

Firebrand 381

Chapter 381: Treasure Hunt

Treasure Hunt

Unlike hearing a sound, Martel could not tell the point of origin when feeling the relic. It was a sensation that slowly built up inside of him, but he had to guess the direction; he only knew he had chosen right when the sensation increased and grew stronger while moving. This led to the odd spectacle of two monks, one trailing the other, walking in awkward circles around the entrance hall. Fortunately, neither guests nor guards questioned them, and eventually, Martel could discern that they had to go outside.

The flow of arriving celebrants had slowed to a trickle, and the two monks had no trouble making their way outside, even against the stream. Looking at the front yard, they saw a variety of carriages, all waiting for when their owners would leave the feast. Martel frowned a bit, wondering if the relic might be in someone's wagon; that felt a bit too unlikely, though.

Perhaps it had simply been transported through here? He knew from the shrine that it left a lingering presence long after its removal. On the other hand, the artefact had also rested in that place for years, decades, perhaps centuries; perhaps that had an effect, building up said presence over time. If so, the relic simply moving through the place should not leave sufficient trace for Martel to notice; this was guesswork, admittedly, but he was beginning to feel convinced that Stars-damned hand was actually somewhere on the premises. The question was where exactly.

Martel tried to think where one might feasibly hide a stolen relic. Unfortunately, he had no experience nor ability to really imagine it. Buried somewhere in the dirt? Unlikely. The area was open; easy for someone to spot a thief digging a hole, even at night. While the servants had their quarters in the back of the estate, the stables lay in front along with some huts that he assumed provided living quarters for the stable hands. Further beyond, stretching down the sides of the main building, lay orchards and gardens; plenty of area to search.

"Well?" asked the Keeper after a lengthy silence where the mage had not made any movement either.

"Hold your horses," Martel grumbled. Before he began combing through the area, he still hoped to get a better feel for his goal. The sensation of the relic tickled him, like the sense of something sweet teasing his nostrils, yet he could not track it.

Horses. Stables. Martel looked towards the buildings. It seemed a profane place to leave a holy object, but obviously, the thief had little reverence for such matters. Ignoring the odd looks from the various drivers by the carriages, Martel walked towards the stables.

The smell of equine creatures, already present outside, became pungent. It was dark inside, and Martel almost summoned a flame on reflex before he remembered his disguise.

"In here?" his companion said questioningly. "I suppose the less likely, the better when it comes to hiding places. Still, it takes audacity to hide something of such value in so lowly a location."

Squinting and waiting as his eyes adjusted to the dark, Martel walked down the aisle between the stalls. Most of them contained a horse, but one in the back stood empty, which almost seemed to call to him. Martel was grateful to be drawn towards the one unoccupied; he had little experience with horses, which seemed skittish creatures to him, in turn making him nervous.

Martel entered the empty stall. He felt the relic more strongly than ever, but he saw no places to hide it. Hay covered the floor, which seemed the only option. He crouched down and pushed it aside, revealing the dirt beneath. The Keeper followed suit, staring at the ground. "Fascinating."

"You have a lot of opinions for someone contributing absolutely nothing." Using his body and sleeves to create as much cover as possible, Martel summoned a tiny flame to provide light. The dirt had been disturbed. Recently, even. "I don't believe it." After all this time, they were too late. This had to be some kind of cosmic jest.

"Someone else beat us to it."

"How?" Martel felt frustration rising. He did not even care about the bloody relic, but being denied this close to the goal felt like the Stars were mocking him.

"Lady Pearl and her henchwomen have the same knowledge as us. We're not the only ones making use of this night," the Keeper speculated.

That meant they had arrived too late by a matter of hours, perhaps even minutes. Extinguishing his light, Martel stood up. He could abandon the search, but something in him wanted resolution. Answers. He looked around. Was every stable hand celebrating as well? If one of them had been present, they might have seen who took the relic. Else the drivers outside ought to have noticed someone enter.

Making sure he had not missed anything, Martel extended his sense of magic around him. Something grabbed his attention. Plenty of heat inside the stable, with all the animals making it their home; each of the horses felt like a lighthouse in the dark. Yet unless four-legged beasts had learned to climb a ladder, someone human lay on the hayloft. The source of warmth was certainly too big to be a cat or the like.

The ladder up to the hayloft stood by the entrance. Looking in that direction, up towards the dark, Martel spoke out. "I see you up there. Come down. We wish to talk to you." Hopefully this particular stable hand had enough reverence for men of the cloth to tell them what they needed.

If confused, the Keeper quickly adapted. "In Sol's name, we are pious men who require your aid." Martel hoped that, whoever was up there, they had not spotted him summoning a flame, or else their little charade would already be unmasked.

A moment passed. Martel began walking towards the ladder, wondering if he would have to climb up; if their bad luck continued, it was some stableboy snoring in the hay, having missed everything that happened below them. They would have to question the drivers instead, in that case.

A shape jumped down from the loft. Flickering light from the yard outside briefly illuminated the person before he ran out of the entrance. By his clothes and age, Martel would indeed have taken him to be a stableboy; by his facial features, the wizard recognised him to be an islander. With a curse, Martel set into pursuit.

Chapter 382: Wheeling and Dealing

Wheeling and Dealing

With empowered speed, Martel ran after the fleeing islander. He swore at his grey robe, longer than he was accustomed to, forcing him to pull it up in order to run. Plenty of drivers in the yard laughed seeing a monk hike up his clothes to sprint like a madman in pursuit of a stableboy. Laughter only increased as a second monk appeared from the stable, likewise in pursuit, though he quickly fell behind.

The islander was fast. Thankfully, the streets of the nobles' quarter were well lit, making it easy for Martel to see his quarry. Yet even with magical strength in his legs, empowerment never being Martel's strong suit, the mage did not easily catch up in a matter of moments as he might have expected. But he did get closer and closer, diminishing the distance between them, and he had other tricks up his grey sleeve.

A blast of air roared forward down the street, pushing the islander to trip. Yet in a fluid movement, displaying a feat of acrobatics, he rolled forward and regained his footing, barely losing time. Next, he turned down an alley, away from the streetlamps with their magical illumination.

Still in pursuit, Martel made the same turn. Darkness did not help his prey to hide; the islander's heat shone like a bonfire in the night to Martel's magical sight. He sent a pulse of power through the earth to spike up, creating an obstacle ahead. It seemed that he timed it poorly, for the youth managed to leap over it just in time, continuing his flight unhindered.

Swearing, Martel decided enough was enough. He disliked using fire, attracting such attention in the night, but he would not be made a fool of any longer. Fortunately, running down this narrow alley worked in the mage's favour. Ahead, he raised a wall of fire that barred all escape.

The fugitive immediately halted, and his head whipped in every direction. It did not matter; the flames rose taller than any could jump, and the surrounding house walls were bare, allowing no ledge or the like that might provide a steppingstone. He was trapped.

"Enough," Martel called out, slowing down as he approached. "It should be obvious I can kill you with ease. Sit down, hands behind your back, and I won't hurt you." That would also let him dismiss his spell, which otherwise would burn more of his spellpower to maintain.

The islander turned around and complied. More than that, once on the ground, he practically prostrated himself before Martel. "Please, great wizard, don't kill me! I am no threat."

Releasing his flame wall, Martel continued to walk forward, feeling most of all awkward. He felt both a spark of pity and a shred of embarrassment for the young man, humbling himself. "I already said I wouldn't. Just answer my questions."

