

Firebrand 371

Chapter 371: Bridging a Gap

Bridging a Gap

Solday morning passed as usual, work keeping Martel occupied; before he knew it, the afternoon had arrived along with his regular get-together in the library with Eleanor. Both of them had their drawings of runes with them, which they spread out across the table.

"Does any of them stand out to you? In the way that Master Fenrick mentioned yesterday, I mean." She looked up at him.

Martel reached out a finger to place it against the rune of warmth and slide the parchment towards himself.

"That one is... Heat, right?" Eleanor chuckled. "Predictable, one might say."

The fire acolyte shrugged. "I am an acrobat with one trick to perform. How about you? Any of them feel right?"

"No. They are all the same to me. But let us focus on you first," she suggested. "It seems you stand the best chance of making it work. Maybe I will learn something from watching your success."

"Let's not get too confident," Martel warned. "Even if I feel certain I'm more – attuned to this symbol, I still couldn't get it to work yesterday." He held out his hand, hovering above the parchment, and spoke the activating word. Magic power glowed, but only around his hand. It felt more frustrating than his failed attempts with the other runes because he could almost feel the symbol calling out to him. It wanted to connect; he just did not know how to bridge the gap.

"Maybe our approach is wrong," Eleanor considered. "You told me of how it is to create potions using the Sindhian arts. That the magic is used differently. This is not Asterian spellcraft, where we simply keep pressing on until it eventually works for us."

She had a point. Martel scratched the back of his head. "What did Master Fenrick say about Tyrians? How do they use magic?"

"They do not see a difference between the soul, mind, and the body. It is a whole to them. That is all I remember in this moment, which admittedly, I'm not sure is relevant for these symbols." She glanced up at the surrounding shells. "Maybe there is a book that delves into the topic."

"Maybe." Martel thought about when he had learned the Sindhian way to awaken the magic in reagents. Trained in Asterian magic, Martel was used to thinking of that elusive power as always residing in himself, emanating from the same point to affect the world around him. But if dried herbs and animal parts ground to dust could be awakened, perhaps even a charcoal scribble on a piece of parchment might possess the potential for magic as well. Maybe he felt there was a gap between him and the rune because he thought the magic only came from himself. A bridge over a gap needed two anchoring points, after all. "Vermi."

The Tyrian symbol glowed. Although faint, Martel's sensitivity to heat told him that it became warm.

Eleanor looked up from the rune to Martel with a surprised look. "How did you do it?"

"I thought about it in a different way." He smiled and began to explain.

It took a while before Eleanor had the same breakthrough. None of the runes seemed to have the same powerful affinity for her as Martel had with his, but she eventually settled on the symbol for repulsion, given how important spells of shielding were to a mageknight. Under Martel's guidance, she finally managed to activate the rune, and the parchment slid across the table to land on the floor, pushing itself away from her hand.

She looked up with a big smile. "It worked! I can scarcely believe it."

Martel was about to congratulate her when the bell rang.

"Oh, I have class." Despite her words, Eleanor remained seated. "I wanted to ask you something. Even though this course is finishing, would you be willing to help me continue studying these runes? I tried before on my own, before we had this class, but I did not really understand."

"Sure," Martel replied. "Why do you want to continue though?"

"Genevieve. My sister." Eleanor hesitated a bit. "Tyrian magic is just about the last thing we have yet to try."

"I'll help you all I can," Martel promised; nobody understood this motivation better than he did. Still, he felt he had to point out the truth. "I'm not sure, even if we do find something useful, that we'll ever be able to make it work. It seems like very advanced magic in a tradition that is foreign to us."

She nodded a little. "I already suggested to my father that we find a Tyrian skáld. He said a legate cannot be seen purchasing the magic of our barbarian enemies, and it would break my mother's heart if we tried and failed yet again." She looked out the window. "That last part may have been as much about himself, though."

Martel could not believe this response – he would have leapt at any chance, however small. But he did not wish to insult Eleanor's father in front of her. "I'm sorry he didn't trust you."

"He regards anyone claiming to have a cure to be a charlatan. But if I am the one who has found the cure," she considered, "if I can explain to him that I have studied this magic myself and verified the solution, perhaps he will be persuaded to let a skáld try."

Martel had his doubts; although he barely knew the legate, Richard Fontaine did not seem a man who changed his mind. But he would never deprive Eleanor of hope or refuse to help her, however frail the chance. "Next Solday, we will start to go through any book or manuscript dealing with Tyrian magic."

She gave a smile that almost looked sad. "Thank you, Martel. Stars, I must get to training." She stood up and looked down at the table with their scattered notes.

"I'll gather this up and bring it next time. You go on," Martel told her. She smiled again and hurried away.

Once all his notes had been safely deposited back in his room, Martel considered how to spend the remainder of his Solday. It was late afternoon; he could go into the city, but he had no pressing

reason to do so. It seemed too soon to visit Sparrow again; better to let her have a few more days of practising magic before he examined her progress. As for Julia, tomorrow was the beginning of a new month, so it made more sense to wait until then that he might pay the rent for her room, while he was at the insula anyway.

He did feel a tad hungry though, and supper was one bell away. Digging up some coins, Martel went out onto the square in front of the Lyceum. He did not have to go far; plenty of vendors with little stalls sold a variety of food. An old crone baked delicious honey cakes, and Martel bought two; one for now and one to have in a dire situation, such as later tonight. As he turned around and walked back towards the Lyceum, he took the first bite and wondered at the strange powder Mistress Rana had shown him. Sindhian honey, or sugar; he wondered if one might use that for baking as well. Might even taste as good as honey.

Across the square, a hooded figure waited. Seeing the tall acolyte appear from the Lyceum, the man had begun to set into motion. Yet he walked slowly along the edge of the square rather than cross it directly, where he would be easily visible. Before he reached the old woman with the cakes, Martel had already made his purchases and returned to the castle.

Chapter 372: A Red Day at Market

A Red Day at Market

At this point, Martel had grown to hate his fire ray spell to such a degree, he would never use it outside of the Circle of Fire. Moira had simply ruined it for him. He had scorched the wall with enough flames to burn down a large forest, and still she demanded he persist.

He began to wonder about the punishment for simply not showing up to class. At this point, it seemed certain he would not be expelled from the Lyceum regardless of his behaviour; as long as he did nothing to make the inquisitors put him in golden chains, he should be fine. He almost preferred the abuse of the initial lessons under Moira, as he at least felt those had taught him something. This was just a waste of time.

When his lessons finally had ended, Martel filled a small purse with silver and left the castle. While it was not urgent to pay Julia's rent – he doubted that the reeve responsible for the insula would make complaints at a mage if rent was paid a few days late – the man might come knocking on Julia's door asking for the money, which would probably spook the skittish girl. Best to have the matter resolved. Besides, it was another pleasant spring day, and Martel had even left his cloak behind, walking only in his robe.

As it was still afternoon, albeit late, plenty of people could be found on the streets. Even though others usually moved out of the way when spotting a mage, Martel's path was still crowded by other people, sometimes slowing him down, and he kept a tight hand on his coin; the tightly packed streets provided excellent working conditions for cutpurses and pickpockets.

While walking, he glanced at the stalls just in case he might spot something worth buying for Julia. She had her most basic needs seen to, but she could probably use more clothes. Obviously, he would never be able to drag her to a tailor, but plenty of people sold children's garments that their own offspring had outgrown.

As he moved through the market district on his way to the docks, Martel suddenly felt a sharp pain in his back, too intense that it could be someone's elbow or knee accidentally striking him. Angry, he turned around.

Almost within touching distance stood a hooded man, though the surrounding crowd threatened to get between them. In the sunlight, Martel saw the shine of metal in his hand, stained with red.

Shocked, Martel realised he was being attacked and summoned his shield, just as his adversary managed to get past a dockworker and stabbed again. With absolute dread, Martel saw the knife pass through his shimmering shield to stab him in the stomach. The dagger had an edge of gold. It was a mage killer blade.

