word as she had, producing the same effect, but nothing more.

"Wait, is that how yours look?" Eleanor picked up her own parchment to place it next to his, allowing a comparison.

"Huh." Although recognisable as the same symbol, some differences stood out. Eleanor's lines were softer, more rounded, constructing the weird shape that resembled a stick with limbs. In addition,

hers had a small extra line that Martel initially thought was a smudge. "Wait, so which of us has done it wrong?"

"I am reasonably sure that I copied it exactly as how Master Fenrick showed it to us."

"Is there someone we can ask to find out?" Martel glanced around the large room, knowing it was probably in vain. Only a few others were present, busy with their own studies; it seemed doubtful that any of them would be an authority on Tyrian runes. The faculty wing did not lie too far from the library; perhaps the only option was to simply find Master Fenrick.

"There should be a book. I used it when I first began looking into the runes, before we started this class."

Of course. Martel had forgotten that. He sat and waited as Eleanor got up and searched through a few shelves until she found it and returned. Placing it for them both to look and leaf through, she quickly found the page showing the rune of warning. They both leaned their heads forward to stare down at the drawing in the tome.

"Huh. I guess we both got it wrong." Martel found some blank parchment and took a piece of charcoal. "Well, we know how to proceed now."

Leaving the library to return his notes to his room, Martel's path took him through the entrance hall, where a letter waited for him. Parchment in one hand, he picked it up with the other and examined the envelope as he continued towards the dormitory tower. The letter was addressed to him, but it had no seal on the back, meaning it had not been sent by anyone from a noble house or an official institution or the like. He did not recognise the hand that had written his name on the outside, and he felt more and more curious until he finally reached his room and opened the envelope to read the contents.

Master Martel,

I am a friend in the making, who has observed your recent dealings and exploits with great interest. I possess information, which it would be to your advantage to receive. It is my understanding that you are a satisfied patron of the establishment known as The Golden Goose. I await your arrival there tomorrow night at seventh bell so that we might discuss these matters further. You need not worry about finding me. I shall be sure to recognise you, once you arrive.

As strange as the message was, the most perplexing part was the lack of a signature. Instead, a small insignia had been inscribed, probably made by a signet ring dipped into ink. The symbol was small, but it looked to be a snake coiled around a sword, if Martel were to guess. He had no clue who this might be, but he assumed the message referred to his recent investigation into the stolen relic. A pursuit Martel had abandoned, as it had felt like a waste of his time, and honestly, not his problem to solve.

But if this person had information to shed light upon the matter, it might be worth the meeting. More than that, Martel's curiosity was piqued as to the identity of this mysterious sender. And should this turn out to be a storm in the barrel, the letter had been correct on one count, at least; Martel was always satisfied to patronise The Golden Goose.

Chapter 363: Silver-forked Tongue

Silver-forked Tongue

Two lessons of training his fire ray proved exactly as dull as it had been last five days, but Martel endured. He could not tell whether the power and intensity of the spell actually increased; if it did, it happened too incrementally for him to feel the difference. As for the wall, it did not care to comment. But Martel knew that complaining about the exercise only risked detention, which would undoubtedly be worse. So, he gritted his teeth until it was done and he could leave the Circle of Fire.

His obligations done, Martel entered the city. It was too early for his meeting with the mysterious Serpentine writer, but he had decided to go to the coupling first and stop by The Golden Goose on his way back. Even though he did not have any ideas for new earth spells that he might teach Sparrow, Martel felt guilty about how long he had waited between his previous visits. If nothing else, he would check on her progress and discuss it with her.

When Martel finally arrived at the house of Weasel and the gang, he found his plans spoiled; Sparrow was not at home. She and the small chief had left to carry out their own schemes; probably roaming the harbour looking for unsecured cargo to pilfer. While Martel did not approve of such methods, he could not fault them when the alternative was starvation. Accepting that he would have to find the time to stop by another day, Martel performed a few bits of magic for the children and finally left towards The Golden Goose.

As the young mage stepped into the tavern, he let both eyes and magic survey the room. The place looked as it always did, busy with customers and a bard performing on the stage in one end. As for his supernatural ability, it told Martel of a few dead pockets, each of them tiny in size. The occasional gold coin in someone's pocket or jewellery of said metal adorning a finger or ear. Nobody wearing gold in such quantity as to suggest an intention of fighting a spellcaster, the way it felt when Martel magically examined an inquisitor or the like. Satisfied of the lack of any immediate threats, Martel got himself an ale and found an empty table, where he might wait for this letter-writing snake to appear.

It took a while before someone finally moved towards him. Martel's eyes glanced over the newcomer, deducing what they could. Leather trousers and a woollen doublet of good make, fitting for a courtier or well-to-do trader; fine garments, but still practical for travels. His belt buckle had the shape of a serpent eating its own tail, and a golden knife, from what Martel's magic told him, rested in the man's sheath. He came ready to fight a mage if need be, but the lack of gold elsewhere on his body meant Martel was not worried about battling him; plenty of vulnerabilities to strike.

Yet his clothes were far from his most distinguishing characteristic. Although his eyes and hair had the same dark colour of many Asterians, his facial features set him apart. Martel had only seen such once before, in the supposed trader who met with Lady Pearl in Smallport. This was no homegrown adder, but a native serpent of the Western Isles.

"Master Martel." The greeting was spoken with certainty, as if they were well acquainted, and accompanied by a flourishing bow.

Unsure what to make of this prospective conversation partner, Martel opted for standing up and inclining his head in a polite, if curt response.