Looking up, he wore an expression of fear. "My brethren will not forgive me if I reveal their secrets. Please, great wizard, I know you may kill me for such insolence, but they'd do worse to me, and my family afterwards." He spoke with a clear accent, and Martel guessed that he had not been that long in Aster.

"In that case, you've nothing to fear. You are one of the Silver Serpents, right?" It would be one Nether-damned coincidence if not, but still, not every islander in Morcaster would necessarily belong to that faction.

The youth licked his lips, but gave no reply.

"Your brethren are dead. They can't hurt you." Just as the acolyte said it, he realised that if the young fellow did not know, he was probably not involved in the plot to kill Martel.

"Dead? How?"

"They angered the wizards of this city. So I suggest you answer my questions."

"I did wonder why I had not heard from them... Spirits, I am alone in this city of stone!" He gave an almost theatrical wail. Martel felt even more embarrassed on his behalf.

"Look, tell me what I want to know. What were you doing in that house, dressed as a stableboy?"

"I worked there, master, as part of the plan. I'm young and new to the brotherhood, without ink yet. So I was well-suited to watch the stolen life-force that we hid."

The relic, Martel assumed. "But why? What on earth was gained by stealing it in the first place, not to mention hiding it inside a stable?"

"Forgive me, master, they did not tell me. Only that I was to expect those who wield the life-force to come looking for this item, and report back once it was found." Various expressions flittered across the islander's face, but most of them within the range of fear.

So it was a setup, of sorts. The Serpents had expected someone to eventually track down and find the relic. If you left stolen goods in the house of another with the intention that they should be found, the only motive would be to frame them for the crime.

Martel exhaled. Another labyrinth of schemes between the Nine Lords that did not concern him. Regarding those people, he only cared about his deal with the Friar, which would grant him sanctuary from their machinations. "So, who took the relic?"

"A young woman, master, dressed most provocatively. She had something in her hand that led her to the buried life-force."

The mage frowned. Some kind of artefact that could find other artefacts? Or a rune token. Martel knew of one rune that could detect magic; perhaps a skilled skáld could inscribe a stone to act much like his own sense of magic. But who was the woman?

"Fancy meeting you here, wizard." A female voice reached him from behind.

Martel groaned even before he turned around.

Ruby smiled at him. In her hand, she held what he assumed to be a rune token. Though she wore practical clothes, trousers and tunic; nothing that seemed provocative.

"I'm not the lucky finder, if that's what you're wondering, though I do possess it now. Hope you enjoyed the show my girls put on. Sadly, my face is a bit too well-known in these parts, so I couldn't attend the party myself."

The troupe of dancing girls. If Martel had paid attention and looked at them, he might have recognised them from the Pearl. The Stars were really having fun with him tonight. He could also tell she did not lie about the artefact; he felt its presence stronger than ever. She had it on her somewhere.

"My sweet Amber noticed the little Serpent while getting the relic, of course, and I was wondering how to best get him out of there. Imagine my surprise when a wall of flames goes up. I knew it was my favourite wizard." Her condescending smile somehow became even more patronising.

"Wait, you want him? Why? You have the relic."

"Martel, my dear, I don't care about that. I only wanted to find it to learn who took it. We found out about these islanders a while back, but we've yet to know who hired them. Discovering that is my mission – this decrepit old hand will make a nice decoration on my desk, I guess, but that's about it."

"If you don't care about it, give it back to the Friar. If someone's after your mistress, you don't want the Pact to be in question," he reasoned. He glanced down at the islander, just to make sure the fellow did not try to make a run for it while they talked.

"I could, but why give it away for free? I'll make you a deal. The hand for your prisoner."

Martel blinked. He supposed that technically, the islander was his captive. He had not considered what to do with him. He could hand him over to the Lyceum; that seemed like the closest thing to justice. But they would probably give him the same treatment as the other Silver Serpents, which made Martel feel queasy. The youth had not been part of the plot to kill him, as far as he could tell, and the unfortunate soul looked to be no older than Martel. Handing him over for execution felt wrong.

But letting Ruby have him might not be better. "So you can torture him for information?"

"So dramatic!" She laughed. "The boy's brotherhood is destroyed. His former employer will be hunting him down to silence him, and we can guess how the Lyceum will treat him. Lady Pearl offers him protection." Ruby looked down at the islander. "If you want to live, you go with me."

Martel glanced from his prisoner to the woman. His head was spinning. He loathed these conspiracies and secrets, plans within plans, enemies at all sides. If this got him out, so be it. "Fine. Let me have the relic. You can take him."

Ruby smiled and pulled out a bundle of cloth kept in her belt behind her back. She tossed it to Martel. "Come along, lad. You'll find the Pearl to be a welcoming home, where a new family awaits you. Convenient, now that you have lost all ties to any others." She winked at Martel. "Just how we like them."

He shivered from discomfort, feeling almost dirty either from her words or from doing this trade. But he had the relic. Its power practically shone at him even through the cloth. A severed hand, something that should be disturbing to him, and yet it gave him the impression of inhaling the scent of wildflowers in a meadow.

"See you next time." Ruby smiled at him and left. The islander scrambled to get on his feet and follow.

Distracted, Martel did not bother to reply. Such strange magic in his grip. It seemed a pity to hand it over, though he had no actual use for it. And if it protected him from the Nine Lords, all the better.

The Keeper's voice reached him, sounding out of breath. "What did I miss?"

A cart drove through the nobles' quarter of Morcaster in the quiet hours of the night. It carried a monk in grey robes and a wizard in red; Martel had changed clothes as soon as they were out of sight from the estate of House Thierry.

"I'll be damned," the Keeper finally said, glancing at the object in Martel's lap. "I honestly had no expectations we'd find it. I figured it had been months and that thing was long gone."

"Well, they wanted us to find it. Though you hid your lack of enthusiasm well."

"If the Pact dies, so do I. I'm rather motivated to protect it."

"What? How's that?"

"Plenty of lowlifes in this city that would love to cut my throat," the Keeper admitted. "The reasons for it are irrelevant. But the Pact protects me. If anybody tried, the Nine Lords would eviscerate them. And now that protection extends to you."

That reminded Martel of something. "So, all my arrangements with the Friar will stand?"

"Of course. He is a man who places extreme importance on oaths and promises."

"Because you agreed that I could study the relic before handing it over."

The Keeper sat silent for a moment. "I did, didn't I. Pray tell, when you say study, you mean...?"

"Nothing wild. I just want to show it to my teacher. He is a lore master. We might learn something."

His companion exhaled. "Very well. Keep it for now. Let's meet at our usual spot Solday evening, and you can give it to me."

"Agreed."

"But that hunk of flesh better be in one piece. I haven't gone through all of this just to lose that damnable hand again."

Martel raised both of his own still-attached appendages to protest the insinuation. "No harm will come to it, of course not." Probably not. The cart rumbled on.

Back in his chamber, Martel made sure the door was bolted shut before he placed the relic in the bottom of his drawer. So much trouble caused by this object; mostly by people who had no understanding of its real power. Islanders, Night Knives, Ruby and Lady Pearl, the Friar, and others, no doubt, all of them pursuing it for one reason or another.

Well, it was over. Martel had done his part and gained the protection of the Pact. Perhaps he could now be afforded some peace from all the endless schemes of Morcaster's underworld, allowing him to finish his education. He had about six months until his graduation when he would bid Morcaster farewell, maybe forever. Lying down to fall asleep, Martel wondered whether that thought should make him thrilled or sad.

