

Firebrand 391

Chapter 391: Becoming Armed

Becoming Armed

Martel kept his decision regarding the inquisitors to himself. Watching his friends spar during their Malday lesson, he remembered his fear at seeing the jinni attack them with impunity. Empowerment magic and physical might would not avail. And since he had no intention of asking them to come along, it seemed pointless to even mention it. Both would try to talk him out of it, and Martel feared they might even succeed. So he laughed with them, enjoyed their company, and said little.

Regular training in the Circle of Fire resumed on the following Glunday, though Martel found it hard to concentrate thanks to his teacher's latest antics. As Moira entered the room, he saw a dagger stuck into her belt; while he could not be certain, given his hazy recollection of the only times he had seen it before, Martel thought that it might be his. He guessed that she had brought it along for the sole purpose of parading it around, taunting him.

Probably another ploy to test him. It worked, he realised, as he felt the magical sting of Harriet's spell hit his shoulder. Pushing the distraction aside, Martel focused on his duel.

Once class ended, Martel had more or less forgotten about the golden dagger when Moira reminded him. Pulling it from her belt, she casually threw it in front of his feet.

Confused, wondering what game she was playing now, he looked from the weapon up at his teacher.

"I suggest you pick it up, boy. You won't be able to levitate it with that gold on it." She cackled.

"You're letting me have it?" Martel felt as confounded as the expressions he saw on the other acolytes.

"You wanted to keep training, didn't you? And you won that fairly. You keep what you kill." Coming from Moira's mouth, the final sentence felt so ominous, Martel almost shivered.

Controlling himself, he bent down and picked up the weapon, sticking it inside his belt.

"Of course, you're responsible for it now. If that blade is used to attack another student, the blame will fall on you. And don't think you can get away with that. Battlemage are not, nobody will protect you." Moira smiled with glee. "You'll be handed over to the Inquisition for ritual strangulation. Enjoy the weapon!" Her howling laughter could be heard even as she descended the stairs.

Martel's fingers ran across the pommel of the weapon. Always thorns with that woman, whether words or deeds. Still, he would not question his good fortune. It had weighed on him, wondering how to get a hold of the blade; figuring out where the Lyceum kept its hoard of golden weapons, not to mention breaking in and getting hold of the dagger without its absence being discovered – Martel had doubted whether he could. And now it sat in his belt, as if the Stars themselves urged him forward on this path.

After class, Martel went to the library. He had tried searching for information about jinn before, but lacking any other ideas – his other option, Master Fenrick, had already been exhausted – Martel gave it another try.

He could search for knowledge about maleficars, but that seemed as unlikely to bear fruit. Given the forbidden nature of the topic, the Lyceum did not have tomes dealing with this matter readily available to students. Certainly, finding anything useful about how to fight maleficars seemed a fool's errand; the books of the Lyceum dealt with esoteric lore or discussions of magic, not practical instructions on taking down rogue sorcerers.

Just in case he was wrong, Martel gave it an attempt. Barely any books made mention of maleficus, so at least it was a relatively simple task to go through them all.

As expected, none provided insight; they warned against the dangers of leechcraft and necromancy, but gave no explanations as to combating these dark arts. Martel would have to trust in the inquisitors. The thought did not sit well with him.

His day spent in attempts to arm himself with weapons and knowledge – the former a success, the latter not so much – Martel returned to his room. Sitting on his bed, he stared at the dagger in his hands. He saw the faint tint of gold along the edges of the mage-killing weapon. Even just holding the handle felt a little uncomfortable, and to his magic, it seemed like a cold spot in his room. He wondered if it had killed mages before, as it had no other purpose or use, or if Martel had been its first intended victim. His blood had stained the blade that now glistened clean and golden in the waning daylight; neither metal nor sun a friend to mages.

Martel knew his personal feelings about the blade were irrelevant. All that mattered was that he now possessed a weapon that could injure a magical creature like a jinni. Of course, he would be entering the catacombs with a group of inquisitors, all of them likewise armed and, presumably, well-trained. Martel had little experience knife fighting, and he imagined that he would have the least skill in weapons of the entire band; still, he felt better about the venture now that he had this blade in his belt.

Especially as his magic seemed unlikely to be of much use. From what he had learned, jinn were creatures of fire and air, Martel's strongest skills in terms of magic. He could fight with the other elements, but it would tire him out fast compared to his ability to hurl fire bolts all day long. Some of his other tricks, such as the flame wall, would probably not avail anything either.