Reacting on instinct, Martel blasted air. He had the wherewithal to aim for the legs, away from the golden weapon that might lessen his attack, to throw his attacker off-balance. Their surroundings finally became aware of what was unfolding. People screamed and scattered in every direction, but the crowded streets did not allow for this, causing further panic.

Martel barely noticed. He did not even feel the pain from his wounds anymore with the instincts of battle taking over. Under the hood of his enemy, he saw the features of an islander. Not that it mattered; his body would burn like any other.

As the assassin regained his balance and once more leapt forward to lunge at Martel, he in turn leant back until the dagger had passed by. Seeing an opening, the wizard responded with the spell nearest to his mind. From both his hands, a ray of scorching fire shot out to strike the islander in the chest. It blazed through wool, leather, linen, and finally skin. The sickening smell of burnt flesh spread through the air. With a terrible scream of agony, the islander dropped his weapon and fled, squeezing his way into the surrounding throng of people still desperate to escape the street.

Martel already had the next spell ready, but any attempt to strike his assailant would most likely hit innocent people. Instead, he knelt down to pick up the golden dagger. At least his enemy had been disarmed, but the rogue might return. Martel needed to get back to the safety of the Lyceum and its wards. He placed the conquered weapon inside his belt and set into motion, trying to push forward through the near stampede of panicking people.

As the fury of battle slowly left his blood, Martel became aware that his blood was also leaving him. He pressed a hand against his stomach to stem the flow, but he could not reach the wound on his back. As he walked northwards, his steps became stumbling. Dimly, as if from far away, he heard the cries from the surrounding crowd, all of them still trying to escape in whatever direction possible. Someone pushed him, and he fell to the ground. Somehow, it seemed to require impossible strength for him to stand up again. Similarly, a fog descended inside his head, making it harder for him to gather his thoughts.

"Make way for the guard!" a voice cried out.

Martel could not see them; from his current vantage point, he saw only ankles. With dwindling presence of mind, he raised a finger to send up bright lights, much like the sparks when a smith's hammer struck glowing hot iron.

The display of magic had a repulsing effect, making people skirt around him. "Guards, to me!" he shouted as loudly as he could, continuing the stream of magic above him to mark his position.

Martel's vision grew dark. When something moved in front of his eyes, he could not discern what it was, other than red in colour.

"My lord, what has happened?" asked a shocked voice.

Martel ceased his spellcasting, letting his arm fall to the ground. "An assassin attacked me. I drove him off. I'm wounded." He wanted to continue, to command them to take him to the Lyceum. But he could not find the words; he could not control his tongue. He could do nothing but slowly lose grasp on his consciousness, less and less aware of the world and himself.

Chapter 373: Red Hunt

Red Hunt

The world was a blur. Shapeless colours were replaced by darkness until jolts of pain brought Martel back briefly, his mind soon after retreating into black again. On and on this pattern continued.

"Hold him down while I open this up!"

The sound of fabric being cut. More pangs of agony.

"Keep pressure on the wound!"

"Princepts, look! This blood on my hands, it's from his back!"

A string of curses. "Turn him on the side!"

Martel groaned as movement sent waves of pain through him. He tried to whisper the name of the Lyceum, thinking of the only place that might free him from this torment, but no sounds issued from his lips.

"Oh, that looks deep. No wonder he's out of it."

"Hard to tell how much blood he's lost. Stupid red robes."

"Shut yer yaps and keep pressure on those wounds!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Where's that cart? How long can it take that imbecile to find something with four wheels?"

"Sir, he looks like he's fading!"

"Of course he is, idiot! That's what losing blood does to you. Sol's eye, where's that cart!"

Martel did not have much awareness of his surroundings. The occasional pain reminded him that the outside world existed and he had yet to depart from it, but otherwise, he had no knowledge of what happened around him.

Finally, a bright light appeared before his eyes. He could not tell the source or see anything by its illumination, but he felt comforted by it.

The light flowed through his body. It filled him with a pleasant feeling, driving away the pain.

It lasted only briefly before stinging sensations reminded him that the world also contained ills. Slowly, his eyes began to discern his surroundings again.

A voice spoke, familiar to Martel, yet he could not name the speaker. "That should keep him alive, at least. But he'll still be weak from the blood loss. Keep him in bed for a day, at least, and let me know his situation tomorrow."

"Understood, Master Kelsos."

Slowly turning his head, Martel saw a figure in a blue robe placing his hands against his temples. "The headache is the worst part. The boy is lucky I had enough left in me for a spell of this magnitude. I am past exhaustion, Sister Grace, so I shall retire for the night."

"Yes, Master Kelsos. We'll take over."

Martel woke, becoming aware that he had slept. But this was not his bed nor his room. Confusion took hold until he remembered another time waking up like this. He had been sick and taken to the infirmary. Master Kelsos had healed him. Had he contracted consumption again?

Carelessly shifting his body sent sharp reminders to his head. He was lying on his side, and both his stomach and back hurt. He had been stabbed. He tried to speak, but only croaking sounds came out.

It took a few moments before he was noticed. "You're awake! You gave us a terrible fright." The anxious features of Sister Grace looked down on him. "Stars, boy, what happened to you?"

"I'm thirsty," he spoke.

"Of course." She helped him drink a little. "Rest some more. Master Kelsos did what he could – food and sleep will do the rest."

"He is resting!" Sister Grace's voice could be heard.

"Master Kelsos assured me there'd be no harm in talking to the boy. Sister, we wouldn't do this unless it was important." Master Alastair spoke in that strained tone of voice when he felt Martel could do better, but he did not wish to be overly harsh.

"Stand aside." Mistress Juliana was more succinct.

"What's happening?" Martel opened his eyes to see the Master of Elements and the overseer.

"Martel, we must ask you some questions." Master Alastair stepped forward, ignoring an indignant outburst from the nurse. Mistress Juliana stepped around the other side to likewise stand by his bed.

"Alright." Martel felt tired and still thirsty, but his pain had subsided, and his mind seemed to work.

"What happened? Explain as briefly as you can. Don't tire yourself out," Master Alastair said.

"I was at the market. A man stabbed me. I drove him off. That's the last I recall."

"Guards found you and stemmed the bleeding of your wounds before bringing you to the infirmary," came the explanation. "What can you tell us of your attacker?"

"An islander. His buckle was shaped like a serpent." Martel's hand went to his belt, but he found only the hem of his undershirt. "He had a gold dagger." He glanced at the others to see the weapon, still bloodied, held by Master Alastair.

"Good," said the teacher while the overseer nodded. "Islanders are rare. Any distinguishing marks on his body? Many of them have inked skin."

"I burnt a hole in his chest. He ran away, so I guess he lived. But he's got a burn mark the size of my fist." Martel suddenly coughed from all the talking, and Sister Grace hurried to bring him water while sending angry stares at the members of faculty.

"Good," Master Alastair reiterated. "There's bound to be lots of witnesses. This should be enough to go on."

"What's going to happen?" Martel asked, looking up at the old battlement.

"A ward of the Lyceum was attacked. We will respond in kind. But that is not for you to worry. Rest."

"Obviously, you are confined to the infirmary for the time being. Both for the sake of your healing, but also until we can determine you are not in immediate danger. Rest assured, we shall speak further on this. But for now, obey the nurses and Master Kelsos," Mistress Juliana instructed.

"Glad at least one person will listen to me," Sister Grace mumbled.

Martel wanted to ask more, but trying to speak only made him cough, and the man and woman in purple robes left swiftly, leaving him at the mercy of his caretaker, who forced more water down his throat. Giving in to weariness, Martel returned once more to sleep. This time, it took proper hold, none disturbed him, and he did not wake until the next morning.

In the small hours of the night, a call went out across the city. A substantial reward offered by the wizards of the Lyceum for information that pertained to the brawl at the market, where magic had been involved. While some questioned witnesses, others distributed the description of an islander, trawling the taverns of the market district. The news spread across the city, street by street; someone had incurred the wrath of the Lyceum.