Not that he could do anything about it. His time at the Lyceum was coming to an end; in half a year, he would be conscripted to a legion and sent to fight the wars of the Empire. In half a year, he would be a battlemage.

Chapter 383: An Enchanting Day

An Enchanting Day

Martel slept soundly after the events at House Thierry, chasing the islander thief and the relic through the streets, and he woke feeling rested. It felt good to be done with the hunt for the artefact and that his efforts were rewarded with satisfaction. Of course, gaining the protection of the Pact was no meagre prize either.

There was the nagging thought that somebody had hired the Silver Serpents to kill him, and Martel did not know who; he could have wrung the truth out of the islander who stole the hand, but Martel had traded the wretch to Ruby for the relic. While she would thus learn who employed the islander, Martel could not trust her to tell him the truth; she was more liable to manipulate him. He would have to put his faith in the Pact to protect him and otherwise withdraw from the affairs of the Nine Lords, making it clear he was not a player in their games. His own threats towards Flora and the Night Knives would also help to keep him safe, given that they would not dare violate the Pact or cross the Lyceum.

The hand lay wrapped in cloth in one of his drawers; Martel felt almost paranoid leaving it, and he checked his door several times to make sure it was locked, the gold inside protecting it from tampering. Even outside his room, he could sense its strange, magical presence, if only faintly. At the same time, it was only felt as a pleasant sensation, like the scent of a warm oatcake; nothing that suggested anything out of the ordinary lay in his room. And as he ate breakfast, his thoughts soon turned to the new subject he would begin studying today, causing excitement to grow. This Manday, he had his first lesson in enchantment with Master Jerome.

Together with the mageknights, Martel stood in the workshops. He had done so many times before, usually with other students, waiting for their work assignment. Today would be different. Master Jerome soon appeared, accompanied by a well-nourished youth wearing the same workmen's clothes as the artificer did. "You all know my apprentice, Rufus."

Martel did not. Sure, he had seen the fellow around, but he assumed he was either a servant or just another student. Though it made sense that Master Jerome would have an apprentice, just like Mistress Rana did.

"When it comes to enchantment, its power and endurance is pretty much determined by the strength of your spell. That means you won't get many results from doing anything other than your specialty. I'm a metalmage, so I forge. A watermage working with another wizard can enchant water to create potions. Rufus is skilled with magic of the body, like most of you, and he uses it to enchant materials harvested from living things. Leather, cloth, and the like. Did a good job on those robes of yours." The artificer nodded at Martel, wearing his fireproof red garments. "He'll take all of you mageknights to his domain and instruct you."

Not Martel. Did this mean he would get personal instruction from Master Jerome? Probably the artificer would have other work requiring his attention for the bell, but Martel still looked forward

to the opportunity to learn directly from him in solitude. Even if it was something as mundane as how to enchant a heating stone for use in a hot bath. Come to think of it, that actually seemed really useful.

"As for you, boy, come with me." Master Jerome led him down a familiar path to the laboratory, where Martel had often laboured to make ink. "I have prepared the materials for your lesson in here. It seemed appropriate, and you won't be disturbed."

Martel looked around. He recognised most of the equipment from his usual work, but in addition, he saw different little pots and containers. A strange smell, almost like rotten eggs, lay in the air.

"Now, there's a few useful things that you can enchant with fire. You enjoy the warm baths in the basement of your tower, I take it." Master Jerome smiled.

Martel's exact thought. He nodded.

The artificer's expression faltered. "Unfortunately, we don't teach much enchanting to fire acolytes anymore. Most of them are excused to focus on their spellcraft instead. You're the first fire acolyte I've had since becoming artificer."

"So, you will be teaching me enchanting?" Martel asked, confused.

"Master Fenrick said he believed you had the wits to pick it up fast enough to make it worthwhile. So there's one thing you'll focus on learning."

"What is it?"

His teacher took a small pot of clay and removed the lid. From a larger container, he picked up a ladle, scooped some of the contents up, and let it fall into the pot. "This is a mixture of pitch and oil, along with a few other things. Sulphur, if your nose hasn't already told you. It is very flammable." He glanced at Martel's robes. "Good thing you're dressed for the occasion."

"What am I to do with it?"

"Now, enchantment is more complicated than simply casting a spell like you're used to. You still want the effect of the spell, but not in the immediate, temporary way. Rather, you want to infuse the material with the magic of your spellwork, weaving it together to make it permanent. In this case, you want to fill this oily substance with fire magic, but without actually setting it on fire."

"Alright..."

Martel's scepticism must have been obvious in either his voice or on his face, as Master Jerome looked almost apologetic. "I know, it's no easy task. But if you get it right and take care when you close the lid on the pot, you should have what's essentially a fire bolt in a jar. It'll stay dormant until you throw it, breaking the pot and releasing flaming oil all over your target."

The acolyte finally caught on. "This is a weapon."

The artificer nodded. "Yes. Due to how volatile the mixture is, it's not recommended for anyone other than battlemages. At least you can handle the fire if it breaks early. So you shouldn't run around making these and giving them away. Not that I'd expect that from you, but just that you've been warned."

"Don't worry. I'm not eager to walk around and distribute explosive magic to people."

Master Jerome gave half a smile. "Good. Now, fire is not my strong suit, and I'd never be able to get the hang of this, but I am good at enchantment in general. And perhaps you can track down Master Alastair and ask him for help if need be. He's usually the mage who enchants fire for me when needed."

Since they had class once a five day, it would not be hard to find the Master of Elements. Martel decided to wait a bit, though; he wanted to finish learning the counterspell first before getting distracted during his lessons with Master Alastair.

"Alright, when it comes to enchantment, it's much like casting a spell, as I said, except your speed is reverse. Normally, the faster you cast magic, the better. Now, you want as slow as possible. Letting your magic leak into the material without doing it so fast that the spell is actually released. Understood?"

In theory. Whether Martel could do it was another matter. But he had learnt Sindhian alchemy and Tyrian runes; he could do this as well. Taking a deep breath, Martel took the small pot with the fiery substance within and began carefully releasing his magic.

As decided earlier, Martel focused purely on his counterspell during his lesson with Master Alastair. Even if he assumed Flora had been scared off, it seemed wisest to master the spell sooner rather than later. He could always seek advice on how to make the fire pots afterwards; he also wanted to give enchanting a few tries on his own before he went looking for counsel.

The rest of his afternoon passed in the other laboratory at the Lyceum, learning potions with Mistress Rana. He began a new recipe, thankfully simpler than the elixir of fortitude; furthermore, she no longer complained about him bringing his clock with him.

Although a full day of new magic, Martel was not done. He only had tonight before handing back the relic. When evening came, he knocked on the door to Master Fenrick's chambers.

"Enter."

Martel stepped inside, bundle in hand.

"Miss my classes already?" The bespectacled teacher smiled before he suddenly frowned. "What's that you got in your hands?"

Holding the relic, even swathed in fabric, Martel felt its presence strongly. It only increased as he unfolded the cloth. "I did a favour for a clergyman. He allowed me to borrow this. I thought you might want to take a closer look."

A severed hand, nonetheless showing no signs of decay, appeared. Master Fenrick widened his eyes, pushing his glasses further up his nose. "Boy, is that the hand of Saint Laurentius?"

"Aye, master." Martel grinned, enjoying his teacher's reaction.