No, Martel would let the inquisitors do the fighting. The dagger was for self-defence, should he come under attack, but he would avoid it if possible. Assuming that the jinni guarded the maleficar, the latter would provide a much more suitable target for Martel's magic; and in a pinch, a golden blade would work just as well against a dark sorcerer as it had against a fire acolyte.

Chapter 392: Hooked

Hooked

Manday saw Martel returning to his efforts in enchantment. He did not feel like he had made much progress, but Master Jerome had told him to practise on Soldays as well; he would ask Master Alastair for advice during the elemental magic lesson later today and apply that counsel tomorrow.

Until then, he continued to practise, pouring a small spoonful of the black substance from the big pot into the jar and letting his magic reach out. Trying to apply what other magical traditions had taught him, Martel did not force the connection or use pressure. Instead, he imagined it like the ebb and flow of tide, his magic moving gently like waves to wash over the oil and become entangled.

It worked, a little too well; a flame shot up from the jar, consuming the liquid within. He had lost count of how many times this had happened. With a sigh, Martel used his tenuous connection to extinguish the fire. This done, he grabbed the ladle in the bigger pot to pour a new spoonful of oil into the small jar.

The bell had yet to ring when the door to the small laboratory opened. Figuring it was Master Jerome come to check on his progress, Martel looked over to be surprised by the presence of Mistress Juliana. "Come with me."

Abandoning his enchantment, Martel followed the overseer out of the workshops. He guessed that this had to do with the inquisitors, unless something else had happened. He did wonder why it was so urgent that she came straight to collect him; usually, she would simply send a message for him to appear in her chambers. She did not enlighten him as to her reasons, walking with swift steps across the castle.

Once inside the room that served as her study, Mistress Juliana sat down. Martel did the same opposite her. "I have received a rather odd request," she revealed.

"Oh?" Even if Martel knew what this was about, he figured it best to say as little as possible. Who knew how she would react if she learned that he had volunteered to enter the catacombs with a handful of mage-hunting zealots.

"The office of the Inquisition has requested your aid. Now, since they did not simply march in here and grab you, I assume they do not intend to put you on trial and strangle you with a golden chain. I must take it on faith that this request is genuine, which begs the question of why they specifically want the aid of an acolyte." Her piercing eyes set to work on Martel.

He met her gaze. "I've had some close brushes with the maleficar in the copper lanes. I've told them as much. They must think I can help track him down."

If possible, her eyes became even narrower. "That is not a suitable task for a student of the Lyceum. Your work is to learn, not get your hands dirty on behalf of inquisitors."

Some tiny part of Martel hoped that she might forbid this and give him an excuse to back out; he could not make himself reject the request of his own volition. It felt too cowardly.

"I could simply deny the inquisitors' call for aid, but since you have made it clear how you do not value my counsel, I will not get involved. You may do as you please."

Hooked by his own bait. "Fine. I'll help them as they need."

"As you wish. They will meet you by the square beyond the gates. I will not let a band of inquisitors trample all over our school if it can be avoided."

They had done so in the past, regardless of objections from the faculty; Martel wondered if this was for his sake, so the other students did not see Martel in their company. It was bound to spark all kinds of rumours. "Very well. When?"

"Now."

"What?" Martel was almost shocked. He did not feel nearly ready for the descent into the catacombs, filled with undead, jinn, and maleficars.

"They wish to leave before noon. Something about doing this while the sun is at its strongest, whatever 'this' is." The overseer stared at him once again. "They did not explain the nature of their need nor what aid you are meant to provide."

The sun weakened magic and monsters. That made sense – except they would be underground. Martel doubted it made a difference, but the hour had clearly been chosen already. Nothing he could do but comply. "I'll go out and meet them." After a quick trip to his room.

"Go by the kitchens. You will miss dinner, and I doubt the inquisitors will care about fetching food for you. Get the matron to supply you with something to bring along."

Matters might be cold between them, but it seemed that the habits of an overseer died slowly. "Yes, mistress."

Martel swung past the kitchens after leaving the overseer's chambers, receiving some bread, a pear, and some slices of meat to take with him. Eating the fruit straight away, he packed the rest into some cloth once back in his room. He quickly disrobed as well to put on his leather armour before placing his wizardly garments back on. His belt returned to his waist with Master Jerome's knife in its sheath by one side, his golden dagger nestled by the other.