Chapter 374: A Day in the Infirmary

A Day in the Infirmary

Martel's thirst and especially his appetite had returned in full force when he woke the next morning. The sun had yet to rise, and it was too early for breakfast to be served, but the nurse on duty gave him water and bread, the latter soaked in a bit of wine to make it softer to chew and more nourishing. A simple meal, but it satiated the gaping hole in his stomach.

Unable to sleep further, but also not allowed to get out of bed, Martel studied his surroundings. Every moment his mind was unoccupied, it tried to think about the attack, so he did his best to come up with something to do. Other patients lay in the nearby beds, though he could not initiate conversation, as they still slept. The ceiling, high up, contained a lot of tiles he might count, which kept him occupied a while. He spotted a tray with different bottles and jars of medicine, entertaining

himself by trying to guess the contents. He wondered how many of them contained ingredients prepared by his hand.

Eventually, the kitchens finished preparing breakfast, and a couple of servants entered the infirmary carrying large trays with bowls of porridge. Still hungry, Martel quickly devoured his portion. He watched the nurse feed those too weak to do so themselves; when he offered to help her with her chores, familiar to him from his own time working in the infirmary, she chastised him and told him to lie back down and rest.

Sometime later, still during the breakfast bell, he heard a commotion by the entrance, but a pillar blocked his view. Shortly after, the reason for the disturbance showed itself as Maximilian strode through the hall. "Nordmark!"

From across the space, the nurse shushed him aggressively.

"Max," Martel replied hoarsely, still feeling the effect of his ordeal on his voice.

The mageknight grabbed the nearby cup and filled it with a pitcher of water, which he handed over. "Apologies for my late appearance, but they would not let you have visitors yesterday. I barely got them to let me just now."

"I was asleep pretty much the whole time anyway," Martel explained. "But I'm glad to see you now." He cast a glance in the direction of the door; he wondered at Eleanor's absence. He could not imagine she had something more pressing to do at this hour, but apparently so.

"They got you good, did they?" Finding a stool for himself, Maximilian sat down by his bedside. "You have an amazing talent for creating a stir, my friend. The whole castle is buzzing with rumours."

Martel gave him a glance. "And you'd like to be the one who can confirm or dismiss them, I'm sure."

Maximilian raised his hands in a shrug. "Obviously, if you were dying, I would be suitably respectful. But I am told you'll make a full recovery in no time, largely thanks to Master Kelsos."

"Someone tried to kill me on the street. Had a golden dagger he stabbed me with. I drove him off with a well-placed spell, though. That's the long and short of it, really."

"Hardly," came an objection. "Common folk do not try to stab mages on a whim, and they certainly do not happen to carry golden weapons with them. Was it an inquisitor? Half the school seems to think so. The rest is betting on the berserker we took down, coming back for his revenge."

"Both parts of the school are equally wrong," Martel was unsure how to explain this without going into excruciating detail, but Maximilian did deserve some manner of answer, lest he might go around thinking he was next. "I have been doing minor tasks in the city. Helping out various places where my gift would be useful. I ran afoul of some people, who thought I was helping their competitor, I guess."

"Minor tasks? Which are worth assassinating a mage over?" Maximilian gave him an incredulous look. "Nobody in Morcaster would be that stupid."

"It was an islander," Martel elaborated. "Pretty new to the city, I suspect. He underestimated me too, or he would have known to protect himself much better." He recalled how Flora had mentioned that the Silver Serpents were low on coin. It was Martel's luck that the assassin had not been decorated in gold from head to toe.

"Well, he'll definitely have underestimated the Lyceum's response. They are scouring the market district, I hear. They will have this fellow soon enough."

A reassuring sentiment, which perhaps had been Maximilian's intent. "Good."

"But Nordmark, if you needed money, why not say so? I would never refuse to lend you what I have?"

"I did. Don't you remember? My brother was sick and needed medicine. I borrowed money from you, Eleanor, and Master Alastair, and it wasn't enough. I didn't have a choice." Maximilian would never understand this; if any in his family were sick, his father would presumably pay Master Kelsos or another healer to deal with it without further thought.

"Ah, yes, I remember," Maximilian replied with an uncertain voice. He cleared his throat. "But you must tell me of the fight itself. I have never gone against anyone armed with a golden weapon. Tell me?"

While thinking of the fight evoked disturbing memories, Martel feared being left alone in the infirmary even more, so he began to relate the tale.

The rest of the morning moved at a snail's pace, with dinner being one of the few breaks in the tedium. Nurses came and went, as did the occasional student who had an injury that required attention, but Martel's limited vantage point did not let him see much. The sisters were too busy with their chores to spend much time chatting with him, and the same applied to the novices doing their month's rotation in the infirmary. Martel did notice that they glanced at him frequently, but if they had questions, they refrained from asking. And still, every time he lacked something to do, his thoughts churned around the memory of the bloodied, golden blade.

Late afternoon finally brought a change. Hearing the door open, Martel broke off counting the tiles in the wall and looked towards the entrance until Eleanor appeared from behind the pillar that obstructed most of his entertainment. She strode towards him with hasty steps, carrying a book under one arm; she used her free hand to grab Martel's and squeezed it. "You seem well. I was uncertain whether to lend much credence to Maximilian's observations. He seemed rather casual about the whole affair."

"For once, he was right. Master Kelsos healed me. I think I'm just being kept here out of precaution. You spoke to Max, then?"

She nodded and sat down on the same stool that his previous visitor used. "We both came this morning to visit you, but the nurse will only allow one of us to enter. So I decided to let him go first and report to me later, allowing me to fetch this in the meantime." She held up her book.

Embarrassed that he had doubted Eleanor's interest in his well-being, Martel was only happy to focus on the tome instead. "Sling, blade, and breaker," he read. "What is it?"

"A book about the three most famous heroes of Archen. It is my sister's favourite, but I have read it to her plenty of times. I do not think she will mind that you borrow it."

A remedy for boredom. Martel had rarely been so grateful in his life. He carefully wiped his hands on his blanket before he accepted the book. "You are a treasure, Eleanor Fontaine."

She smiled. "I am aware. But you can read once I am gone. Your zealous jailer will not allow me to stay long, I suspect, so first, tell me what happened. Maximilian's recounting of your explanation left something to be desired."

Taking a deep breath, Martel began to relate the same as he had done this morning.

When finished, Eleanor gave him a long look. "Martel, I know you get into trouble and usually find your way out of it again, but you must concede, this is different."

Martel was unsure; Tibert, Leatherfist, Duke Cheval, and now the Serpents, it was quite a list of people who had tried to best him. "I know you tend to worry. But I'm trained for trouble, just like you. I'll be fine."

"If Mistress Juliana will ever let you out of here again," she considered. "Tell me you will be careful in the future."

Martel wanted to; his mind formed the words that would reassure her. "Eleanor, I'm going to war. If I can't survive Morcaster, I won't fare better on a battlefield. You'll just have to trust that I can handle myself."

"I am not sure that I do," she muttered. "Enjoy the book. If you are still confined here tomorrow, I shall return for another visit."

"I look forward to it already."

As night-time fell, two cloaked figures made their way through the market district. As they approached an alley, they stopped and turned towards each other. "You are absolutely certain?" Underneath his cape, Alastair wore a surcoat with a leather jerkin underneath. In his hand, he held a staff that had a ruby embedded in the top.

Next to him, Juliana nodded. She wore full armour with a sword by her side and a round shield strapped to one arm. Anyone walking down the street who became aware of them instantly shied away and gave them a wide berth. "All of the inhabitants are islanders. One of them was seen running inside around the time of the attack, and none of them have left since. And the neighbours have heard moans consistent with someone badly injured or in great pain. Lastly, a helpful urchin confirmed that he had seen the serpent buckle on one of them once. There can be no doubt."

"How many?"

"Four, including the one Martel wounded. No guard outside, but probably one on the upper floor, watching the alley. Once we walk around this corner, we will be spotted."

The former battlemage nodded a little and looked at the woman who had served as his protector. "Lead the way."