"I'm not sure I want to know how this came about," he mumbled. "Well, I won't look for scratches on a gift plough. Place it there." He removed a pile of parchments and books from his desk.

"Remarkable. No signs of age despite being centuries old."

Martel placed the hand on the table. "I did promise we'd do it no harm."

Master Fenrick laughed a little. "I'd be surprised if we could. You feel its presence, I assume? This is magic beyond us."

"You mean, magic of the soul? Or mind?" The acolyte thought back on his lessons about Archeon mages and their mastery of those arts.

"Not even that. I've dealt with Archeon artefacts, and even their magic pales in comparison to this. No, my boy, somehow, this hand is infused with power we cannot even begin to understand." He pointed at a feather pen. "Write down what I tell you."

Martel smiled and took hold of the writing instrument, finding some parchment as well. "Yes, master."

Meanwhile, his teacher stretched out his own hand towards the artefact, and a pulse of magic could be felt. "Write this down. Immune to Asterian magic, much like if the hand was still part of a living creature." As Martel did so, Master Fenrick rummaged around until he found a piece of parchment with a rune upon it, which he placed by the hand. "*Her*." The symbol activated, but nothing else happened. The hand remained motionless. "Immunity to Tyrian runes as well. At least, those containing physical magic."

Dutifully, Martel scribbled down every word spoken.

"I wonder what effect gold might have..." Master Fenrick searched through his drawers. Finally, he dug out the golden chain that Martel recalled he once brought to class. The Master of Lore wrapped the chain around the hand and fingers; the acolyte shuddered a little at seeing him pick up and handle the severed limb. "Do you feel any difference in the artefact's presence?"

Martel reached out with his magic. "Maybe? Hard for me to tell."

"I thought I did, but aye, not easy to know. If that were the case, though, if gold has less of a suppressing effect on this kind of power, that would be a great discovery." Master Fenrick scratched his beard. "Most interesting. Are you writing this down?"

"Yes, master." He hurried to comply.

Chapter 384: Handing It Over

Handing It Over

Solday morning, Martel made his way to the workshops for his recurring chore. At this point, as he and the other students arrived, they did not wait for Master Jerome to appear and assign them work. Everyone simply moved to the same station they had commanded last, which for Martel meant the laboratory.

As he entered, he noticed that the tools and ingredients for the fire pots still lay on one of the worktables; Master Jerome had told him not to bother removing them when he finished his lesson yesterday. He had not made much progress; either he failed to infuse the mixture with magic, meaning nothing happened, or he did it too fast, making it catch on fire before he could close the jar and interrupt the ignition process.

He was just about to start his work when Master Jerome entered. "Not so fast, my young spark. No ink-making for you."

"Alright." Martel stood up again. "Where should I go?"

"Here." The artificer grinned seeing the acolyte's confusion, but his expression quickly became serious again. "Until you've learned how to enchant those little fire spitters, I want you to use this bell on Soldays to practice." He gestured towards the table with the pitch and oil.

"Really?" It did not sound like the Lyceum to grant Martel deliverance from his chores; or rather, it did not sound like the headmaster, and given their last conversation, he did not imagine the overseer was inclined to grant him favours either.

"Yes. Once you're on the field, there might come a moment where you've exhausted your magic and you need a last spell. Having one in a jar will be handy. So a little more time for you to practise this craft won't hurt." He gave a wry smile. "I've got other workers who can make ink."

Martel felt a little touched. As with Master Alastair teaching him extra lessons, it was good to know that people cared about him. "Thank you."

The artificer inclined his head in reply. "Now, get to it. Enchantment won't learn itself."

In the afternoon, Martel met with Eleanor as they had agreed to continue their studies into Tyrian runes, searching for something to help her sister. For now, it was slow and laborious work pouring through tomes, noting mentions and descriptions of any magic that seemed to affect the mind.

Looking up from his current book, Martel glanced over at Eleanor. "I am happy to keep investigating, but wouldn't it be easier if we found a bard first, who could tell us about the magic? Rather than us searching in the dark."

"I thought of that."

Of course she had.

"Of those I could find in Morcaster, none had such an ability. They both claimed it was beyond them. Skálds with such power rarely leave Tyria, they claimed, and I would have to send for them specifically. Which would require quite a sum of gold that my father must pay."

"And he won't pay unless you can convince him it's worth it."

She nodded a little. "I asked Master Fenrick as well, but he didn't know for certain if skálds can heal the mind the way they can confuse it. Which is not sufficient for my father. Hence our continued reading."

Accepting this, Martel returned his attention to his book, turning the next leaf.

Morning and afternoon duties complete, a final obligation awaited Martel in the evening. With a familiar bundle under his arm, walking swiftly to escape the strange looks that the presence of the artefact seemed to draw, Martel left the Lyceum.

The Keeper awaited him at their usual spot, and Martel handed over the relic. He felt odd for a moment that nobody in the tavern seemed interested at all until he remembered that to these people, it was just some dirty rags. And if they knew what lay inside, he doubted they would be interested

in a severed hand. So strange to feel its presence so powerfully while those around him were clueless.

"Thanks. Just to avoid the trouble that revealing a disembodied limb might cause, I won't unpack it here, but I trust our five-fingered friend has not been damaged?"

"I don't think we could if we wanted to. Not that we tried, obviously," Martel quickly added. "You'll find it as good as new – for a hand three centuries old, anyway."

The Keeper gave a satisfied smile. "Good. Whatever anybody was trying to accomplish, I believe they have been thwarted. The Pact remains in effect as ever, protecting my humble self and now also you. The Friar will spread the word immediately. Every Ninth Lord is responsible for protecting you on their territory. Any thug giving you trouble, they won't live to regret it."

Reassuring, though Martel could have used that last fiveday. At least now, between the Lyceum and the Pact, he ought to be safe. "But you still don't know who employed the Silver Serpents to steal it in the first place, right? What's to stop them from trying again? You don't even know for sure what they were trying to accomplish."

"Searching for that answer will keep me busy," the Keeper admitted. "But such plots are not easily instigated. The resources spent to acquire the wardstone, bringing the islanders here and supplying them, along with actually paying them, it all adds up. Perhaps not a huge cost for a Ninth Lord to bear, but with nothing to show for it, they might be a little more cautious about trying again."

"Ruby is probably going to find out," the mage considered. She had quite the advantage, given she had someone to question. "You may want to follow her trail rather than seek your own."

"Perhaps. But that's my headache. I won't trouble you further on this," the jester-like fellow said.

Martel got the sense this was not spoken out of concern for his time, but rather, as a manner of concluding their business. Which suited him fine. "I suppose we're done, in that case. Enjoy your hand."

"Pleasure working with you, Master Martel."

Chapter 385: Golden Memories

Golden Memories

In the Circle of Fire, the acolytes continued practising fighting with and against gold-edged blades. By now, the other students seemed to have gotten the grasp of it as well; Martel figured they would move on to something else soon, so he tried to enjoy the easy lessons while he could. Intercepting a fire bolt with his weapon, Martel smiled as he disabled the attack and lunged forward afterwards, though he did not connect. He could not quite see how he would ever need the skill to fight with a golden weapon; it was only useful against another mage, and even if Martel found himself in a situation where his own magic could not be used, he still needed to actually own such a mage killing blade to make use of it.