"I have the advantage of you, of course. Please, you may address me as Charles." An Asterian name, but his accent when speaking the Asterian tongue suggested he had been born with another.

"Master Charles."

"Please, be seated again. We have much to discuss."

"So you say," Martel replied, even as he sat down while the islander took another chair opposite.

"But your letter was sparse with details as to what."

"Forgive the subtlety. I know you Asterians prefer a more direct approach, at least in business. But given how freely information flows in this city, I thought it best to play coy." His lips, crowned by a thin moustache, smiled.

"Well, I'm here now. Nobody listening but me."

"So we would hope." For a moment, it seemed his expression turned overbearing. "But if Asterians value directness, I am told that mages do even more so, so I shall get to the point without delay."

Still taking him a lot of words to accomplish this, Martel thought.

"I represent the Silver Serpents, a company offering many services to facilitate trade. While our headquarters lie across the sea on the Isles, we have chapters in Aquila and now also Morcaster. And we are always on the lookout for skilled individuals to join our organisation."

There it was. This was an offer of employment. "I fear you have wasted your time. For the next two decades, my services are spoken for." Martel reached out to grab his mug of ale. Might as well empty it and head home.

As if reading his intentions, the islander raised one hand to make Martel wait. "But are you satisfied with this? What if you could be released from this obligation, free to choose a path of your own volition?"

"Perhaps you are not familiar with how the Asterian Empire works. I am to be a battlemage. No amount of bribery to anyone in the Imperial administration will save me from the legions."

Charles made the same smile as before, as if he knew a secret Martel did not. "Trust me. We make no investments, no plans without first gathering full knowledge and considering every step. If you were to simply disappear, taken safely far from these lands, what could they do? The reach of these legions does not extend to the Isles."

Martel was not inclined to take the idea seriously, but he felt curious nonetheless. "You think you can accomplish this?"

"I would not make the suggestion otherwise. We are highly skilled in moving not only goods, but also people around, especially without drawing attention to either."

Of everything Martel had considered this conversation might be about, he had never expected this. It seemed fanciful; he found it difficult to trust this islander, who spoke with such a silver tongue and refined speech despite Asterian not being his native language. Yet the thought of escaping twenty years of war... He could not dismiss this out of hand. "And what would you expect in return for this service?"

"More or less what you have already shown yourself to be capable of. Guarding ships or shipments valuable enough to warrant a mage, accompanying settlers or trade caravans across the Isles. They

are beautiful, my friend, lush islands full of delights. And I can guarantee that payment and living conditions would exceed those of the legions."

"Mercenary work, in other words."

"That is one way to name it," Charles admitted. "But often, your mere presence would deter trouble. Certainly a far better post than dying on a battlefield in the endless wars of your empire."

The air felt heavy inside the tavern, burdened by smoke, countless scents, and the loud noise of customers. "I cannot make such a decision on a whim. I need time to think."

Charles bowed his head in acceptance. "Of course. But given what must be set in motion, if we are to go through with this, I cannot wait too long. There are many preparations to make, and I shall require your help in the coming fivedays. I shall be in this place at this hour two days hence. I would ask that you bring me your answer then, and we may set to work."

"Very well. I shall return then." Martel reached out and grabbed his ale to empty it.

Chapter 364: The Illusion of Choice

The Illusion of Choice

The offer made by the Silver Serpent left a disquietude in Martel. On the surface of it, the proposition seemed ludicrous. He had no knowledge of these people nor the Western Isles. He could not place his life and future in their hands. Setting aside the question of whether he could trust them – which he was disinclined towards – Martel had no way of imagining what his life might be. Furthermore, it seemed a terribly drastic step to abandon everything he had ever known and journey to a place so foreign to him.

Though at the same time, a voice whispered to him, had he not done the same when he left Engby and set out for Morcaster? For better or worse, that choice had made him who he was now. Try as he might, Martel could not dismiss the decision placed before him by this Charles fellow.

An otherwise good night's sleep did nothing to dispel his indecision, and it followed him to class. Fortunately, his first lesson on Maldays was always simple, given that none of the other acolytes could threaten him in staff fighting; especially not while getting used to the weight of chain armour, so Martel passed the two hours parrying their feeble attacks while being distracted.

For his second lesson, he could not afford to be absent-minded in the same manner; the same difference in weapon skill between Martel and the other fire acolytes also applied between him and the mageknights, except in reverse. Unlike him, who trained one day out of five, they practised every single day and had done so before he even arrived at the Lyceum. One black-clad acolyte in particular seemed eager to take advantage of the opportunities in a sparring match without magic. Martel had avoided him last Malday, but now, Cheval eagerly pushed forward to take position in front of the fire acolyte. "Face me, unless you are a coward," he sneered.

Martel stared at the arrogant noble, unaffected by the infantile attempt to make him lose his composure. Martel knew he was no coward; he had faced danger plenty of times and kept a cool head. Nor did he feel the need to prove himself, least of all to Cheval. Avoiding a fight on unfavourable terms was not cowardice, but simply good strategy.

Before he could express any of these thoughts, Maximilian appeared and cast his shadow over the shorter mageknight. "No." The brief utterance carried such weight, it made Cheval immediately retreat. With the corner of his mouth curled upwards, the son of Marche turned towards Martel. "You escaped me last fiveday, Nordmark, but no more. Now show me what mettle you are made of!"