The pair set into motion, rounding the corner to hurry down the alley. Each unclasped their cloak to let it fall behind. Moving faster with empowered speed, Juliana reached the front door of the building and kicked it in. She entered, Alastair following right behind her. Weapons were drawn, fire erupted, and screams could be heard. The justice of the Lyceum was being meted out.

Chapter 375: Three Spells

Three Spells

His second day in the infirmary, Martel woke early. Not a surprise, considering how much he had slept the previous days. It was still dark outside, so he summoned a flame to hover above his head and picked up Eleanor's book to read. He noticed that the nurse on duty gave him a look with an odd expression, but in the darkness of the hall, he could not interpret it, so he simply continued with reading. It was a fascinating tale of three Archean heroes. The title referred to their specialisations in magic; spellslinger, spellblade, and spellbreaker. Martel had heard tales of the latter, even back home, and the Lyceum had a statue of Atreus the Spellbreaker in its courtyard. But he had not heard of the other two, Nikolaos and Sophia. From what he could tell, a spellslinger used ranged attacks, much like himself, whereas a spellblade fought up close, much like a mageknight. As for the last one, a spellbreaker seemed a curious mix aimed more at defeating enemy magic-wielders than fighting in any particular style.

Although he knew it was childish, Martel could not help but imagine himself and his friends as the trio of heroes. Obviously, he would be the slinger; Eleanor, using a sword, would be the blade, which left Maximilian as the breaker, mostly out of necessity.

But the adventures were grand. Facing maleficars and undead monstrosities, saving people and thwarting villains. Martel could only imagine such a life. He was bound for the next twenty years, and assuming he survived, he imagined that he would have had his fill of danger by that point. Still, it was wonderful to read and imagine.

In the afternoon, the overseer came to visit Martel. She carried a red bundle in her hands and sat down next to him, while he propped himself up against the wall to sit upright.

"I took the liberty of entering your room to fetch your spare robes. The other ones are being mended and will be returned to you soon," Mistress Juliana informed him, handing over the bundle.

At least the blood would not stain much against the red colour. "Thanks." He accepted the clothes and placed them in his lap, feeling awkward. He was only wearing an undershirt besides his pants, making him feel vulnerable under the stern gaze of the overseer.

"As to the man who attacked you, he is dead." She stated this in such a factual tone, Martel did not understand at first. "We believe all of his compatriots are dead as well, though we continue to search for information to be certain."

Martel eagerly wanted to ask questions, namely how it had happened and what made the overseer so sure they had caught the right people in question, but as always, her demeanour discouraged this. The fact that she knew this was the work of the group and not a single person, though, suggested she was right. "That's a relief."

"We could not take any alive for questioning, which leaves us wondering why they targeted you. Any thoughts?"

Plenty, but none that he would share. "I can't say. I've never met any islanders before."

"He came at you with a golden knife, so he knew you to be a mage. He did not attack you at random."

Martel shrugged. "Remember the berserker last year? He wanted to sell me and Maximilian as ingredients to Sindhian alchemists. Could be something similar."

"Yes, the berserker. You do find yourself in trouble quite often. And there is a chance, however slight, that someone escaped our retribution and may be biding their time for revenge. For this and other reasons, I hereby confine you to the Lyceum for the remainder of your studies. You may not under any circumstances, for any reasons, leave the castle. I assume you understand."

"I don't," Martel objected. "You said they are dead. Even if someone survived, if you really killed all their companions, they'll be on the first ship out of here to the Western Isles."

Those stern eyes gave him a piercing look. "It is not only for safety, it is also a punishment. Martel, you have skirted the rules on many occasions. While I have never been presented with irrevocable proof that you should be expelled, you have clearly allowed yourself to become embroiled in all manner of unsavoury business, leading to the inevitable consequences of last Pelday."

"Those are my affairs," Martel replied coldly, for once finding the tenacity to return the overseer's stare. Everything he had done, all of it had been to save those he cared about. Money for Shadi's rent or medicine for John, helping Julia and the other urchins of the street; Martel would not be chastised for that.

"Incorrect. When someone attacks a ward of the Lyceum, the school is forced to respond. We have invested considerable resources in training you, which all nearly went to waste two days ago. And as a response, we have upended a district in Morcaster and killed several people in retribution." Her voice had the exact same cold tone as his. "I will not allow you to leave this castle and continue such reckless behaviour. Like it or not, you are our responsibility and must submit to our authority."

"I have responsibilities of my own," he retorted. "My brother would have died if I didn't get the coin for his medicine. There are street children who have a home now because of me. I will not be confined to this place, nor do I believe you can accomplish this by threatening to expel me. The Imperial administration would not agree to this."

For the longest moment, Mistress Juliana observed him. "So be it. But never come to my door seeking advice or counsel. I have none for you." She stood up and strode away.

Once more dressed in his robes and with coin in his pocket, Martel stood by the threshold of the Lyceum. He ignored the odd looks sent his way and looked out on the square beyond. As long as he was inside, the wards of the castle protected him.

He hesitated. Dreadful images passed through his mind. The islander with a cold look in his eyes, ready to end Martel's life. His own blood on the golden blade. Screams and shouts of people stampeding in panic. The eerie sensation of slowly losing consciousness, inching towards death.

He had stood up to Mistress Juliana for the right to leave the Lyceum. Exercising that right was another matter. But if he was to one day fight in battle surrounded by enemies that all sought his blood, he could not be afraid. Steeling himself, he stepped forward to cross the threshold and leave the school.

Martel's determination to face his fear only went so far. He avoided the main squares of the market district, especially the street where he had been attacked, and took a much longer route through back alleys. While darker and perhaps more ominous, at least he could see others coming from a distance. And despite knowing the threat against him most likely was indeed gone, as Mistress Juliana had declared, he still felt a little relief to reach Julia's insula. Quickly and with curt words, Martel paid the rent for a room. He considered whether to go up and visit her, but she might notice either his frazzled state of mind or that he moved more slowly due to his injuries. The girl was anxious enough; no need to scare her with talk of assassins on the street. Better to save his visit for another time when they might brew potions together.

Leaving the large building, Martel did not set a course back the way he came, but ventured into another part of the district. He still had to pull himself together on occasion; even sticking to the smaller alleys, he sometimes had to cross the larger thoroughfares with their usual crowd of people going in either direction. Once more, his route cost him time, but he finally made it to The Golden Goose.

Inside, the hustle and bustle of the great common room almost made him flinch, but Martel composed himself. He looked around until he spotted two mageknights at a table with three cups. Smiling, he walked over and joined them.

"There he is!" Maximilian raised his drink in greeting.

"I am surprised you are already allowed to leave the infirmary. Not to mention, that you would wish to go out tonight." Eleanor gave him an inquisitive look.

"You cannot keep our boy down," came the boisterous reply from her companion.

Martel gave a shrug. "I figured this was the healing I needed most." *freewe@novel.com*

She raised an eyebrow. "Ale?"

"Friendship," replied the fire acolyte, feeling silly even as he said it, but he was rewarded by a half smile from Eleanor.

"Alright, enough of that!" Maximilian raised his cup further in a gesture for the others to do the same. "A toast! To thwarting dastardly assassins from distant lands!"

"Cheers!"

Chapter 376: On the Nature of Authority

On the Nature of Authority

His evening out with Maximilian and Eleanor did much to uplift Martel's spirit, as intended. He had faced dangers before and come out stronger for it, and the company of his closest friends did much

to chase away the gloom of recent events. Along with the knowledge that his attackers had been slain, Martel felt fine.

His only trouble came at night; his body no longer overwhelmed by the need for rest and recuperation apparently gave room for his mind to fill the nocturnal hours with unpleasant dreams. A golden blade stained by red appeared more than once, and Martel felt tired when the morning bell rang to wake him. His wounds and the large bandage around his torso served as reminders as well, aching at times and making his movements uncomfortable.

All minor inconveniences that he would have to set aside. Being released from the infirmary and having declared himself healthy enough to even venture outside the school, Martel received no further reprieve from his classes. Today was an ordinary school day for him. Fortunately, it was Manday, his preferred day. He had only missed combat training and fire practice; at least the assassin had timed his attack well. And since today offered the last lesson on Tyrian runes before the examination tomorrow, Martel would probably have dragged himself from the infirmary to class, even if still injured.