Did he need anything else? None of his few potions would be of help here. If he had mastered enchanting the fire pots, those might have been useful, but that would have to wait for another time. A staff would be his usual weapon of choice, but if he needed to fight with arms rather than magic, the second blade in his belt would serve better.

No more preparations could be made. Martel slaked his thirst as best he could from his pitcher of water; picking up his provisions, he left his room and the Lyceum soon after.

Chapter 393: On the Trail

On the Trail

Outside the Lyceum, six inquisitors had gathered. They stood at the centre of the square; any other citizen passing by skirted along the edge, as if the presence of the mage hunters physically repelled other people. Feeling vulnerable, Martel walked out of the castle to cross the open space and join the waiting group.

Four men and two women turned to look at him. Besides the blue uniform with the emblem of Sol, they all wore gold in different places. Shoe and belt buckles, cloak clasps, jewellery on their fingers,

in their ears, and around their necks; to Martel, it felt like approaching the emissaries of Death, clad in coldness. In addition, each of them had chains nestled in their belts and a weapon, either held in their hands or attached to their waists. They all seemed to favour different types; blades with a length that hovered between dagger or short sword, a staff, axes or clubs. Martel did not need his magic to know that each of those weapons would be edged or tipped with gold.

One inquisitor, holding a club in one hand with the other resting on the pommel of a dagger in his belt, scowled as Martel approached. "Sod off, boy, or we'll be hunting for you next."

Refusing to be intimidated, Martel held his gaze. "I'm here to lend you aid. You'll treat me with respect."

Red colour flushed the zealot's cheeks. "What did you say, boy?"

"Calm yourself, Henry. This must be the mage sent to help us," said another inquisitor, the one armed with a staff. He looked older, perhaps a little past forty, where Martel judged the others to be in their late twenties or early thirties. Furthermore, his emblem of Sol looked more complex.

"I was not sent by anyone. I volunteered to help. Nobody asked me."

"You're just a child! Barely a hair on your chin," Henry said in protest.

Martel nodded at the two women in their company. "Beards are not a requirement, I notice."

"He's got a point," said one of the female inquisitors with a smirk.

"Enough. We appreciate the help and willingness," said the ostensible leader of the group. "Have you been informed as to the nature of the undertaking?"

More than that; as the only one, Martel knew what they faced. But already sensing the suspicion radiating from at least one of the mage hunters, the young wizard saw no reason to elaborate. "I am fully aware."

"In that case, let's not waste any more of Sol's blessed light. Noon will soon be upon us." He set into motion, and the others followed. Martel did as well, though happy to fall behind a little and bring up the rear; yet he soon discovered that whenever he tried, one of the inquisitors would naturally slow their pace as well.

They walked for a while until they reached an entrance to the sewers. After unlocking it, they descended. Martel finally remembered a preparation he had overlooked; a cloth mask doused in perfume would have been good. Instead, he had to rely on breathing through his mouth.

Almost on instinct, Martel summoned a flame in the dark and sent it ahead down the tunnel. As soon as it got close to the nearest inquisitor, it died. The zealots laughed as one of them took out a lamp and ignited it.

Not to be deterred, Martel summoned another flame and let it fly up under the ceiling, moving it forward while avoiding the gold-clad inquisitors to finally illuminate the path ahead.

The staff-wielding leader, whose name Martel had learned to be Tiberius, took the lead. They began walking down the narrow ledges of the sewers with the rancid water floating in a stream next to them.

Even if they kept a bit of distance to him, Martel could feel the presence of the other people at all times. Every time he reached out where he should feel heat, he felt only the cold. He remembered the ambush by the docks, where he, Flora, and Marcus had been lured into guarding a house while guardsmen and inquisitors assembled outside. If they had not reacted so swiftly, Martel doubted they would have escaped in time; even then, Flora had nearly lost her life by taking a severe wound.

So strange to think back on that. Flora and Marcus had been his comrades in arms, and the inquisitors his enemies. Now, it was Flora who had tried to engineer his death, and it was the inquisitors with whom he marched to battle. Less than half a year had passed between these two events.

Whatever their faults, the inquisitors knew the way. Soon after, they stood in front of the entrance to the catacombs, once more boarded up. Two of them removed the obstacle while a third placed a hammer and a small bag of something metallic next to it. "No point dragging that around in there," he said in response to Martel's quizzical look. "We won't need to board it back up until we return."