Between every bout, Martel retreated to the stone seats of the arena to catch his breath; after a little while, he would get up to slake his thirst in the rainwater barrel before sitting down again. Moira was not present, and Reynard did not seem to care much about what the fire acolytes did, which Martel took advantage of by resting longer than he strictly needed. He spent the time observing his friends. Maximilian fought with strength, using his hammer to force an opponent on the defensive; Eleanor favoured speed, her blade finding an opening wherever possible.

The thought of leaving them made Martel's heart suddenly ache. If he fled, he could not expect to ever see them again. The same went for his family in Nordmark; while he did not know the details of how the Silver Serpents would get him out, he doubted that it involved a return trip. If nothing else, for his own safety. He could not even be sure they would let him write a letter to his mother, explaining that he was well.

At the same time, was it much different from what he already faced? Maximilian would stay in Morcaster, becoming a praetorian. Martel would undoubtedly be sent to the Khivan front, but Eleanor might be sent to any legion in need of a mageknight. Ironically, she might even be posted in Nordmark. And while he was not bound to the legions forever, twenty years was still a long time; longer than he had been alive in this world. After such absence, would any of them recognise each other again, or still be friends? Assuming Martel even survived the war.

It seemed that no matter what, Martel stood before a journey into the unknown. Whether in service to the legions or this mercenary company, his fate would be in the hands of strangers, living in faraway lands. At least one of them promised better pay and, presumably, less risk of dying, though Martel could not be certain of the latter.

As the bell rang and the lesson ended, Martel found himself no closer to a decision.

Returning to his room in the evening, he noticed his notes from class lying scattered on his small writing desk. Picking them up, he sorted through the parchments to put them in order. One pile for the recipes he wrote down after his stints in the laboratory, along with remarks on the process and ingredients. Seeing what he had written for the sleep potion, Martel was reminded of others affected by his potential departure from Morcaster. Without him, Julia would be homeless, and Sparrow would be denied the prosperous life that her gift could offer, if only someone taught her how to use it.

But even if Martel rejected the offer made to him, he would still have to leave. When winter came, he would graduate from the Lyceum and leave Morcaster. Whether it happened soon or in eight months made little difference.

Putting the pile aside, Martel made another for his notes on Tyrian runes. The symbols stared back at him, reminding him of a Solday afternoon spent at the library. Another thing that would come to

an end sooner or later, though he preferred it to be later. Whether it ought to influence his decision, Martel could not say, and he went to sleep as disquiet as when he woke up.

Chapter 365: A Nest of Snakes

A Nest of Snakes

Glunday saw the continuation of Martel practising his fire ray spell. The boredom nearly drove him to turn his spell on Moira instead, but he restrained himself; at least he was spared detention or insults from her harsh tongue, as she busied herself with the other acolytes, still practising their wall of flames.

His work in the apothecary passed without any visit from Mistress Rana; as she did not give him any new list of ingredients to memorise, that meant he would be practising the fortitude potion again for tomorrow's labour in her laboratory. Martel did not mind as such; given how useful the tincture promised to be, he was happy to learn it to perfection. His only concern lay in the rarity of the ingredient; the Sindhian honey seemed expensive if even possible to obtain, since it had to be brought to Morcaster from across the sea. Still, it was good to learn and master the recipe. freewebnovel

With his chores done and supper eaten, Martel left the Lyceum at a leisurely pace; the hour approached for Martel to meet the Silver Serpent for the second and final time.

The man in question sat waiting as promised at The Golden Goose. Martel made his way towards his table, nodding in greeting as he sat down.

"Something to drink?" Charles asked.

"No thanks." Although thirsty, Martel did not plan to stay long. And he felt wary about accepting anything from people these days, especially when he was about to disappoint them. "I just came to say that while I appreciate your offer, I won't take you up on it."

"I see." The insinuation of a smile vanished from the islander's face. "May I ask why? If you have doubts, perhaps I can dispel them."

"Too many things tie me to Aster," the wizard replied truthfully. He did not know which bond exactly had tipped the scale, but the thought of leaving everyone and everything behind was simply too hard to bear. He would take his chances on the battlefield and hope that despite the years, his friends and family would greet him when he returned. The war had already lasted for over a decade; perhaps by the mercy of Sol, it would end soon. "But I'm flattered by the offer. If I had been free to come and leave Morcaster, I might have accepted."

The islander regarded the mage, and Martel could not tell what thoughts whirled behind the blank expression. "Very well," Charles finally said. "I wish you safe paths wherever you may tread."

"Same to you," Martel replied, assuming this was an islander saying or the like. He got up, bowed his head in farewell, and left The Golden Goose. His room back at the Lyceum waited for him.

He stopped on the way to enter another tavern, where he bought a small slice of pork wrapped in bread seasoned with garlic, adding a cup of ale to wash it down with. Having enough silver in his pocket to simply buy such luxuries without a second thought felt like such a blessing, Martel

thought, paying the tavernkeeper; not to mention that he might walk down the street and find a vendor who could sell it to him without delay. Such a different place compared to Engby, and how different Martel was, compared to when he first arrived. Most of all, he no longer hid his magic, but celebrated it.

All in all, Martel did not regret coming to Morcaster; he hoped that he would not regret either staying in the city for as long as he could.

Their meeting done, the islander who called himself Charles also left the tavern. He walked south to enter a house not far from the docks, though still considered part of the market district. The building was small and old, wedged in between a large insula on one side and a prosperous butcher's shop on the other. The smell from the latter proved a pervasive influence; even once inside the old house, the stench of blood and butchered animals found its way through the cracks in the wooden boards.