As their teacher entered and looked at his students sitting by the desks, Master Fenrick did pause to stare at Martel for a short while before moving on. "Tomorrow, you will all demonstrate your skill with the runes." Reactions seemed mixed, mostly uncomfortable or indifferent; only Martel and Eleanor appeared confident. "I hope you all followed my advice from last fiveday and spent time discovering which rune seems most attuned to your magical gift. Armed with that knowledge, and combined with our understanding of the Tyrian tradition, you should be able to activate the symbol. You see, you must stop thinking like an Asterian mage and think as the northerners do when it comes to magic."

Martel straightened up a bit in his seat, paying extra attention.

"You are used to thinking of magic as a force within you that you project outwards. But to Tyrians, magic rests as much in words, including one written down. Therefore, think of this spell as your magic meeting that of the rune. You are not enforcing your magic upon an inanimate object. Instead, the rune is as much part of your magical self as your finger or foot. So when you cast the spell, you are not imposing your magic on something else," Master Fenrick explained. "You are simply reconnecting what should already be connected."

Couched in other words, but more or less what Martel had figured out already. He exchanged looks with Eleanor. This would have saved a lot of trouble and time if Master Fenrick had explained this in the first lesson rather than the last. He wondered if this served any purpose, or the Master of Lore simply enjoyed making his students waste time.

"I want you all to start over, in a sense. Put aside your notes. Draw your preferred rune anew, bearing in mind what I just told you."

A little annoyed, but not enough to start an argument, Martel began making the rune of warmth.

As class ended, Martel glanced towards Maximilian. He felt a pang of guilt for not helping his friend with this particular class, especially since he and Eleanor had dedicated a bell every Soliday towards learning it. Though Eleanor had not invited Maximilian either, so at least they could share the blame. And perhaps it was not too late.

"Max, would you like help with this? I think I figured it out, and I could probably help you with it."

"I fear that would be a waste of both your time and mine," the mageknight replied, unperturbed. "I doubt the praetorians have great need for barbarian scribbles. It would clash with the decor at the Imperial palace. See you at lunch, old boy." Maximilian trotted off, leaving Martel feeling assuaged of his guilt.

Entering the Hall of Elements and seeing the look on Master Alastair's face, Martel suspected another conversation about to happen, which probably would not be resolved as easily as the one with Maximilian.

"Martel, I heard you defied Mistress Juliana."

Using Martel's name – he was mad, the acolyte sensed. But he would not apologise or concede to any wrongdoing, even if it meant an argument. "I did."

"That was some manner of criminal gang that assaulted you. And you have been in trouble before. The berserker, catching a disease from spending time in the copper lanes... We allow our students some leeway, but when taken too far, we also expect those students to obey our authority."

No doubt they did, but besides magic, the Lyceum had taught Martel a lesson concerning that. Authority required either leverage or consent, and the Lyceum had neither with him. "I have also saved a hedge mage from being murdered and brought cures for that same disease to street children, who otherwise would have no hope of finding any."

"It is also for your own protection," Master Alastair stressed.

"Keeping me alive until I am no longer the Lyceum's responsibility, only for a Khivan bullet to find me."

His teacher looked hurt, and Martel regretted his words; perhaps they had sounded harsher than intended. "I tried to avoid that fate for you. I told you to hide your particular gift."

Martel nodded a little, wanting to smooth things over again. "I know. I don't blame you, Master Alastair. Everything has been my choice. Including leaving the castle despite these roaming assassins, coming all the way from the Western Isles just for me."

His jest made a sad smile appear on his teacher's face for a moment. "I don't know. Master Ogion sent you to me because he thought another fire-touched would understand you best, but maybe he sealed your fate in doing so."

"Speculating about it won't change anything. If I'm going to war, I might as well be prepared. How about we stop chattering and begin practising spellwork?" Martel suggested, curling his mouth upwards.

"Well, you've learned to sound like me." Master Alastair took a deep breath. "Let's practise that counterspell."

As the only one of his teachers, Mistress Rana did not show any sign that she even knew about what had happened to Martel. It could be because her attention lay on the clock in his hands, and a scowl threatened to break out on her face. "You have brought it back."

Placing it on the table to free up his arms, Martel afterwards waived his notes around. "I know how long it takes between each step of the fortitude recipe, but I still need the watch to tell me how much time has actually passed."

She gave a sigh. "Very well. Get to it."

Three hours later, in part thanks to his clock, Martel correctly brewed an elixir of fortitude for the first time.

Chapter 377: Wisdom without Knowledge

Wisdom without Knowledge

As Martel did his chores Soliday morning, his mind busied itself with thoughts on today's examination. Master Fenrick had brushed off any questions, claiming it to be a quick and simple process, and since Martel could make the runes work, he should not have anything to worry about. Still, his last such examination had been when he moved from novice to acolyte, where Reynard had tried to sabotage him; Martel had no proof, but he felt certain of it. Though Master Fenrick had never given Martel any reason to doubt his intentions as a teacher, even if he disagreed with his methods. Besides, the Imperial administration wanted Martel to pass. Tonight, Martel would be done with the subject, and he could look forward to next Manday and its replacement – enchantment with Master Jerome.

As the bell rang, Martel gathered with the mageknights outside the classroom where they had lessons with Master Fenrick. Their teacher appeared soon after, nodding and mumbling as he saw them. "Very well. You'll enter one at a time and demonstrate your skill. Once you are finished, make your way to the arena and train as usual." He opened the door and looked over his shoulder as he crossed the threshold. "Elaine, we might as well begin with you."

The girl nearest the door followed after him, closing it behind her. The other students began quiet conversations among each other. "You think it will be difficult?" Martel asked his friends. Despite his considerations this morning, he could not help but feel nervous. Regardless of importance, this was a test, and he did not like those.

"Nordmark, you simply must calm yourself. This little song and dance will be over before you know it, and tonight, we can go out to celebrate," Maximilian replied.

"If you think so little of it, why would it be cause for celebration afterwards?" Eleanor shot him a challenging look.

"Eleanor, I expected more sensitivity from you. Obviously, I propose it purely for our friend Martel's sake. After his recent ordeals, suffering murderers and teachers alike, he could surely benefit from an evening of leisure and pleasure."

"I feel quite certain this proposal was made for your own sake," she retorted.

"You argue, but you do not refuse."

Eleanor shrugged. "Why not? But something other than The Golden Goose. There must be other establishments in Morcaster worthy of our patronage."

Maximilian nodded sagely. "A worthy quest. We shall begin our search tonight."

Martel felt no need for words and simply laughed.

Master Fenrick examined the mageknights first – probably because they had weapons training waiting for them afterwards – which did make Martel feel a little awkward, standing outside in the hallway as the group of students shrank. Eleanor entered as the penultimate acolyte, having elected to keep Martel company for as long as possible. When she emerged soon after, giving him a smile, he felt a little reassured.

"Martel," his teacher called out, and he hurried to step inside. On one desk lay five pieces of blank parchment; another held an additional five, though those sheets each had a rune drawn upon them. Master Fenrick placed a piece of charcoal in his hand. "You can see how the runes look if you need the reminder," he said, gesturing towards one desk. "Now, one after the other, draw them and activate them."

Wanting to start off strong, Martel went for the rune of warmth. He drew it, almost with even lines, and spoke the activating word. Both his hand and the rune glowed with magic. Feeling confident, Martel continued and did the same to the remaining four. Before he knew it, he was done with the examination.

Master Fenrick nodded in approval. "Well done. I figured if any would accomplish this, it would be you."

"Because of my blood?" Martel felt a little uncomfortable at the situation.

"Nonsense. My eyes are as black as they come, and I could learn this. No, you are one of my few students whose interest in magic seems to exceed beyond what it can accomplish for you right now."

Martel stood a little taller hearing that; if he ever were to teach at the Lyceum, his preferred role would definitely be Master of Lore. It made him feel audacious enough to ask a certain question.