"Be on your guard," Tiberius warned them as the passageway became clear. "You all know what roams these corridors. Do not make light of the danger."

Nobody responded other than to grip their weapons; one after the other, they entered the catacombs.

After a short while, they reached the first fork in the road. As the inquisitors halted, they turned to look at Martel. "Last time, we searched as far as we could before we had to turn back. But I was told you might have a better idea where to look," Tiberius said.

Not as such; Martel would have to catch the scent of the jinni first. Which required him to be clear of the inquisitors, whose gold dampened his magical sense. A fatal flaw in his plan to stay back and let the zealots face all the danger. Moving to the front of the pack, Martel stood before the two diverging tunnels ahead. He closed his eyes and let his magic feel what it could.

Nothing pleasant lay ahead. An uncomfortable presence, either caused by the countless dead or the necromantic energies preying upon them. But nothing as powerful as how the jinni would feel.

Even with his eyes closed, Martel could feel the inquisitors watching him. He needed to choose. With no obvious sign to follow, Martel turned towards the tunnel that gave the strongest response to his magical fumbling. "That way."

Tiberius made a chalk sign on the wall to mark the way back, and they continued.

They walked in silence, Martel still leading the way. Magelight illuminated the path, but it could not tell him where to go. Every now and then, he paused to once more feel what he could, though he knew it would probably not help; on previous occasions, the presence of the jinni had been so powerful, it had been impossible to miss.

The fourth or fifth time that Martel examined the magic around him, something finally felt different. A shiver down his spine, a touch of sadness, an unhappy memory resurfacing unprovoked. "Something is ahead," he whispered over his shoulder.

The inquisitors moved forward and past him, raising their weapons. This left Martel unable to use his magic against any target down the corridor, so he hoped they were ready for whatever came.

Moving around the bend, a skeleton animated by necromancy came into sight. Shreds of ragged fabric clung to some of its bones, somehow not decayed despite the centuries. Slowly, the skull turned its eye holes towards Martel's magelight floating in the air.

To his credit, despite his other flaws, Henry stepped forward and raised his club. The undead creature noticed him and responded by snapping its teeth together and charging him. Just before it could reach his throat with its bony fingers, his blunt weapon came smashing down to strike the skull clean off the spine. All the bones fell to the ground.

"Almost too easy," the inquisitor grinned.

Martel looked at the remains of the undead creature. "Don't celebrate too fast. If it rose from the dead once, it might again." Sure, it lacked a head, but being without muscles and flesh had not proved a hindrance either.

Henry looked at him with an overbearing expression. "Necromancy mimics real life. It can't reanimate something too far removed from how it looked when alive." Just for good measure, he stomped his boot through the ribcage lying on the ground. "Don't they teach you anything at that school of yours?"

"We don't learn about necromancy in detail, or old bones, for that matter. A more apt topic for mage hounds." Despite his barb being aimed at the inquisitors, one of them laughed at Martel's jest. As for the wizard, he moved past Henry and all his gold in order to sense ahead. Strange – despite the destruction of the undead creature, he felt the same cold disquiet as before. In terms of magical energies present, nothing seemed different.

Or rather, if anything, it felt stronger. Taking a step further away, it increased greatly, emanating from ahead. It even came from the sides with the alcoves where the dead lay arraigned.

A sudden thought made Martel push through all the inquisitors to the back of the group. The same creeping sensation filled the space behind them, the way they had come. Martel realised his mistake. He had followed the trail of magic thinking the source lay ahead; he had failed to consider that the gold-clad inquisitors bringing up the rear left a dead area behind him, which his magical sense could not penetrate. This cold, crawling presence of ill sorcery did not originate from somewhere forward; it surrounded them.

"Go back," Martel exclaimed, turning to look at the inquisitors. "Go back!"

Around them, from every alcove, the dead began to rise.

Chapter 394: Danse Macabre

Danse Macabre

The inquisitors disregarded Martel's suggestion to retreat. Without hesitation, they began attacking the skeletons rising all around them, sometimes striking before they could even get out of the alcoves.

Standing in the back of the group, Martel was exposed. Down the corridor, the way they had come, more and more of the undead could be seen. Martel's instinct was to raise a wall of fire, but that would block their retreat. He could not do it on the other side of the group either, blocking the enemies coming from ahead, as all the gold worn by the inquisitors in between interfered.