Another islander sat on a stool by the cooking fire in the middle of the room, stirring the contents of the pot. The smell of herbs rising from the soup battled with the smell coming from their neighbour. "Well?"

'Charles' shook his head. "He rejected the offer and gave some vague excuse. Just as I knew. He is still in league with the Night Knives."

The other islander slowed his stirring. He had a serpentine buckle in his belt and the same symbol written in ink upon his hand. "We cannot know for sure. We have only heard rumours, and those same whispers spoke of discord between this wizard and his black-clad allies. Our own eyes in the city have yet to see proof of this alliance."

"They will soon enough. Keala is watching him?"

"Yes, he waited for him outside the tavern. You did not see?"

'Charles' shrugged. "He would be a poor Serpent if I noticed him." He stretched his neck. "Tama, this mage is undoubtedly the same as showed up to the artefact trader."

"How certain are you?"

"Completely. Young, blue eyes, red robes, tall. He fit the description perfectly." The islander wet his lips. "What more proof do you need? He is not only investigating our activities, he is doing so in the company of the very people we are trying to destroy. He must be dealt with."

Tama finally stopped stirring the soup. "I was warned by our superiors to avoid entanglement with this school they call the Lyceum. It would be a drastic move, I am given to understand."

"And yet they barely give us resources to work with!" came the frustrated reply. "If we are to succeed in gaining a foothold in the city, we need either coin or bold action. The money from our last job is nearly spent."

Tama began pouring soup into a bowl. "Patience, my brother. Here, eat." He extended the food towards his companion, who gave an annoyed look but nonetheless accepted the bowl.

Chapter 366: Matter over Mind

Matter over Mind

The longer Martel thought about it, the better he felt about his decision to stay in Morcaster. As intriguing as it would be to set sail for foreign lands, ultimately, it was a step too far to trust this mysterious fellow, whom he had only met once before, and whose real name he had not learned. Going to his class on Tyrian runes, sitting down with Maximilian and Eleanor on either side, Martel felt reassured he had chosen wisely.

As the previous Mandays, Master Fenrick had another rune to teach them. Martel felt a little overwhelmed at the pace with which they went through the symbols, considering he had yet to make any of them work; and if he had trouble doing so, he could only imagine how the rest of the class felt. But either the teacher knew what he was doing, or he did not care. In either case, he held up a parchment to show them yet another strange symbol with twisting lines interlocking.

"The rune of preservation, we call it, as its purpose is to create cold. You may think that nature provides this in abundance in the lands of Tyria, but even there, summer can be hot and quickly turn food spoiled. This rune, which they might inscribe straight upon the meat or bread, keeps it cold. While obviously our own enchantments can achieve the same effect, only those gifted in elemental magic can do this." The teacher glanced at his students, all of the mageknights except one. "That means even you have hope of learning how to keep your ale cold on a hot day."

"Finally, something useful," Maximilian muttered, which made Martel smile.

"The activating word is this. *Frjósa*." Master Fenrick almost breathed rather than spoke the phrase, but they all saw the shimmer of magic around his hand. From the distance, Martel could not tell of any effect, so he let his ability to sense heat extend forward. A cold pocket met him where the rune stood inscribed on the parchment. "Get to work," their teacher commanded. He spent the remainder of the lesson moving up and down the classroom, issuing corrections wherever needed.

Martel stood, eyes closed and with complete focus on his magical sense. "Water. Earth. Water. Air. Fire. Earth." Each utterance came in response to feeling a burst of magic from his teacher. As he no longer felt any spell work being done, he opened his eyes to look at Master Alastair.

"Correct on all. And speedily done too. You've come far learning how to sense and identify magic. But that's just the first part of learning how to counterspell."

Martel nodded, knowing he still had ways to go; even so, he felt a thrill at how good he had become. He hoped that by increasing his sensitivity to magic in this way, it would affect his ability to identify in general. Recognising spells was one thing; if he could add potions and artefacts to that, he would feel like an expert. Perhaps even like a Master of Lore.

"The hardest part comes now," his teacher warned him. "Sensing the element at play, the spell attacking you, is only the first step. You must react with the opposite element to counter, and you must do so immediately, or it will be too late. Now, it's not intuitive for our minds to think water when we feel fire, earth when we feel air, and so on. But that is what we must train. Close your eyes and focus once again. When you feel and identify my spell, draw the opposite element into your hand."

"Yes, master." Martel readied himself, eyes closed and hands in front of him. He waited until he felt fire; eager to react, his mind and instinct both went to what seemed most obvious and conjured a

strong flame into his own hand. It took him a moment to realise what he had done; he opened his eyes to look at his teacher with a sheepish expression.

As for Master Alastair, he gave a wry smile. "I may have been a little unfair to you with this first attempt. For our kind, fire is always the first choice when it comes to magic. But now you understand what you are up against. And perhaps we should make this a little less difficult for you until you get the hang of it. For now, I'll only use water spells. So all you have to do is follow your instinct and conjure fire the moment you sense it. Understood?"

Martel nodded quickly and prepared himself once more.

Ready to give the elixir of fortitude another try, Martel stood once more in Mistress Rana's laboratory. He had brought his note with him, written down after last time so that he might remember the different steps. Unlike previous potions, this recipe required the ingredients added at different times with different heat. Adjusting the intensity of the fire was no issue for Martel, but he found it difficult to know when it was the right time to add the next reagent.