"Master, why did you wait until the last lesson when explaining how to approach this exercise? I'm sure everyone could have learnt this if we had known how to think about the magic involved from the start."

"Knowledge without wisdom is more dangerous than ignorance. If I simply gave you all the answer, you might learn this magic, but you would never understand it."

Martel thought about how he and Eleanor had cracked this on their own. "I think I see what you mean. I actually figured this out last fiveday. Well, along with Eleanor. She remembered how the Tyrians think about magic, and we were able to make it work even before you told us how." He knew he was bragging, but he could not help himself.

"And I would venture a guess that your understanding of magic is now greater than if I had simply told you from the start."

Martel met his teacher's piercing eyes, surrounded by spectacles and bushy eyebrows. Perhaps his teaching methods made more sense than Martel had realised. "Yes, master."

With a course completed and a pleasant evening ahead, Martel felt good about the Solday. With a stomach filled from the evening meal, he stood in the entrance hall, waiting for his friends to join him on the night out. A sense of foreboding filled him as he saw Henry the airmage approach and mutually hand over a note. It never turns out well when he received one of those. Nonetheless, Martel unfolded it to read.

Master Martel,

I was grieved to hear of the assault
and pleased to hear of your survival.

I believe myself to be in possession of
personal information regarding those
who viciously attacked you.

If it would benefit you to hear, please
arrange a meeting through usual means.

Your friend the jester from below

Martel squinted at the missive. What was the point of writing on a small scrap of parchment if you were going to be so verbose? Just write a proper letter rather than cram so many letters on so little space.

He had half a mind to ignore the request; he had been assured his attackers were destroyed, and even if any survived, would they truly be so foolish as to try again? He could not imagine what they stood to gain.

On the other hand, the Keeper had always dealt with Martel in a forthright manner, which could not be said for many of the denizens of Morcaster's underworld. This did not feel like a trap, and if the rogue intended to make a request, Martel could always refuse it. Perhaps it was worth hearing him out, in case he did have useful information to share.

A familiar voice calling his name made Martel look up. He smiled seeing his friends approach and crumbled the note together inside a pocket. He would decide later; for now, his time and attention were spoken for.

Chapter 378: Slow Fire

Slow Fire

By the time Martel had to appear in the Circle of Fire again for lessons, his wounds seemed almost healed, and he could shed his bandages. While still sore, his injuries had closed, and only silvery scars remained as visible reminders. Martel once more marvelled at the power of magical healing, even if it also meant a speedy return to his lessons with Moira.

The aged woman strode into the chamber, and her wild eyes fixed on Martel. In her hands, she carried a bundle. "You. Boy. Tell us of the fight. What happened?"

Feeling suddenly awkward with everyone's eyes on him, he cleared his throat. Talking still might be preferable to whatever exercise she could have cooked up for them. "I was walking down the street

at the market when I felt this stabbing pain in my back. Turned out, it was because I had been stabbed."

"Spare us the feeble attempts of humour. What did you do?"

"I turned around and saw my attacker, knife in hand." Martel swallowed, as he felt more and more uncomfortable. The memories were unpleasant, as was the attention. The other students looked at him with detached curiosity, like he was a strange traveller passing them on the street, and the teacher seemed almost gleeful in her expression. "I summoned my shield to protect me."

"What happened then?"

"His knife cut through to stab me again. It was made of gold."

"And?"

"I blasted him away from me with air, to buy time. When he came at me again, I hit him with a ray straight in his chest. He burned and ran away." Martel spoke the final sentences quickly, wanting this to be over with.

Moira finally looked away, towards the other acolytes. "Anyone trying to kill you, who poses a real threat, will use gold. Khivan sharpshooters are issued a golden bullet, in case they can get a mage within their sights."

All the youths looked visibly disturbed. Being in battle sounded dangerous enough; it gave Martel a creeping sensation down his spine to imagine a Khivan musketeer aiming his weapon and launching a projectile that pierced all magic.

"Fortunately, it can't do much to ordinary steel, so I hope you fools are all training diligently with the chain shirts in Master Reynard's class," Moira continued. "Regardless, as demonstrated by the beanstalk here," she continued, nodding at Martel, "other dangers lurk. You may find yourselves attacked by someone with a golden dagger or chains or such, requiring you to fight differently."

Martel frowned at the examples; he had yet to encounter any using chains as a weapon. The only thing that came to mind would be inquisitors, using golden chains to subdue mages... Martel narrowed his eyes, looking at Moira. Perhaps she had one redeeming feature.

The old woman unfolded the bundle in her arms, revealing two daggers with golden blades. Every student immediately looked uncomfortable, Martel especially so. It also made him wonder what had happened to the one he had taken from his attacker; maybe Moira had taken it for her armoury of mage-slaying weapons.

"You'll practise today fighting with these weapons. One student attacks, using only the dagger. The other defends with their magic. It will teach you both how to fight against such weapons, and how to fight should your gifts be disabled." Moira distributed the blades, one for Martel and one for William, and directed them to attack the other two acolytes.

Martel disliked the touch of the weapon, even if the hilt was simply leather; he could practically feel the edges of gold along the steel blade, killing his magic. He also had no experience with knife fighting. Ignoring the discomfort from the metal, Martel ran a finger along the edge; blunted, at least. Taking position the way Eleanor did with her sword, he readied himself to attack Harriet.

After a full bell reminding Martel of being attacked, he decided to meet the Keeper. Just in case the motley-dressed fellow had something worthwhile to relate. But, also just in case, Martel decided for once to bring support. He loathed the idea of putting Maximilian in danger, but it seemed prudent; also, most likely, nothing would happen.

"Max, are you busy tonight?"

"No more than usual. Why?"

"Someone's asked to meet me. Said they have information about the fellow who attacked me," Martel explained.

"I thought they had all been dealt with," the mageknight replied with a frown.

"Yeah, probably. I just figured I'd hear him out. Do you mind coming along? Just have a drink while I talk."

Maximilian shrugged. "Why not? Drinking I can do."

"You're the best."

"That is self-evident."

Martel smiled and parted from his friend, leaving to set up the meeting.

In the evening, Martel arrived at the tavern with his temporary protector in tow. Immediately, he sent out his magic to sense for gold – no dead pockets larger than a few coins. No hidden assassins wielding mage killer blades, it seemed.

With a nod, Maximilian went to the tavernkeeper while Martel found the Keeper at the expected table and approached him.

"You brought company," the jester remarked. "Reasonable, given your ordeal. If you will believe the word of this rogue, I am pleased to see you still among the living."

Martel sat down. "I might believe that, yeah. I'm more interested in what you claim to know about my 'ordeal'."

The Keeper bowed his head. "I shall attempt to be brief."

That, Martel knew, was a lie.

"Given the revenge wrought by the Lyceum, the identity of your attackers is known to you, yes? You are familiar with the Silver Serpents."

"Yes." Martel figured it was best to keep his responses brief.

"Are you aware of why exactly they chose such a foolish decision to attack a mage without the wherewithal to see it through?"

"I rejected their offer."

The Keeper gave half a smile. "You think that spurning their advances enraged them thus, it required fatal retaliation?"

Granted, it did seem like an overreaction. "Why then?"

"Now we approach it, though I fear the explanation takes some winding turns."

Of course it did. "Get to it."

"The Silver Serpents have been – or rather, they were targeting Lady Pearl. Using their gifts of subterfuge to undermine her position, already precarious with the death of her benefactor, the old Lord Thierry."

Martel recalled that Flora had told him as much. "And?"

"As mercenaries of sort, they have – had no agenda of their own besides acquiring money and a foothold in Morcaster. They had no reason to attack Lady Pearl, unless someone paid them. Another Ninth Lord, whose patronage would allow them to establish a base in the city, and who could use them to strike at Lady Pearl from the shadows while feigning ignorance of their actions."

"Claiming no breach of the Pact."