Bony fingers reached out and grabbed him by the arm. Despite the lack of muscles, the grip was so tight that even through his clothes, it threatened to cut off his blood flow. Staring at the skeleton, Martel launched a fire bolt straight at the skull. Teeth rattled, but it was not enough; grabbing the dagger in his belt, Martel struck just below the jaw to hit the spine. Finally, his undead attacker fell to pieces, returned to the rest otherwise denied.

Martel had no time to savour this; already, several others moved towards him. As for his comrades, using the term loosely, they seemed only eager to fight back rather than withdraw one step. Though an anguished scream, sounding more like it was born of pain than fear, told Martel not all was well. His own magelight had been extinguished, and the lamps born by the inquisitors had fallen to the ground, primarily illuminating their feet. In the darkness of the tunnel, Martel could barely see, which reinforced his belief that they should pull back rather than fight on these terms.

But as long as enemies came at them from both sides, an orderly retreat seemed doubtful. Even in the dark, Martel could see the white bones of their enemies everywhere, engaged with the inquisitors. So, either Martel blocked the path behind them and they advanced without knowing the way back to the surface, which seemed foolhardy – or he had to get through the skirmish to block off the other side of the tunnel, giving them a chance to fight their way back to the exit.

Martel released another fire bolt at the nearest enemy to buy himself time as he moved in between the inquisitors entangled with the undead. Panic threatened to overtake him as he tried to advance between mage hunters striking wildly with their golden weapons and skeletons trying to rend flesh apart. He summoned his magical shield, praying that none of the inquisitors hit him and dispelled it.

A golden blade flashed in front of Martel as an inquisitor severed the lower arm of an enemy. From the other side, claws came to tear at his face, stopped by his shield. Another agonising outburst could be heard as someone became wounded. In the midst of undead and inquisitors, Martel felt terrified, and the amount of gold around him amplified the feeling; to his magical senses, nothing surrounded him but the coldness of death.

Foregoing magic, Martel wielded his dagger, swinging it around as he tried to move forward. He stepped on bone more than once, cracking underneath his boot. Next, his foot met something soft, and a complaining moan came in response; someone had fallen to the ground. Forced to ignore them, Martel took another step forward, pushing his way through the brawl to reach the other side. The faint sight of white bones told him of enemies advancing, but he was free of the inquisitors and their gold; nothing hindered his magic down this path. Grateful for his training in the Circle of Fire, Martel raised a wall of flames within moments to block the hallway. The spell should last a few minutes, giving them time to deal with the remaining enemies and scarpers.

Turning around, Martel tried to get a sense of the fight. Some of the inquisitors had to be wounded, but half or more were still fighting, by his estimate. Their weapons worked well to destroy the necromantic abominations. Although the skirmish had been chaotic with the undead attacking from all sides, leaving every person to fend for themselves, the creatures fell quickly to the inquisitors' strikes.

Saving his magic rather than risk hitting his allies, Martel swung his blade at the nearest enemy. His blade pierced the skull, releasing bone dust to make the wizard cough. It was not enough to destroy the undead, but Martel distracted the monster, giving Tiberius an opportunity to smash his staff against it. Moments later, the bones fell to the ground, and the inquisitor gave a quick nod in recognition to the mage.

Just as Martel thought the fight was at an end, he felt cold dread from behind. Next, his flame wall disappeared.

As Martel swung around, dagger held ready, he saw a gruesome sight. Dozens of skeletons approached, led by one that looked and felt different. Its clothes were, whilst still old and torn, recognisable as a ceremonial robe of some sort. Unlike the others, it did not have empty eye sockets in its skull; instead, blue flames burned where eyes had once been. Around its neck, it carried a necklace that emanated foul magic. Somehow, the jewel had dispelled Martel's wall, and he recognised it to possess some manner of necromantic powers as well.

A ray of fire burst from the wizard's hand to strike the undead straight in the chest. It recoiled, but as Martel's spell ended, it advanced once more. As for the pendant, it appeared unharmed.

Tiberius leapt in front of Martel and swung his staff. Reacting with preternatural speed, the skeleton seized the weapon in flight and held it back. With its other hand, it raked the inquisitor across the face, causing four gashes to bleed.

"The necklace!" Martel shouted and unleashed another ray. Their enemy staggered backwards under the attack, forced to release its grip on Tiberius and his weapon.