He was supposed to know this by examining his brew as he went along, checking colour, viscosity, and even smell; all of these signs and others would tell him when it was ready to move to the next step. Assuming he was a skilled alchemist who could correctly determine all of this, naturally. He had failed to do so last time, forcing Mistress Rana to step in and do it for him in order to save the potion. But he would learn it eventually; if that required some failures along the way, he would just have to accept that and keep trying.

"Let me see what you wrote down." Mistress Rana took his notes and let her eyes glance over it. "You remembered everything, at least, though your handwriting leaves much to be desired. Still, no use having a skilled hand if your mind is empty." She handed it back. "Very well, let us try it again. This time, remember to use all your senses. Even something like how the potion simmers can tell you whether you're progressing correctly or not."

"Yes, mistress." Taking his notes back, Martel put them aside and began awakening the magic in the ingredients.

Chapter 367: Study Sessions

Study Sessions

Feeling the pace set by Master Fenrick when it came to learning Tyrian runes, Martel only became more and more glad to have Eleanor's company for studying every Solday. Having grown up with tutors, it seemed second nature to her. She made extensive notes and knew how to look for more information.

She had also known to compare their drawings of the runes with those of the library's tome; it seemed an obvious thing to do, but Martel might have spent several fruitless sessions practising before coming up with the same idea.

And besides the methods Eleanor brought to the table, Martel found her presence to be pleasant, even when they simply sat quietly together, each focused on their own spellwork or notes. It was similar to how he felt himself when around Maximilian.

"What is it?" she asked, looking up from her runes.

"What? Nothing. What makes you ask?"

"You smiled for a moment as if a jest had come to mind."

"No, nothing of the sort," he told her. "I'm just glad to have your help with this."

"Not that we have made much progress." Eleanor glanced at the library's book on Tyrian runes.

"The descriptions on how to make the magic work seem like guesswork, written by someone who never actually did it themselves."

"There are Tyrians in the city. I remember you mageknights all bought rune-inscribed arrows for the harvest games," Martel considered. He could add another example, that of the bard who played during the masquerade at The River Pearl, but that might be awkward to explain to Eleanor. "We could find him, or someone else like him, and ask for their help."

"I doubt they are inclined towards teaching the secrets of their runes to others. Either because they might consider it sacrilege or because it would deprive them of their income," she said.

"I guess. Do you – would Master Fenrick keep us from graduating if we fail this course?"

"I doubt he has the power. I remember he made that threat when he taught us astronomy, but I suspect it may have been idle words. The legions are not going to be deprived of a battlemage and several mageknights simply because we cannot recognise a constellation or draw a barbarian symbol right."

That made Martel feel a little more at ease. "I guess they need us too much. You're still joining the legions, then?"

"Yes, why would that have changed?"

Martel shrugged. He found this topic awkward to discuss, but now he had brought it up, he might as well ask. "I thought you might become protector instead of a prefect. Join the Praetorian Guard and stay in Morcaster. With Maximilian."

"Oh." It was hard to tell in the dim light, but it looked like Eleanor blushed a little. "Did he tell you? I do not recall if you and I discussed it."

"He told me, yeah."

"Well, my father still wants me to become a legate. Originally, I intended to seek command of a frontier legion, but my father may retire early if it allows me to take over the Legio Urbis. Such a move would require support from Maximilian's father, though, and I still need to serve several years as a prefect, no doubt."

"So, no wedding bells any time soon."

She gave an awkward laughter. "No. Our fathers may announce the union when it seems suitable – probably the same time we graduate from the Lyceum and take up our respective posts."

"I see." Martel cleared his throat and turned his attention back on the runes.

With his own studies seen to, at least for the day, Martel left the Lyceum in order to oversee those of another. He found it to be a pleasant evening in spring, enjoying the walk to the copper lanes. As the days grew warmer, activity grew in Morcaster. More and more ships arrived, no longer suppressed

by the fear of winter storms. Goods and trade flowed faster and faster, filling the streets with labourers, donkeys, and carts.

As Martel left the mercantile districts to reach the copper lanes, much of this faded away. The slums of the city did not share in the increased trade nor the wealth that resulted; winter or summer, only the current weather determined how many could be found on the streets.

Reaching the home of the urchins, they knew to fetch Sparrow for him. As he retreated to the alley, the children crowded around the open door to stare at him; once his unofficial apprentice arrived, however, Weasel shooed them away and closed the door, leaving him as the only spectator.

Sparrow smiled at him; crouching down, she eagerly placed her hand on the ground. About a yard ahead of her, the earth cracked a few inches in width and depth. Looking up at him with excited eyes, her smile only grew. "I did that!"

"You certainly did." Martel was in a flash reminded of his younger brother William, who would come running into the house to display a frog or bird he had found in much the same excited manner. "Keep practising. I know it's dull and repetitive, but you'll increase what you can do in every way. You will be faster, you can do it more powerfully, and over greater distances."

Sparrow nodded sagely, as if Martel was saying something obvious. "I will. I remember how you made Weasel fall." She giggled, and a grumble could be heard from the door. "Once I can do that, nobody can ever catch me again."

"Very true. There are many other spells that can be done with earth magic." Not that Martel knew any, but he would find out. "Is there something you would like to learn in particular? Besides what I already showed you – what would you find useful?"

Sparrow frowned in thought. Behind her, Martel could almost hear Weasel leaning forward.

"Well, the other thing you showed me helps to run away. But what if I can't? Can I use this magic to protect myself? Keep someone from hurting me?"

"There ought to be." Martel hoped so, at least. "If you keep practising what I already showed you, I'll figure out a new spell for you to learn next time I visit. Sound good?"