His line of thoughts stirred a memory. Perhaps because he had been so focused on first Flora and afterwards finding the relic, but now he recalled holding such a weapon before his lessons with Moira; the dead feeling of the knife in his hand, like holding a cold and limp fish. The events of his attack at the market lay hazy in his mind; he could not recall the timespan between the guards arriving and finding himself in a bed at the Lyceum. Yet the actual fight remained clear to him;

getting stabbed and retaliating with a spell to grievously wound the islander. After that... he picked up the weapon, Martel finally remembered. What had happened to it?

Searching his memories, he recalled seeing it in Master Alastair's hand, but nothing more. He would have to ask his teacher. After all, that weapon belonged to him as spoils of war; and if he ever did find himself in a situation where such a blade would be useful, now was the time to get it back.

Someone gave him an elbow, a little more forcefully than necessary to gain his attention. "If you can pull your head out of the clouds, hand it over," Harriet told him with a mocking tone.

Looking around, Martel saw Moira waiting for him to return the blade in his hand; she wore a disdainful smirk, typical for her. Martel gave the weapon back and quickly left the Circle of Fire, counting down the days until he was done with this school.

Once done with lessons, Martel went out. It was already late, so he would have to be quick about his visits and get back. But the next days would be equally busy with classes, and he did not want to postpone seeing Sparrow any longer. He was responsible for her magical education, sparse as it was; he did not want her to feel neglected.

On the way, he could also do a quick stop at Julia's. Martel had originally wanted to do some potions with Julia – he imagined she could use more sleep elixirs – but he lacked the time for the lengthy brewing process, so it would have to wait. Just a brief visit to ensure she was fine, lacking nothing; he had a handful of coins he could spare her if need be.

His intentions were for naught, as nobody answered his knock. Probably, she was out getting water or food, taking advantage of the darkness to avoid people. He would have to come back later this fiveday, Martel reasoned, turning around to leave the insula again.

Sparrow bit her lower lip in concentration as she slowly raised a mound of earth towards her outstretched hand. It lasted five breaths before it finally crumbled.

"Well done." Martel smiled and nodded to her as she looked at him proudly.

"I kept it going longer than yesterday, I'm sure of it," she claimed.

"I have no doubt. And it's a good exercise, even if it seems like you're just doing the same. You need to train up your spellpower."

"What's that?"

"It's like energy, but for spells. You know how you get tired after running, or you don't have much energy when you haven't eaten in a long while?"

"I can go without eating for a very long time," Sparrow assured him. "I'll still be faster than any old dumb guard running around in armour."

"Alright, I'm sure. My point is, you need to be rested to run well. But also, the more you practise running, the faster and longer you can run."

"What's that got to do with magic?"

"Well, casting spells also makes you tired. So you need to rest, sleep, to regain your strength. But you can also train your magical muscles, so to say, letting you cast more and more spells before you need to rest," Martel explained.

"Magical muscles," she giggled.

"Yes, 'spellpower' does sound better. Anyway, it's important that you practise how long you can keep a spell going. It'll train up your endurance. So, keep doing simple things like this, count your breaths, and measure your improvement."

"Yes, master wizard," Sparrow said, making a mocking salute like she might have seen a guardsman do to his princeps.

"Alright, you're having fun, but this next bit is important. So pay good attention."

She grew quiet and sat down on some debris in the alley behind the gang's house.

Martel frowned a bit; how to best explain this so she understood? "So, horses are obedient animals. If you ride them hard enough, they'll run themselves to death. Magic can do the same to us."

"What, magic rides us like a horse?"

Maybe not the best imagery to use. "Sort of. If we keep using magic, we'll get tired. Exhausted. Need to rest. But you might be tempted to keep going, cast more spells. Doing this can leave you unconscious, or even worse." Martel recalled his own experience atop the belltower of the Khivan temple, overextending his spellwork to tame the blaze. "So if you get really tired, stop with the magic and rest. Especially if you throw up or something like that." Like Martel after summoning the lightning bolt at the Imperial palace.

"Fine. I don't want to throw up anyway. Waste of food."

Well, if it got the girl to take his warning seriously, Martel would not argue. "Exactly. So always stop when you feel tired."

"What about new spells though? Can you teach me something else?"

"There's one I got my eye on, but I think we'll save that for next time." Martel looked up at the night sky; the sun had long since set, leaving the full moon as its replacement. "I need to get home now. But I'll be back when I can."

"Thanks." Sparrow smiled at him before she got up and ran back inside.

Chapter 386: Between Golden and Silvery Light

Between Golden and Silvery Light

As with his visits to the Circle of Fire, Martel likewise looked forward to the end of his hours spent in the gymnasium. Not that Reynard harassed him the way Moira did, at least not anymore, but Martel remembered how the Master of War had treated him initially and also tried to prevent him from becoming an acolyte.

The other three fire acolytes stood gathered in an uneven circle, and Martel joined them. Even if hardly on friendly terms, they were all in the same boat during these lessons, and they sometimes

needed to work together. Best to put up at least a facade of camaraderie, or failing that, avoid antagonising them.

"Mistress Moira is here." William gave a barely perceptible nod towards the stands, where the old woman had taken a seat. Always a foreboding sight.

"Wonder what she's plotting now?" Harriet asked.

"You think we can stop training in these?" Edward shook his arms, jangling the chain links of his armour.

"Keep dreaming," she snorted.

Reynard entered, carrying a bundle of swords in his arms. Taking a guess from recent lessons in the Circle of Fire, Martel extended his magic towards the weapons and felt a chill. While hard to tell by sight, Martel's other sense revealed that the blades were edged with gold.

The Master of War distributed the weapons to some of the mageknights while directing the rest of them to spar against each other. "As for you four, pick one of the fire runts and train against them," he told the acolytes armed with gold.

Alain stepped towards Martel, who inclined his head in recognition of the challenge and raised his staff. The warrior's sword struck out, forcing Martel to parry before he quickly released a fire bolt in retaliation. It struck his opponent's physical shield, accomplishing nothing.

Further blows, whether metal or magic, were exchanged back and forth in quick succession. Unable to use his magical shield, and clearly inferior when it came to weaponry, Martel was steadily pushed back, always retreating while trying to release a spell. But Alain's sword and shield both protected him, and even landing a fire bolt on his legs did limited damage thanks to his armour.

Martel's defences finally failed, and he received a slap across the face with the flat of the blade. Had Alain used the edge, and assuming it was not blunted, it would have sliced Martel's cheek open. Even now, it still stung, and the pain made his anger flare up. But rather than let it take over, Martel used the burst of emotion to spur his spellpower. As he continued to retreat, he sent his magic through the earth to spike the ground up in front of Alain. The mageknight, advancing to press his advantage, almost stumbled and had to correct his footing. Quickly following up, Martel sent a blast of air against his opponent's feet. It worked better than another fire bolt; his balance already precarious, Alain fell to the ground.

A moment passed before the mageknight relaxed rather than raise his weapons or seek to get back on his feet. "Nicely done."

Martel extended a hand to help the other student stand up. "You got me first."

Alain smiled. "Now I know where to watch out. Or rather, because I remember you doing such tricks before in the Chamber of Earth, you reminded me what to be careful of. Again?"

Martel nodded and took a defensive stance.

Lessons done, Martel went to his room before supper and surveyed his wealth. Thanks to his regular payment for work done in the apothecary, he had a tidy sum of more than thirty silver pieces, even after paying Julia's rent the other day. He could send another silver letter to his mother; she had not

asked for money nor indicated any need for it, but Martel assumed that they could use it. It might buy a few luxuries for his siblings, such as finer fabric for clothes; or should one of them fall ill again, they would have the coin to buy a remedy immediately.