Swiftly, the inquisitor smashed his gold-tipped staff straight at the jewel. It held, so he struck again and again. Finally, it cracked. To Martel, it felt like the foulest odour had been released, and he almost vomited. Still Tiberius attacked until finally, the undead creature fell to the ground, as did all the other skeletons. As for the necklace, it lay broken. Taking out a piece of cloth, the inquisitor carefully picked up the jewel from the ground and placed it inside his pocket.

"It's over," he breathed, looking at Martel and the others. "Who's injured?"

"Clara's arm is bleeding," came one reply.

"I can't stand up," another complained. "Bastard took a chunk straight out of my leg like I was mutton!"

"Henry, help him back. Clara, how bad is it?"

"I'll live."

"Keep the wound clean as best you can. We're headed back," Tiberius declared. Their mission was at an end.

Seeing the state of the others, Martel understood why a retreat had been called. Two of them were not in much condition to fight, and the inquisitor with the wounded leg slowed them down, making further advances impossible unless they left him behind. Which, given the undead guardians of these tombs, was a fate that Martel would not even wish upon an inquisitor. Maybe.

Still, the disappointment was hard to swallow. Going into the catacombs in the company of inquisitors had seemed like a nightmare, yet Martel had done it in the hopes of destroying the pernicious threat of the maleficar. And they had accomplished nothing. He had not even seen the smallest sign that the sorcerer or his creature still hid in these tunnels. Maybe, given all the attention shown by the inquisitors to the sewers and catacombs, he had abandoned this hideout. Or retreated so deeply into the sepulchre that they stood no chance of finding him. Either way, all of Martel's work these months trying to track down the maleficar had been in vain.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief as they reached the sewers; however pungent, Martel preferred the stench of filth over the unpleasant presence of necromantic magic. Quickly, the inquisitors boarded up the entrance, and they could finally move towards upper ground.

"You did well, master mage," Tiberius said, walking behind Martel who took the lead with his magelight.

"Not that it mattered."

"We destroyed an evil artefact, bringing a little peace to those tombs. Though I must ask – did you feel any sign of the maleficar or this monster he has in his service?"

Martel exhaled. "No."

"I feared as much. Two expeditions into those crypts without results. We'll have to search elsewhere in Morcaster for our fiend, though we have little to go by."

"He'll probably have abandoned the sewers for now," Martel considered. "He might try new hunting grounds that he hitherto has shunned, such as the Khivan enclave."

"Perhaps. If so, I doubt we can do much," Tiberius admitted. "The locals look upon us with fear. Even if someone fell victim in that district, I doubt they would even tell us."

Probably true. Martel fell quiet; he was out of ideas, and he had done what he could. By right, this was a task for inquisitors, not him. It was time he left it in their hands, however little faith he had in their abilities.

It was strange to return to the castle. Hours earlier, Martel had been surrounded by undead abominations spawned by evil magic. Now, he walked past students engaged in conversations about classes and teachers, waiting for the next meal without being aware of what lay underground, far beneath their feet.

Chapter 395: Self-preservation

Self-preservation

Martel still felt odd the next morning, waking up to an ordinary day of routines. He had experienced this before, of course; evenings spent in danger, replaced by mornings of schoolwork. Somehow, it hit him harder this time. Maybe because he felt increasingly isolated; most of his recent endeavours had been with temporary allies, people he did not share much of a bond with. He knew that he had to keep Maximilian and Eleanor separate from his many ventures, for their own sake, but it was still difficult keeping quiet about so much he had experienced.

Gathering his wits, Martel stared at the equipment in front of him. Thanks to Master Jerome's kindness, he had another bell of enchantment practice ahead of him, rather than doing his usual Soliday chore.

Another reason to be annoyed about yesterday's failed outing; it had taken place during his regular lesson with Master Alastair, keeping Martel from asking for help with enchanting fire. He could seek out his teacher outside of class, of course, but since the Master of Elements taught every novice at the Lyceum, he was usually busy; when he was not, such as late evenings, Martel felt a little guilty for intruding, since Master Alastair was already generous with his time, giving extra lessons to the acolyte.

Of course, it was silly to let that keep him from asking for help; he was not making much progress with enchantment, and time was not infinite. Since he was going to the library this afternoon anyway for his meeting with Eleanor, he could stay afterwards and look up enchantment in the tomes; if nothing proved useful, he would look for Master Alastair tomorrow.

"Hey there," Martel spoke in greeting. As always, Eleanor had arrived before him and already gathered materials to their usual table.