The little girl beamed. "Yeah!"

Martel did not stay much longer. He knew it was a bad habit to stay out in town late, attracting trouble and disrupting his sleep pattern. The walk to the copper lanes was pleasant, especially given the mild weather, and he enjoyed getting out of the Lyceum for a change of scenery, but there was no need to be gone longer than necessary.

His mind filled with thoughts of earth magic and how to find out about the spells that Sparrow might want to learn, Martel paid no heed to the shadow that followed some distance behind him, watching his every move; looking ordinary in every regard, the hooded fellow only had one distinguishing feature – his belt buckle was in the shape of a snake.

Chapter 368: The Slow Machinations of Earth

The Slow Machinations of Earth

If Moira had been anything like Master Alastair, or even just Master Fenrick or mistress Rana, Martel would probably have loved learning fire magic at the Lyceum. If he overlooked the reason why he was being taught these spells, Martel felt a joy each time he unleashed the fire in his soul. Like seeing the acrobats perform their feats of dexterity and athleticism during market faires, it came so swiftly and naturally to him.

And all he used it for was burning a ray of fire into the wall. He was so tempted to protest, but the one time he had glanced at Moira with a disgruntled expression on his face, she had immediately barked at him to keep at it. He knew disobedience would simply yield detention, where he would probably be given the exact same task as now or worse, so he continued while trying to distract his mind with thoughts of what he might teach Sparrow.

In between his lessons in the Circle of Fire, Martel went in search of further knowledge on the topic of earth magic. Asking Nora had been fruitless; the obvious person to approach might be Master Basil, the Master of Earth. While sometimes reluctant to ask his teachers about anything related to his activities in the city, this particular concern did not hold Martel back for once; students asking teachers about spells seemed innocuous enough. Rather, he feared that old age would claim him long before Master Basil had finished replying.

Master Alastair did not seem a good option either; although the Master of Elements, he was a battlemage by trade and only taught basic elemental magic. Even if he knew any earth spells, they would probably be similar to the elemental bolt he had taught Martel, who was not keen on teaching potentially lethal spells to Sparrow.

Instead, Martel took his inspiration from Eleanor, who had reminded him what he had done in the early days of his stay at the Lyceum; he went to the library in search of a book on the relevant topic.

It took a while to find anything useful. The library did not have just a single book containing all useful spells discovered or invented over the years, especially not for a particular element. It had a long list of books on various topics that sometimes delved into the subject or described a spell that might be relevant. Perhaps, with magic being taught by masters and teachers directly to apprentices and acolytes, nobody saw the need for the expensive investment of time and resources it would be to create such a compendium. Or maybe mages preferred to know who was learning their spells, rather than write them down in a book for anyone to read.

In the end, Martel had to spend an hour after supper before he found something useful. A book, written by an earthmage, made references to a defensive spell that used earth magic to protect the caster. Combing through the text, Martel eventually pieced together how it worked. It was similar to the wall of earth that he had seen Flora and other mages raise, though they usually did so to create an obstacle and control the battlefield. This was different. This wizard used it to swiftly raise the earth up in front of himself as a kind of physical shield, while also hardening the earth to make it more like stone, increasing its protective qualities.

Martel frowned as he read this. While he could understand how this worked in theory, he knew this was not a spell he could learn himself. He had nothing of the intuitive control and understanding of the earthen element that this required. He could increase or decrease heat on instinct, but altering the properties of the ground itself seemed beyond his abilities. Of course, he was not the one meant

to learn this spell either, but it would be difficult for him to teach it when he did not know how to cast it.

He would have to figure that out, perhaps along the way. It was not like Sparrow had other options; no gifted earthmage sat around waiting for an apprentice to walk through the door. Martel would just have to try his best and do further studies into this kind of magic if need be.

Leaving the library, Martel found a message waiting for him. The handwriting looked familiar, which never bode well.

Martel,

I am concerned for you.

For your own sake,

we should talk soon.

Please write back when

you would be able to meet.

Location is up to you.

Flora

He squinted his eyes, wondering what this would be about. Had she heard about the offer made by the Silver Serpent and now wanted to make her own? Except once Martel became a fire acolyte, Flora had given up on making him a Night Knife. Considering they had been at opposite sides in the skirmish at the Four Flagon Tavern, he doubted that the mercenaries wanted anything to do with him.

But they had been comrade-in-arms on several occasions; Martel had even saved Flora's life when an inquisitor had wounded her by stealing a healing elixir. Their fight at the tavern had not been personal as such. If some danger had reared its head, perhaps lingering affection made Flora reach out to warn him. At the very least, he would hear her out without necessarily trusting her.

Back in his room, Martel sat down and quickly crafted a reply.

Very well. Tomorrow, Malday evening.

Sixth bell. The usual tavern across the square from the Lyceum.

Martel

He considered whether to stipulate that she should come alone, but decided against it. It already seemed implied that this would be a private meeting between just the two of them; if she brought anyone else with her, or if Martel simply noticed another patron who looked suspicious, it might indicate that she had malicious intentions, and he could simply leave.

The note complete, Martel grabbed a penny from his drawer, and another; the missive was going to another district after all. Expensive considering the Imperial post would take a letter to Nordmark for just four pennies, but the Courier's Guild had a monopoly and set their prices as they wished.

Going outside, Martel looked around the square of the Lyceum until he located one of the messenger boys that always loitered around, waiting for work. Waving the boy over, the wizard dug out his letter and two pennies. "For the bridge district. Address is on the other side. Do you need me to read it for you?"