"Indeed. Here's the part that concerns you. Over the last five days, the Night Knives had resumed their offers of selling the services of not one, but two mages. Whether they have acquired another wizard in the company, I cannot say, but as you are known to have previously filled the position, I suspect the Silver Serpents drew their own conclusions and decided to hamstring the competition. Lacking in resources, they could not strike at the compound of the Night Knives, but they could strike you." For once, a serious demeanour lay upon the Keeper's face.

Even with limited information, the jester had it right, Martel realised. He recalled the odd meeting with Flora, her overly friendly behaviour. As the pieces fell into place, a slow fire began burning inside the battlemage.

"Unfortunately, this means you are not necessarily out of danger simply because the Silver Serpents have been removed. The employer has no reason to relent in the attack upon Lady Pearl, and if they still assume you remain an ally of hers or the Night Knives, they might make another attempt on your life. While not even a Ninth Lord would casually risk the wrath of the Lyceum, nothing seems certain anymore."

"Well, thanks for the warning." Perhaps Martel should have listened to Mistress Juliana after all and stayed inside the Lyceum.

"I offer more than that. Do you not see the connection yet? Whoever hired the Silver Serpents, they desire strife between the Nine Lords. It would not have been hard for this band of rogues to carry out the theft of the relic, assuming they were given the necessary resources by their benefactor."

"You want my help. This is still about the relic for you." At last he got to the point.

The Keeper nodded. "If we find it, your role will be known. You will have helped preserve the Pact and thus fall under its protection, same as I. We can unravel this conspiracy, learning the identity of who moves against you, and ensure you are protected. For should they even raise a hand against you, the remaining Nine Lords are bound to move against them immediately."

"Convenient, except the relic is most likely far gone." This whole hunt for the artefact felt like chasing a rabbit.

"Granted, which is why the Friar is willing to sweeten the deal. If you help at least one more time, regardless of the outcome, he swears to protect you against the one institution that even the Lyceum are powerless against."

It took Martel only a moment to understand. "The Inquisition."

"Exactly. As you can imagine, the Friar wields significant influence in the religious organisations and communities of Morcaster."

While the inquisitors most of all seemed like bumbling fools to Martel, they did wield the power to see him executed if they could only come up with sufficient evidence. And they had certainly tried in the past. As much as Martel hesitated to tangle with the Nine Lords, the Friar seemed a monk of his word. And protection against the Inquisition was not something to scoff at. "How am I to help?"

The Keeper smiled, almost relieved. "The celebration at House Thierry. It is in two days. I shall arrange disguises and invitations for us, and you may search around looking for the scent, so to say. Even if the relic is no longer there, its presence might linger, which would at least confirm what little we know."

It seemed dubious, but Martel accepted. And that gave him time to deal with another matter tomorrow. "Let me know the information when you can."

The jester bowed his head deeply and responded with a sly smile. "Agreed."

The two acolytes walked home soon after. "You are quiet," remarked Maximilian. "What did that ill-dressed man tell you?"

"Nothing of importance. Everything is fine." Martel was not going to drag his friend any further into this. Satisfied, the mageknight began humming a tune.

Meanwhile, Martel's mind swirled like a maelstrom around what the Keeper had inadvertently also revealed. Not only had the Silver Serpents targeted Martel because of the Night Knives; as a graduate of the Lyceum, Flora would know how they would react to one of their students being attacked in this manner. She most likely also knew or had guessed that the islanders either surveilled her, him, or both. She set up the meeting and spread those rumours to make Martel bait, and the Serpents had swallowed the hook, thereby causing their own destruction. A deft manoeuvre by the earthmage, removing her rivals while leaving Martel to pay the price; tomorrow, he would collect on that debt.

Chapter 379: Burnout

Burnout

Malday saw the continued training of the fire acolytes in mail armour, and it seemed some of them took it more seriously after yesterday's lecture on golden bullets. Martel, already accustomed to the weight and feel, allowed his mind to dwell on other matters while the staff in his hands parried blows.

Flora needed to pay. Kerra had done the same to him, using his life as bait for a trap, and Martel had been forced to accept it; going to war with one of the Nine Lords as a novice at the time had not seemed feasible, and one way or the other, it would probably have gone poorly for him.

Not that he had given up entirely on the idea of one day repaying Kerra as well.

But Flora first. Martel was not the same naïve and untrained novice anymore. He had far more spells and control of his magic available to him now. Furthermore, he did not fear retaliation. The Night Knives had much fewer resources at their disposal, and Flora herself had shown Martel how to protect himself. To that end, in between classes, he sat down in his room and wrote down a letter detailing various events taking place between him and the Night Knives, making sure to mention Flora by name and profession, including a description of her appearance.

Deployed correctly, that would protect him from further harm inflicted by the Night Knives. That left the question of how to punish the earthmage for her conspiracy.

An attack in return seemed the most obvious answer, but Martel knew that was out of the question. Not due to fear, as Martel felt capable of taking her on in a fight and emerge the victor, but simply because it felt too similar to cold-blooded murder. Even if she survived, she would be horribly maimed and suffer intense pain from his flames. No matter how angry, Martel could not make himself do that just for the sake of vengeance. His mother would be horrified at the thought of her son doing such a thing, and he could imagine how it would have disappointed his father.

Setting the house on fire was another option that did not necessarily involve gruesome mutilation or death. However, it posed other problems. The fire might spread uncontrollably to other houses in the district. Even if Martel assumed he could control it, some unexpected development, such as being forced to defend himself against a regiment of Night Knives streaming out of the burning compound, might prevent him from containing the blaze. Having seen the damage done to the Khivan quarter, Martel would not be responsible for this happening elsewhere. Besides, someone would probably notice him starting the fire, and it was difficult to argue self-defence against a building.

Searching his memory for what he remembered of their headquarters, Martel finally decided on his choice of action during supper. His meal finished, Martel returned to his room briefly. He put the letter he had written earlier into an envelope and wrote the name of Mistress Juliana on the outside, afterwards placing it on his writing desk where it lay easily visible. His preparations done, Martel left the Lyceum.

On the horizon, the sun slowly set. Walking eastwards towards the bridge district, Martel its light behind him and could enjoy its dark yellow rays colouring the path before him. Reaching his destination, he looked upon the house that served as home for the Night Knives. None of them were visible on the street, but he could hear them on the other side of the wall that surrounded their yard. Walking up to the door, Martel gave it a heavy knock.

A warrior in the expected surcoat opened the door. He stared at Martel, either recognising him or simply recognising a wizard on his threshold, leaving him momentarily mute, it seemed.

Not a problem. Martel had come to deliver a message; it only mattered if the man's ears worked. He glanced behind the man to look into the yard and see it as he more or less remembered. "Tell Flora that when she is done putting out the fire, I'll be waiting for her on the other side of the street."

The Night Knife narrowed his eyes. "What are you on about?"

Martel nodded for the man to look over his shoulder; at the same time, he ignited everything within the yard. Crates and barrels with provisions, tents, surcoat, weapons rack and so on. Anything that would burn caught on fire. As the mercenaries shouted and ran around, Martel crossed the street to sit down on a stone and watch the spectacle through the open door. All in all, the conflagration was limited, and even Flora should have enough water magic to put it out.

His vantage point did not allow him to witness as the latter happened, but he felt the flames disappearing and saw black smoke rise above the garden wall. Moments later, Flora marched out towards him, the soldiers under her command following some distance behind. "That was months' worth of supplies!"

Martel stood up to face her, enjoying that the height difference allowed him to look down. "What I took from you can be replaced with coin. You tried to take my life from me, Flora. Be grateful."

"I have done no such thing! I would never be so foolish!"

"No, not directly. But you lay all the groundwork for the Silver Serpents to turn their daggers on me. You wanted them destroyed, and you were happy for me to die in the process." He stared at her in anger.

"If this were true, the Lyceum would have torched our home by now."