Martel would delay for now, though, just in case he found himself suddenly needing the money himself. He also wanted to get more alchemical supplies to keep practising his few recipes. Once he had forty or fifty eagles, he could consider sending half. It had been a while since he received a letter from home; he might as well wait for that and read their news before posting a letter back along with the coin.

In the late hours of the night, a drunkard stumbled through the streets in the harbour district. He left the wide streets, full of life and light, to cut a path through the narrow alleyways. Although the moon was full, it was a cloudy sky, obscuring its shine. The intoxicated man – a day-labourer by his clothes – halted his progress several times to lean against the nearest house wall and gather his strength before continuing.

At one of these stops, something caught his attention. Squinting his eyes and peering into the dark, he noticed another person lying flat on their back in the alley. "Didn't make it home, eh?" He laughed. "Got to know your limits." With a second look, his eyes glanced over the garments of the supine man, who wore broad linen trousers, an open shirt, and a headband typical of Sindhian sailors. "Enjoying shore-leave a bit too much?"

The drunk chuckled to himself before it seemed another thought struck him. Looking in either direction of the otherwise empty alleyway, he bent down and began rifling through the sailor's pockets. Pulling out a few pennies, he smiled to himself.

The cloud obscuring the moon chose that moment to abscond, and a few stubborn rays of light made their way in between the houses to illuminate the narrow street. They revealed a sight that made the workman's smile freeze.

The sailor's expression likewise seemed frozen with open eyes that stared without ever seeing. Furthermore, where his shirt opened up, a symbol could be seen branded into his flesh.

Chapter 387: Quandaries at the Quay

Quandaries at the Quay

It took half a day for the news to reach the Lyceum, disseminating around the dinner tables at noon. Thus, in between his lessons in the Circle of Fire, Martel had time to ponder the matter. As he recalled, the Friar had promised to get a patrol of inquisitors into the catacombs, dealing with the maleficar and his enslaved jinni. Either the Friar had failed to uphold his promise, or the inquisitors had failed. Given what Martel knew of the former's insistence on oaths and the latter's incompetence, he suspected the second reason.

Martel knew this was not a problem he could solve. He had tried to face what he assumed to be the jinni in service to the maleficar, aided by two mageknights, and come up short.

But he was curious. If nothing else, assuming the Friar was true to his word, what had happened in the catacombs? Martel had not met with the old monk since he agreed to have the inquisitors

investigate, so there had not been an opportunity to follow up. While Martel had no desire to venture into the sepulchre below Morcaster again, he did want to know what the inquisitors had found. Given they lacked his knowledge of magic and related sensibility, they might have missed something.

That in mind, Martel decided to take a look at the docks in person. Rumours were exactly that, rumours, and highly unreliable. While he had lost his appetite for seeing the catacombs again, there was nothing wrong with a little jaunt to the harbour.

Before that, though, he needed to arrange a meeting with the Friar. As he did not know where to find the old clergyman, Martel went for the second-best choice and decided to get hold of the Keeper. Which meant the old method of buying an oatcake from the girl selling them on the square of the Lyceum.

As Martel went to her and asked for a cake, she squinted her eyes even as she handed him one. "Is this because you're hungry or because you want to see the guy? Because he told me not to expect you anymore."

"Both, really. Tell him I'll meet him tonight, last bell." Martel took a bite of his cake and turned back, returning to the Lyceum for his second lesson of the day.

Late afternoon, the young fire acolyte took a stroll to the harbour. Passing through the crowds of the market was unpleasant, but Martel kept his wits about him and continued. Nobody flashed a golden weapon at him, and he made it to the docks safely.

It took some questioning to send him in the right direction; not all the local people were thrilled to discuss the return of the maleficar in their own district, especially not to someone clad as a wizard. Yet that same authority compelled others to tell Martel what they knew, and he continued on.

Reaching the area, he saw no sign of inquisitors, which he had half expected; they must have finished their investigation already. Probably not much to discover; the closer Martel came, the less people seemed willing to discuss the event, and he doubted the maleficar had left many clues behind.

He assumed the rogue sorcerer had moved through the sewers; since they discharged their contents into the sea, there would be several tunnels in the district. Striking his victim at the docks also fit the previous pattern of choosing a different area each time.

Wanting to learn everything he could, however little it might be, Martel crossed the docks until he found someone he recognised. "Mouse," he called out.

The small girl broke into a run before she stopped, turned around, and walked back towards him. "Sorry. Force of habit."

"Have you heard about what happened here last night?"

"Of course, everyone has. But people die all the time." She shrugged. "If you let that keep you from putting coin in your hand, your stomach won't thank you later."

Martel exhaled, digesting the implications of such a statement from so young a child – he was not sure he would ever get used to it. "What can you tell me about it?"

"Dead fellow was a Sindhian sailor. They found him in an alley, pretty close to the pier. Inquisitors carried his body away."

So a victim unfamiliar with the city; that made sense. "Anybody say anything about who did it?"

Mouse shook her head. "What I heard, some drunk fellow practically fell over the corpse when stumbling home. Someone said he was already cold by then, so he must have been dead a while."

"Thanks." That was probably all Martel would learn. He took out a few pennies and handed them over.

Mouse gave him a broad smile and took off.

Walking to his meeting with the Keeper, a question rumbled around Martel's mind. Attacking a victim in an alley was bold; different from previous attempts taking place indoors, out of sight. But more than that, it seemed the maleficar had been able to do his misdeed in peace. Yet the body had been left in the open to be discovered.

It was not a long distance from the alley to the closest pier. Dumping the corpse in the water would have gone a long way towards concealing the crime, assuming this could be done without anyone seeing. Alternatively, although Martel did not know where the sewer entrances lay in the harbour, that could provide another opportunity to dispose of the body.

Circumstances might have prevented the maleficar from doing this, but another explanation fit with Martel's previous instinct; if the maleficar lacked the magic to prevent Sparrow from fleeing, he might also lack the magic to hoist a heavy body and drag it around. Though it clashed with the idea of a dangerous sorcerer conjuring jinn for their own defence. As much as Martel felt he was on to something, he could not actually make sense of it.

Entering the tavern, Martel quickly looked around; although their business was concluded, the Keeper had felt intrigued enough to show. Martel knew that feeling.

"My fire-clad friend," the rogue declared as Martel approached. "I confess my curiosity as to the reason for this get-together."

The wizard sat down. "You've heard about the maleficar."

"Just the rumours flying around. I cannot provide you with more information than what any man knows if that's your intention."

"No. I want to meet the Friar to discuss it."

The Keeper raised an eyebrow. "Unexpected. You understand he is not a glovemaker you may call upon at your leisure? He owes you much, but those debts are repaid in the favours he promised. He's not at your beck and call."

"I don't presume that either," Martel declared impatiently. "And he did make a promise in regard to this. Seeing as the maleficar is still active, I can only assume it went poorly. I should like to hear from the man himself what happened."

The Keeper blew out his breath. "Very well. I'll let him know. But it's up to him whether he'll meet you. Don't contact me again about this – I won't be able to sway him one way or the other."

"Fine." Martel got up and left again.

"Wizards – always in a rush." The jester took a deep draught from his mug.