"Of course not, master!" came the almost offended reply. The boy, wearing the courier's emblem that showed a pair of winged shoes, accepted the letter and payment. "Delivery straight away, master, no matter the hour or weather, that's the guild's guarantee!"

Martel watched the boy turn around and sprint away towards east, smiling a little to himself before walking back inside.

Chapter 369: Veiled Warnings

Veiled Warnings

As he wiped the sweat from his brow during his second combat lesson, Martel tried to determine which kind of training he disliked the most. Doing weapon sparring without magic against mageknights was a fool's errand; Martel could not imagine what Reynard thought this would accomplish, which made him suspect that Reynard had not given this any thought to begin with. But at least the chain shirt protected against blows, leaving Martel with nothing worse than superficial bruises; as the mageknights did not use magic either, their blows with blunted weapons had considerably less bite.

In comparison, the kind of skirmishes he had done in previous months had been a lot more interesting. Whether mageknights and elemental mages fought side-by-side or against each other, Martel felt he had learned about how to fight as a group and used his magic in various ways, such as the flame wall spell. While it had sometimes felt that the exercises were stacked against them, fighting four mages against eight, they had still managed to grab a win now and then.

On the other hand, the punishment for losing those skirmishes had often been detention with Moira in the Circle of Fire. Perhaps Martel should be grateful that the current training did not involve any risk of that. The fire acolyte told himself that in an insisting manner as Alain's sword slapped against his shin, making him wince.

As Martel left the Lyceum, part of him regretted setting the meeting with Flora. Night Knives, the Friar and the Keeper, now these Silver Serpents – every time he rejected them, another sprung up to try and reel Martel back in. As much as he disliked Kerra, at least she had the good sense of leaving him alone.

But Flora's note had sounded important, and whether curiosity or caution drove him, Martel wanted to know what she had to share. As he entered the tavern, he let his magic sweep the room; no hint of gold larger than the occasional coin in one or two purses. Flora sat alone; Martel did not see any who looked like a mercenary, though if they were in disguise, that would be the point. Still, with nothing to alarm him, Martel approached the earthmage. Pity there was bad blood between them; he could have used her help with Sparrow.

To his surprise, Flora rose to meet him with a big smile. "Good to see you," she declared in a loud voice, even though the room was not particularly noisy. She even reached out to place a hand on his

shoulder; as she did it slowly, he did not take it as a threat, though it did make him frown. Finally, she sat down again, pushing a cup of ale towards the empty seat opposite her.

"Your note made it seem important," he mumbled, confused by the complete change in her demeanour from their last conversation. He could guess at two possible reasons; either she wanted to reconcile – or she needed something from him. In which case, she was out of luck.

"Yes." Her expression grew serious, and she lowered her voice that he suddenly found it hard to hear her. "I've come to warn you."

"About what?" Even as he leaned forward a little to better hear, he stayed mindful of any movement around him.

"I've been told you had a meeting with some islanders. Shifty-looking fellows, usually with a snake as a symbol on their clothing or skin." She gave the cup of ale in front of him a little push. "I got that for you."

Martel was not thirsty. "How would you know about my meeting?"

"One of my men saw you at the tavern and recognised you. While he did not know your companion, islanders are few in Morcaster, and he could guess the rest."

"Well, what is it to you?" Martel leaned back again, crossing his arms.

"I thought you should know who you are dealing with. They may have presented themselves as a mercenary company, much like the Night Knives, but their dealings are more in the shadows. They gather information, spy on people, and have been known to extort others when it suits them."

Martel furrowed his brow. As he did not have any dealings with these islanders anymore, it did not matter to him who they were, but he wondered what Flora's angle was in all of this. "They did not seem like such. At least the one fellow I met." Truth be told, he had made Martel feel a little uneasy, but he figured this was the best way to derive more information out of the earthmage.

Flora gave an overbearing smile. "That is their pattern. They are excellent at appearing to be something else than their true nature. After all, they'd make terrible spies and rogues otherwise. I'm told you accompanied Lady Pearl to a meeting with an islander at Smallport?"

It took Martel a moment to remember. "What of it?"

"That was one of their number, pretending to be a merchant in order to fool Lady Pearl out of her coin. One of their many schemes against her. They are quite wily, though fortunately inept when it comes to applying force, making them no match against us Night Knives in an open fight. Hence the scheming."

Now the pieces began to fall into place. "They're your rivals. Or Lady Pearl's, at any rate. They're trying to ruin her, and you're afraid that I will help them do it."

"I thought there might be a risk you make that mistake, yes. Which is why I thought to warn you against them."

Martel felt a tinge of annoyance. He had already rejected them. This evening was turning out to be a waste.

Either oblivious to his mood or simply deciding to press on, Flora continued. "Lady Pearl told me of that encounter and how you knew him to be a fraud. His jewellery was all fake, which should tell

you of their financial situation. Their headquarters lie across the sea. They have only a small presence in Aquila, and barely any in Morcaster. Whatever they promised you, they lack the coin to pay you."

That made Martel feel a little better about his decision; it had seemed a little foolhardy to trust these people to get him out of Morcaster without knowing anything about their network capabilities. Still, as he had no arrangement with them, Flora's warning was superfluous. "Well, you need not fret. I turned them down. I have no interest in getting entangled with them – or you. You can chase each other in the shadows for all I care." He got up.

The earthmage swiftly stood up as well, smiling. "Wonderful to hear! Take care, my friend."