"Spare me. I did not come to hear excuses, but to deliver two messages. You have received the first. The second is this." He made sure to keep his eyes locked on hers. "I have written a letter describing my work with the Night Knives. But I added how I now fear for my life, and that I expect your mercenary band will seek to kill me after I defied you at the Four Flagon Tavern. Being true, the Lyceum should have no difficulty verifying these events. I made sure to describe you in excruciating detail, Flora. If anything happens to me, that letter will find its way to the overseer and unleash the same Nether-born storm upon your organisation as revisited upon the Silver Serpents. So you better pray that no further attempts on my life take place."

She opened her mouth, but no words came, and Martel knew he had beaten her. He turned around demonstratively and began walking away from the earthmage and her warriors, his magic sense extending behind him; at any sign of danger, he was ready to summon his shield or react with a counterspell. Nothing happened. Peacefully, Martel left the bridge district.

Chapter 380: Grey Brothers

Grey Brothers

Moira's lessons on Manday saw a repeat of practising with or against golden weapons. It was not terribly different compared to fighting an opponent armed with an ordinary dagger. It really only required two adjustments. The shield spell being ineffective, you had to keep distance to your enemy; and you had to direct your spells elsewhere than the torso, otherwise the easiest place to land a spell, as the gold on the dagger might intercept and nullify the attack.

Having faced plenty of enemies using gold against him, who had also tried their best to kill him, Martel found it rather easy to duel against the comparatively timid fire acolytes. He knew to direct his spells at other parts of the body and otherwise continued to avoid and dodge the blade. If he had been given a staff to fight with, the latter would not even be necessary; he felt confident he could simply knock the weapon out of the other person's hand.

That said, Martel never saw a reason to complain if his lessons in fire magic were easy. At least he could move around and bury his attacks, unlike previous fivedays, mindlessly blasting fire rays into the wall. Even if he had to admit, when faced with the islander on the street, the spell had certainly become more potent.

A message yesterday from the Keeper had told Martel of the plan for tonight; or at least, the appointed hour of their departure. Martel did not know much else other than their destination had to be the residence of House Thierry, where a celebration was taking place, which they would attend in disguises. While not particularly comfortable with sneaking around this way, Martel was mostly concerned about that last point. Knowing the attire favoured by the Keeper, Martel dared not guess what he considered a suitable disguise.

Leaving the Lyceum, Martel glanced around at the square. The usual vendors crowded at the edges, and the occasional citizen or cart crossed it. No sign of his companion for the evening.

Resigned to waiting, Martel leaned against the castle wall, idly glancing in different directions. A cart loaded with barrels and driven by a monk approached, and to his surprise, the wagon halted in front of him. Looking at the driver, he recognised the Keeper in a completely ordinary, undyed robe of grey wool.

"Climb aboard, good master. In the back, if you please." Martel followed the instructions, making his way up between the barrels. "There's a robe for you as well, though you may wait with changing clothes until we are out of sight. Just in case any of your acquaintances from your school wonders why you are getting undressed in the back of a cart driven by a monk." The Keeper laughed to himself and set the cart into motion.

"We are going to a celebration at a noble family's house, right? Won't two monks stick out?"

"Not among the other dozen," his driver snorted. "One of the little brats in their family has had a naming ceremony today. They did it this morning at the convent of the Grey Brothers, who are therefore invited to the feast. You and I are bringing a gift of wine for the celebration, giving us cause to enter. Once inside, we can search around without anyone questioning our presence."

Grey Brothers – a rather practical name for a religious group. Apparently, women of the cloth were more imaginative when it came to names. Though given how wizards did it, Martel was in no position to criticise. "You mean I'll search around," he corrected the Keeper.

"Yes, yes, you're the ship bringing us ashore, and I'm just a sailor."

The Lyceum disappearing in the distance behind them, Martel pulled his red robe off to put his disguise on. The home of House Thierry awaited.

Driving through the nobles' quarter, they eventually reached a mansion that looked like most of them; certainly grand and opulent compared to any building in the districts south of here, but not on the scale of the home belonging to the duke of Cheval. They went to the backyard, where servants could receive the barrels of wine brought for the celebration. After making sure his red robes were well concealed, Martel and the Keeper left the cart and entered the stately home.

Arriving through the back, Martel did not have the same experience as when he attended the celebrations for solstice in this quarter. Instead of statues and painted walls, they passed through the servants' quarters. The smell of food from the kitchens filled the air; as for the scent of magic, nothing piqued Martel's sense.

"Any suggestion on where to go?" Martel asked, making sure his grey hood covered as much of his face as possible.

"I've never been here before, but a few things tend to be the same in all these houses. Servants downstairs, masters upstairs. If the relic is here, I assume they'd keep it close."

"So, we try to make our way up without anyone noticing us," the wizard muttered. Should someone like a guard stop them, he hoped that the Keeper would be able to spin a lie on the spot; that seemed like something in his repertoire. Though come to think of it, when that had happened outside of Lady Pearl's bedroom to Martel, the Keeper had not been much help.

As it turned out, despite any claimed similarities, finding a route that led them to the upper floors without attracting attention proved a challenge. Guests, guards, and servants filled most of the hallways. The only saving grace proved to be that none seemed interested in talking to a pair of monks; nobody approached or spoke to them as they filed through the corridors.

Martel suddenly stopped, reaching out to grab his companion's arm. It almost felt like his skin tingled. Amidst the countless sources of heat from the many people or even just trays of cooked meat being carried around, Martel sensed something else.

"What is it?"

"I can't say. But there's something here."

"Which direction?"

"I can't say that either," Martel admitted. He looked down the hallway, where sounds emanated. "Could be that way."

"I doubt they'd hide stolen goods in their great hall, but you're the one with the nose."

"I'm not a dog. And I'm not sure either."

"Well, let's find out." They set into motion, approaching the centre of the festivities.

The celebration was in full bloom. Guests in silk and jewellery ate and drank while music played. All that resembled any other feast Martel had attended on marbled floors, though he did notice something different. A troupe of dancing girls, dressed as modestly as those working The River Pearl, who entertained the crowd of nobles with their moves.

As enticing as they looked, Martel felt too uncomfortable to pay them heed, wearing a stranger's robe while inside a place most likely hostile to him. If someone from House Thierry had worked

with the Silver Serpents to steal the relic, they might have known or even ordered the attempt on his life. The sooner this was over, the better. Martel extended his magic to learn what he could.

Countless flashes of heat met him. To be expected in a hall full of people. But something else. Intangible. Martel glanced around, trying to learn what he could. Finally, his eyes fell upon a woman.

She was pale as snow, accentuated by dark red lips and other cosmetics, presumably. Like any guest, she wore expensive clothes and plenty of jewels. She even looked familiar to Martel, though he could not place her. His interest was not drawn by her face, at any rate, but the necklace around her neck and the sash around her waist. They both shimmered with power.

Most guests wore gold; both Martel's sight and his sense of magic told him as much. This woman wore enchanted items, though he could not discern their purpose.

As if his eyes had drawn hers, she looked up and stared straight at Martel. Feeling caught, he quickly turned around and approached the Keeper, who had strayed a little to watch the dancing show. "Aren't you supposed to be a monk?" Martel asked in chastisement.

The rogue shrugged. "Monks are human too."

The wizard chose to ignore that. "The pale woman behind us, do you know her?"

The Keeper gave a discreet glance. "Certainly. The Comtesse. The Ninth Lord claiming ownership of this quarter. I suppose it's not strange she would appear. That does confirm her ties to House Thierry. Best you avoid her – she might recognise you from the Undercroft."

Perhaps too late for that. Regardless, her artefacts were not the relic; given how strongly he had felt its presence at the shrine, Martel assumed that he would have recognised it by now, should it be in the great hall. "Nothing here. Let's look elsewhere."

The Keeper nodded, and they quickly left the celebration. "Let's go towards the entrance hall. There should be stairs around there leading up. If need be, I'll create a distraction."

Having no better plan, Martel followed, and the pair of fake monks walked through the mansion towards the entrance hall. Even at this hour, new guests still arrived.

Martel felt it. The first inkling came so subtly, he barely noticed. But every step towards the great doors leading to the front yard reinforced it. Like the scent of lilies in his nose, except he sensed it through his magic. The relic.