Chapter 388: The Consumption of Desires

The Consumption of Desires

Manday saw the resumption of Martel's efforts in learning how to enchant fire pots. He made little progress, if any, but it did not trouble him; learning Sindhian alchemy and Tyrian runes had been slow as well, and this time, he was practising the kind of magic that came most naturally to him. Sometimes too naturally; quite often, the liquid caught on fire before he could seal it away. Had his robes not been fire-proof, Martel would have left the workshops in his shirt and trousers.

The obvious place to ask for help was with Master Alastair, but as Martel entered the Hall of Elements, his mind was not on enchantment, but on lessons from previous days. Specifically, fighting with golden weapons. Not that he had any intention of going up against other spellcasters, but the return of the maleficar made Martel consider that perhaps owning such a weapon would be best. And since one had been in his possession recently, he knew where to find one; furthermore, he felt it only right that the blade be restored to him.

"Master Alastair, before we begin, there's something on my mind."

"What is it?"

"The day I was attacked, I took a gold-edged dagger from the assailant. Last I remember, I believe I saw it in your hand, though the events of the day are blurry in my mind."

His teacher nodded. "Correct. I took possession of the blade. The Lyceum has a small armoury of these weapons, to which it has been added. We use them for training acolytes against such blades."

Martel was aware; since he had not seen that particular dagger during training, it seemed that the school had enough for its purpose. "Could it be returned to me? I would say I won that on fair terms. I could even argue that it cost me quite some pain and difficulty."

Master Alistair narrowed his eyes. "And why exactly do you feel the need to have it returned?"

Martel tried to give his most casual shrug. "No particular reason other than what I said. I took that weapon from my attacker. It's mine, as spoils of war."

"You may be joining the legions, but that doesn't make you a mercenary," the Master of Elements said sternly. "And considering the danger such a weapon poses, the Lyceum has no interest in seeing golden blades disseminated among the students. Furthermore, knowing your propensity for getting into trouble, along with, might I add, your reckless behaviour, I cannot in good conscience hand it over to you."

Martel opened his mouth to argue further, but a gesture from his teacher silenced him.

"No more. This bell is to train you in elemental spells, not bicker back and forth. Get ready!" Without further warning, a bolt of water flew straight at Martel, traversing the handful of yards between master and student.

Reacting on instinct, a shield of fire appeared in front of the acolyte, absorbing the attack.

Master Alistair nodded in approval. "Again!"

Martel deflected another attack. By the bell's end, he felt his spellpower drained, along with his mind; he only remembered to ask about help with enchantment long after he had left the Hall of Elements. Well, he could do so next Manday; no harm in trying a few more lessons on his own. For now, alchemy awaited him.

Martel walked to his next appointment with a spring in his step, despite his weariness; thanks to using the Khivan clock, he had cracked the obstacle posed by the elixir of fortitude, and a new recipe ought to be his soon. Given how useful other potions had proven to be, such as the sleeping draught, he was curious to know what came next. Mistress Rana had not given him any list of ingredients to memorise as usual.

Appearing in the laboratory, he saw the reagents laid out on the table as on previous occasions. His teacher looked up at him. "You recognise them all?"

Martel did, indicating this with a nod. Different herbs and what looked to be the claws of a cat; as they had not been ground into powder, he guessed that they would simply be boiled along with the liquid, much like bones for soup.

"This is for a simple potion that you might remember, even if you did not help in the final process. You helped prepare it for me one tiresome afternoon."

Martel frowned, not recognising what she referred to, and he felt a little bewildered, as Mistress Rana rarely acted coy in this manner.

"This potion will cure consumption."

His eyes widened a little. He finally recalled what she meant. That dreadful disease, which he himself had contracted, as had several of the children in Weasel's gang; only Mistress Rana's intervention and donation of cures had seen them all healed.

"This malady is among the most contagious. Fortunately, from what we can tell, it is not always lethal. Many may suffer from this disease without necessarily dying. On the other hand, this allows it to spread easily, claiming victims where it can. Thus, while this potion has a very specific and limited use, you will be glad to have learned it, should the need ever arise."

Martel agreed, and he gladly set to work.

After a day of learning, Martel felt spent; furthermore, there was nothing obvious for him to practise his magic on. Until Master Alistair gave new instructions, he had no elemental spells that needed honing; he could attempt learning more Tyrian runes, but few remained possible for an Asterian to learn, and he might as well delay until tomorrow when he would delve into the topic with Eleanor.

Allowing himself to relax, his thoughts returned to the matter of the mage killer blade. The Lyceum had no right to confiscate it. In Martel's eyes, the weapon belonged to him. Of course, the school clearly had the opposite view, and if Martel took it back, he might be accused of theft. While he seemed safe from expulsion for pretty much any reason other than perhaps outright assault upon his

teachers or fellow students, he had already pushed Mistress Juliana by refusing her command to stay on school grounds.

The question was, if he simply took the dagger and this was discovered, would she begin to look for creative ways to punish him? It might be foolish to inflame the dormant conflict between him and the overseer, considering he had no urgent need of the weapon.

Still, Martel had bled for that blade. It had been forged with the explicit purpose of killing him and those like him; no better way to defy such intentions than by taking possession of the weapon, especially after winning it in combat. Everyone always took things from Martel, demanding his magic, skill, or coin; he had earned the right to take back what was his and keep it. He was not necessarily going to push this matter too far, but nor would he be deterred so easily from regaining what was rightfully his. He would have to think of a way to get it back.

Chapter 389: Enchanted Hours

Enchanted Hours

Martel stared at the black liquid inside the jar, barely visible, and entirely hidden once he placed the lid back on. Yet he could feel it, coiled like a viper about to attack. It longed for fire, to burst into flames. Martel let his magic sense wash over the oily substance, connecting to it. This part was easy, especially after his work with Sindhian and Tyrian magic. The difficult part, as usual, was control. Feeding fire magic through the bridge to settle in the liquid without actually igniting it.

Whenever Martel tried, one of two things happened. The oil caught fire immediately, or it never did, no matter how much Martel shook the pot around. The idea was that the viscous liquid would be at the bursting point, ready to ignite once Martel removed the lid on the jar and allowed air to flow inside.

Grumbling to himself, Martel was tempted to set it aside and spend the bell relaxing. He could cast fire bolt spells all day; did he really need to have another in a jar?

His annoyance lasted a few moments longer before he sighed, knowing such feelings were childish. Master Jerome was right. Martel had known magical exhaustion on more than one occasion, leaving him entirely unable to conjure the slightest effect. If that happened again while surrounded by enemies – and the battlefield did seem a location that would fulfil those criteria – having a spell in reserve might save his life. Pulling himself together, Martel gave it another try.

Afterwards, Martel had some time before his afternoon meeting with Eleanor, and he decided to make the most of it. He had not seen Julia in a long time; he expected she would be home in the middle of the day, and she could probably use some money for supplies. Of course, Martel knew that she most likely stole what she needed, so she did not depend on his charity as such; but if he gave her the coins for it, she would not take the risk of stealing, and some poor trader would not lose their goods.

Swiftly, Martel traversed the market to reach the harbour district and Julia's insula. As he knocked on her door, his assumption was proven correct; the girl was home and opened the door for him to enter.

"Sorry it's been a while. I came by the other day, but you weren't home."

"Had to fetch water." She glanced at the jar in the room, nearly full.

"Of course. Here's a few eagles for you." Martel extended his hand to let some coins drop into hers.
"Do you need more sleeping draughts?"