"I wondered if you would make an appearance today," she remarked without looking up from her notes.

He frowned a little, noticing an accusatory tone in her voice. "Why not? I said I would."

She finally looked at him, and her expression flickered from annoyed to worried. "I am sorry. I should not say it that way. But I have been concerned since yesterday, and seeing you walk in here so casually – I do not know what to think."

Martel sat down, keeping eye contact; he could not imagine what gave her cause for concern. "Concerned about what?"

"I heard a rumour that a whole patrol of inquisitors marched off with you. It sounded ridiculous, but I went to your room more than once, receiving no answer." She spoke swiftly, the words almost tripping over each other.

Right, that. Someone must have seen him leave the square with the mage hunters, Martel guessed; easy to draw the wrong conclusions. He had not considered what others would think. "It's true, but they didn't arrest me or anything. I just helped them with their hunt for the maleficar."

She took a deep breath, and a few moments passed before she spoke again. "Why?" Her tone was almost neutral.

His turn to inhale and exhale. She always had to know. She could never just let something rest. This friendship would be easier if Martel felt comfortable lying to her. "You remember the creature we faced when I dragged you and Maximilian to the catacombs. How its presence could be felt."

"Not something I am likely to forget." Discomfort was briefly visible on her face. "What about it?"

"I told the inquisitors about it. They couldn't find it, so I went with them to search. It takes someone with magical sense to track magic, after all."

She stared at him with the disappointed expression he had expected. "Martel, why? I – no, never mind. You will not change. No point chastising you. Your life is yours to toss around or throw away as you please."

"It's not gone wrong for me so far," Martel replied with feigned nonchalance. It had been close on more than one occasion.

"Which worries me. At this point, I fear that nothing short of death will make you consider your ways, in which case, it would be rather too late." She spoke in a neutral voice, almost as if merely jesting about the prospect of his demise.

But she was probably being earnest; certainly she was right, he knew. Only a few fivedays prior, someone had plotted his assassination and almost succeeded. But what were his chances of surviving the Khivan war? At least now, it was his own choice to take risks, seeking outcomes he cared about. Stopping the maleficar would make the people of Morcaster a little safer, even if it claimed Martel's life. Dying to a Khivan bullet accomplished nothing.

"I'll try to do better," he finally said. It was the best he could offer while still being truthful.

"I believe I told you long ago to at least seek advice before going on these foolhardy errands," Eleanor pointed out. "Is it because you already know that you will disregard my counsel that you never ask?"

"It's too dangerous, telling you about my schemes." Martel allowed himself a smile. "You're one of the few people who could talk me out of them."

"I highly doubt that." She took a deep breath. "Anyway, you are here to help me. I should not give you trouble for your decisions. Time is also wasting, and I have practice after this bell." Demonstratively, she picked up the nearest book and began reading.

Martel did the same. Perhaps that was one argument for why he should display a stronger sense of self-preservation; should the worst happen, he could not help Eleanor find a remedy for her sister. Nor teach Sparrow magic, keep a roof over Julia's head, or make potions that would let her sleep. He had about six months left before he would be deployed at the front; rather than chasing ghosts among skeletons, maybe he should spend that remaining time doing what he could for the living.

Chapter 396: Sleepy Work

Sleepy Work

The hours in the Circle of Fire felt long as always; the physical and magical exertion was only made worse by constant tongue lashings from Moira. Martel longed for the day when he would never have to endure a moment in her presence again, though he grudgingly had to admit that she returned his golden dagger to him where others, such as Master Alastair, would not. She had not argued against him or tried to make a decision on his behalf; she had simply given it to him. Not that one friendly act made up for all the hostility she had put Martel and her other students through; he could not imagine that he would ever forgive her for that.

As for the dagger, it rested inside the drawer of Martel's writing desk. While he had been glad of it two days ago in the catacombs, he still felt uncomfortable around it; in part because it was a weapon

designed to hurt people like him, in part because someone had used it for that exact purpose already. Besides, walking around the Lyceum with a mage killer blade in his belt seemed like bad form.

In the distance, the bell rang. "Alright, you little maggots, enough for now. I'll see you this afternoon." Coming from Moira, the reminder of the day's second lesson felt like a threat. One after the other, the four acolytes filed out of the Circle of Fire.

Walking past the workshop on his way to dinner, Martel was reminded of his lack of progress with enchanting. Rather than keep postponing, it seemed prudent to ask Master Alastair for help while he remembered to do so. Since no classes were being taught during the lunch bell, now might be the best time. Delaying his meal, Martel crossed the castle to reach the faculty wing in the western part.