Feeling weird, Martel just nodded and left. Once he was gone from the tavern, Flora's smile vanished, and she likewise strode away. Soon after, two men, both hooded, also rose from their seats. They had been sitting in opposite ends of the tavern, and although they did not even glance at each other, their departure seemed almost in rhythm. Once they were outside, one followed Flora towards the bridge district while the other watched Martel enter the Lyceum across the square.

Chapter 370: New Methods

New Methods

Standing in his classroom, Master Fenrick held up a piece of parchment with a strange semicircle and other lines drawn upon it. "This is the last rune I will teach you. Simply because we are out of time. Next Manday will be your last lesson in the subject with an examination taking place the following afternoon. I know you mageknights have weapon training, but you have been allowed to arrive late for that."

Martel could not help but feel a little rattled. Even if he believed Eleanor's words that an inability to cast these runes would not cause him problems, he disliked the thought of moving on to another subject with this one unfinished. While he might not have any immediate need or use for this kind of magic, it rankled him to have begun learning without actually getting anywhere. Perhaps he could continue on his own if time permitted it.

"Furthermore, I am aware that none of you have yet been able to actually cast a rune successfully. Don't be discouraged by this," the teacher told them. "The method for learning this is a little unusual compared to what you'll be used to here at the Lyceum."

Martel sat up straight, making sure to pay extra attention.

"Just as a mage will have stronger affinity for certain kinds of magic, so will some of these runes be easier for you to activate. I cannot predict which one, unfortunately, which is why I have taken you through as many as possible in the time allowed. For this lesson, you will practice the last one I show you as you have previously done with the others, but in between today and next Manday, your assignment is to practice every rune and find the one that speaks to you the strongest. Keep practising with that one, as you are most likely to find success with that particular symbol."

Martel glanced at Eleanor. Perhaps they would figure this out yet.

"As for today's lesson, this is the rune of warmth. You can guess what it does. In times of winter, this is a fast and easy way to stave off the cold. Listen. *Vermi*." The rune glowed with magic, and

reaching out with his own, Martel sensed its heat. "Now draw it and begin practising," Master Fenrick commanded.

Even as Martel led his charcoal in the strange pattern of the symbol, he began to smile. He did not know how the Tyrians had made or discovered the symbols, nor how it worked. But he could feel it. Not physically – the parchment remained the same temperature regardless of his scribbles. But another of his senses, whether magical or instinct, told him of dormant heat waiting to be unleashed by this rune. He knew which symbol spoke to him. No matter how long it took, he would make this work.

As it turned out, it would take Martel longer than two hours, and he finished the bell without any clear progress. But he also found it a little hard to focus in that classroom; all the other students were likewise muttering to themselves, charcoal scratching against parchment, Master Fenrick walking up and down between the desks to issue corrections. He already looked forward to the peace and quiet of the library for his study session with Eleanor tomorrow.

For now, elemental magic awaited him, familiar and practised in solitude with only his favourite teacher present. "There you are, boy," Master Alastair said. "I think you are ready for us to practice the final step of the spell."

Martel already smiled. "Which is?"

"Sensing the element at play is the first step. Conjuring its counter is the second. The third is to actually use that conjuration to defend yourself."

The acolyte nodded. Simple and straightforward. Exactly what one could expect from Asterian magic.

"I'll conjure an elemental bolt and attack you. Don't worry, I won't use any spellpower."

Martel was tempted to say that made the Master of Elements different from Moira, but he kept silent and simply indicated his readiness.

A bolt of water formed between Master Alastair's hands and flew forward to strike Martel straight in the face. A moment later, a burst of fire came up from the acolyte's hands where the bolt would have been.

His face splashed, Martel felt the water drip down his hair onto his robe. "Was it necessary to aim for my head, master?"

"Necessary? No. Hilarious? Very." The teacher gave a wry smile. "Besides, I thought this would help to motivate you. "

"Trust me, master, I couldn't be more motivated."

"Excellent. We go again."

Mistress Rana stared at the object in his hands. "What manner of bizarre toy is that?"

Martel held out his hands to give her a better look. "It's not a toy, it's a clock."

The alchemist squinted. "Like that infernal thing in the entrance hall? But it's so small!"

"Smallest clock in Morcaster," Martel said proudly, feeling reasonably confident his statement was true. Excluding the one he had given to Maximilian, of course.

"Fascinating." Her demeanour did not agree with her utterance. "And why have you chosen to pollute my laboratory with that incessant sound?"

"Well, it's hard for me to know when to do the different steps of the fortitude potion. But with this watch, I can measure the time in between, as long as you tell me when, of course. So if I write it down, another time, I just have to measure the time to know when the next step is."

Mistress Rana crossed her arms. "Your little plan has two flaws. First of all, a good alchemist must be able to determine the progress of their potion with their own senses, not some mechanical monstrosity. If the ingredients are of different quality from one time to the next, it will alter the brewing process, making one step take longer or less time than before. Furthermore, you will have to drag the clock with you every time you want to make this elixir."

"Of course, mistress, I understand. I do want to learn to understand the process just through my senses. But I thought this might be worth a try. Experiment and see if something new can be learned. Perhaps even improved." He gave her a hopeful look.

"Preposterous," she mumbled. "An Asterian mage proposing to use a Khivan clock in Sindhian alchemy. Madness." Yet despite her stern words, her tone of voice seemed soft. Finally, she glanced from the contraption to Martel. "Fine. You may try this time. But if that device distracts you and ruins the potion, I'll throw it in the cauldron, and you can drink the resulting concoction."

"Understood, mistress." Martel smiled and began his work.