"I wouldn't mind another."

He nodded. "I don't have time or reagents with me, but I'll bring some for my next visit, and we can make you more."

"Don't rush. There's lots of the blue-cloaked people about." She looked at him with her big eyes; her expression seemed vacant, where he might have expected fear or concern. She was a strange child, but given her experiences, Martel could not fault her for that.

"Yes. They're hunting the evil sorcerer that plagues Morcaster. He struck again, down by the piers. You should avoid that area."

"I will. I don't want them to see me."

Martel considered the maleficar a far greater threat than the inquisitors, but he could why she might think otherwise. "Don't worry. They seem to have left again. I went by and saw no sign of them. It's the evil mage you should be on the lookout to avoid."

"What about the blue man who hunts me?"

He frowned. "Who?"

"He's one of them inquisitors. But he travels alone. His eyes are hazy, and he can't really speak. He got my parents. He's always trying to get me." She suddenly shivered.

Martel recalled that Julia had spoken of such a fellow, long ago, but there had been no sign of him. "I've not noticed anybody like that." It sounded like this zealot was perhaps near-sighted; Martel doubted such an inquisitor posed much threat to anyone, or that anyone actually hunted Julia. "I'll let you know if I see him, but there's no inquisitors around. You're safe."

"Alright."

Her voice, devoid of emotion, made it impossible for Martel to tell whether she believed him or simply indulged him. He gave her the most reassuring smile he could.

After hastening back, Martel met up with Eleanor in the library. It was very satisfying to open the door to the upper floors himself; he placed his hand on the inscribed rune of attraction, spoke the activating word, and the door clung to his fingers as he pulled back.

Upstairs, Eleanor had already collected some manuscripts and texts that might yield insight into Tyrian runes, in particular if they possessed healing powers. For a bell, they combed through travel tales, treatises on magic, and anything else they could find. Eleanor had received a list from Master Fenrick of the most likely candidates worth reading, but as the bell rang, they could only cross out a few entries.

Nothing so far had related to their specific search, but Martel had come across more than a few interesting fragments, discussing runes that might be possible for him to cast. He made a note of

each detailing what he had learned; while the books never delved into the actual symbols or commanding words, just knowing of their existence would be a starting point.

"I'm sorry we didn't find anything," Martel said as they began clearing the table. "But there's still lots of titles left on Master Fenrick's list."

"I am certainly not giving up yet. Will I see you next Soliday?"

"Count on it."

Leaving the library to go back to his room took Martel through the entrance hall, where a message waited for him.

You have your meeting.

Tomorrow evening, seventh bell.

Shrine of Saint Laurentius.

The Keeper had done his part. And the meeting place was well chosen; it would remind the Friar of what Martel had done for him. Tomorrow, the young wizard would demand an explanation from the old monk as to why the maleficar still roamed the streets and tunnels of Morcaster with impunity.

Chapter 390: The Right Hound

The Right Hound

Pelday saw their last lessons practising with golden weapons in the Circle of Fire; as their class came to an end, Moira announced as much. "That's enough fooling around from you lot. If this won't teach you how to survive an attack with gold, you'll just have to die."

Encouraging as always.

"Glunday, we'll move on. Not that I expect much from you." She collected the gold-edged daggers from the students.

Martel noticed that none of them were his; he had not seen it once, in fact. It would be nice to know where his dagger was held. "Those weapons aren't kept in the armoury, are they?"

"What's it to you, boy?" she snapped.

Martel doubted she would be more amenable to his request for the return of the blade than Master Alastair had been. Better to give her a reason that aligned with her thinking. "In case we want to train with them on our own time. To get better."

"You got plenty of other spells you could hone," she retorted.

"Well, one of those daggers is mine. It seems only fair I have access to it if I want to practise," Martel argued.

His teacher narrowed her eyes, turning her gaze from wild to calculating. "I did see a new one. That's yours? From the attack?"

"It is. I should like access to it, so I can keep practising. In case someone else makes an attempt on my life using the same means." Martel figured that was reasonable; nobody could fault him for being eager to improve his fighting skills against gold-bladed weapons.

Moira laughed, looking and sounding like the old crone she was. Without further words, she turned around and left.

As evening fell, Martel made his way north towards the temple district. Although he had only been there once before, he mostly recalled the path to the shrine of Saint Laurentius; a few questions to the locals helped him with the last few steps.

Inside, the temple looked the same as his previous visit, with the stairs to the crypt taking up the centre. A few other people could be seen, either the local priests or worshippers. Squinting in the dark interior, Martel glanced around until he recognised the Friar.

The old monk sat on a bench to the side, and he gestured for the wizard to join him. "I was surprised to hear of your request for a meeting, as I thought our business concluded. But hearing the rumours in town, I suppose I can guess."

"You said that you'd send a group of inquisitors to search the catacombs. They didn't meet with success, I gather."

"I fear not. They searched that unholy place as best they could, but they encountered nothing but the simple undead creatures that plague the tombs. No sign of a maleficar nor that strange spirit you spoke of."

"Did they search everywhere?"

"The catacombs are a labyrinth, by design. Nor is the necromancy an accident. Who knows what riches lie in the deepest tombs of that great crypt? To keep it that way, our predecessors made the place impossible to navigate, and let the dead rise again to guard it."

"Did they bring a mage?" Martel only realised now he should have mentioned this originally; a wizard would be able to track the jinni much like he had done with the relic.

The Friar nodded. "They did. She claimed that the necromantic energies made it impossible to discern any other magic."

"That's not true," Martel exclaimed. The presence of the jinni had been unmistakeable. "If she had caught a trace of the spirit, she would have known immediately. It felt nothing like the simple skeletons that wander the tombs."

"That may be the case for you, since you know the scent already, so to say," the Friar retorted. "Regardless, the inquisitors found nothing, nor did the mage."

"I didn't lie about this," the young wizard protested.

"Of course not. You could have asked me for all kinds of favours, yet you chose this. But either the maleficar has absconded from the tombs, or he hides so deep inside, we cannot hope to find his trail in the twisting and turning hallways of that dark sepulchre."

Disappointment filled Martel. He knew already that this had failed, else the maleficar would not have been free to strike at the harbour the other night; still, it stung to think that nothing had come of all his troubles.

"Of course, another mage might succeed where my contact failed. One who already has the scent of this strange creature."

Martel became aware of the Friar staring straight at him, and he took the hint. He ought to decline. This was not his problem to solve. By all rights, the inquisitors should return and scour the catacombs, no matter how long it took.

But right and wrong had limited influence in Morcaster, and it seemed the maleficar had given up on targeting mages, turning his aim on the Sparrows and Julias of the city. People, children, those who none would or could protect – unless Martel did it.

He exhaled. "Very well. I'll join."

The Friar inclined his head. "I'll see to the arrangements."

Walking home, Martel felt disquiet about his decision. Entering the catacombs with a group of inquisitors – everything felt wrong about that. He knew that his friends always advised him to steer clear of the blue-clad zealots, regardless of reason; but so far, the Friar had proven true to his word, and his influence should protect Martel among the inquisitors. Should.

Certainly, he would not involve Maximilian or Eleanor. They had followed him once; he saw no reason to endanger them again. Asking them to face the jinni once more, this time surrounded by inquisitors – he had no right to make that request, and there might be a strong chance they would refuse. Best not to put them in that position.

But if Martel was to face either the jinni or the maleficar, possibly both, he wanted his golden dagger back.