After knocking a while on the door to Master Alistair's chamber, he realised the flaw in his plan; the man was most likely busy enjoying his dinner with the other teachers in the dining hall reserved for their use only. Students were not supposed to go there, and Martel figured that they frowned on students interrupting their mealtime. Not the best conditions to come asking for help. He would have to try another time.

Going back, he found a message waiting for him in the entrance hall.

Master Martel,

If you can spare the time,

I should be glad to hear

of your exploits the other

day. I await you, eve of

tomorrow. Same time,

same place as last.

Your friend the Friar

A little unexpected. Martel had gotten the impression that the Friar had no personal interest in this matter and had only provided aid from a sense of obligation towards Martel. Nor did the young wizard see what might be accomplished by such a conversation; he doubted that more could be done. But he saw no outright reason to reject the request; no harm in indulging the old monk, and since he protected Martel in some ways, it might be best to remain in good standing with him.

Once his classes were done, Martel left the castle. He wanted to practise his alchemy and also get Julia a new sleeping potion, and he knew she might be gone from her room after nightfall, so it seemed best to leave at the earliest opportunity. This did cause Martel to miss supper, and there was a time where the thought of skipping a free meal seemed inconceivable to him. But thanks to Mistress Rana's generosity, his purse had plenty of silver for both ingredients and buying something to eat on his way.

Money was not a hindrance for him anymore, not as such; when it came to alchemy, Martel's problem was not the price of reagents, but rather scarcity. He had plenty of coin to spend, but he

only knew of vendors who sold the most common herbs and the like. That was fine for apothecary remedies and the simplest potions he knew to make, but not the rest. There was little point in knowing how to make an elixir that cured diseases if he lacked the materials, but he did not know where Mistress Rana got hers from.

Of course, certain plants she collected herself; Martel would have to ask her about that and when she might teach him such herblore. But plenty of the strange ingredients in her laboratory had to come from far away.

On a few occasions, Martel had ground to dust what his teacher had called cat claws; when he had remarked that these claws were many times bigger than what any cat might have, Mistress Rana had given a rare smile and told him about lions. It was not an animal that lived in these parts, at least not in the wild, and certainly not in Nordmark; where Mistress Rana had gotten these claws from, he had no idea.

With a bundle of herbs in his arms and food in his stomach, Martel knocked on Julia's door. He had more luck than with Master Alastair; the hinges croaked as the entrance opened, granting him access.

"Hullo." She looked at him.

"I thought we might do some alchemy together. Would you like another sleeping draught?"

She nodded and moved over to prepare the cauldron and what else they needed. "Are there still the men in blue clothes on the street? I don't have much water left because I'm afraid they're waiting for me out there."

Martel wanted to explain that most likely, the inquisitors had no interest in Julia, but he got the feeling she would not listen. Huh, maybe that was how Eleanor felt about him. "No sign of them. They were mostly by the docks anyway. But I can go fetch water for you before I go home?"

"No, it's all right. If I stay inside this room all day, every day, I'll go crazy."

She spoke it in such a matter-of-factly tone, Martel could not help but smile. Looking at the cauldron ready for him, he extended his magic and began heating it up.

Chapter 397: Old Confessions

Old Confessions

While Malday was for lessons in combat magic, Martel spent the bell between studying elemental spells. Though this was not for his own sake; he had Master Alastair to guide him in learning spells. Rather, he went through what he had learned about earth magic that he might teach Sparrow.

The most interesting candidate was a spell called earthen armour, mentioned in more than one book. It raised the earth up to act as a shield, much like the empowerment spell that Martel himself had learned. This variant would be easier for Sparrow to learn, and she might even improve upon it, the way mageknights had a much better shield spell than Martel did thanks to their superior skill with empowerment.

The question remained whether he could teach it to her. As it was not a spell he had learned, he could not really grasp how it felt to cast it; at best, he could read the descriptions and try to explain them to Sparrow. He could draw upon his own experience casting the empowerment shield, but he

could not teach Sparrow the way he had been taught. It had taken some particular circumstances that might not work for her. Nor try what Reynard had attempted with him, terrorising a new novice to make him manifest a shield spontaneously. Martel was not going to intimidate a little girl, who had already been through one terrifying ordeal due to a mage, if the maleficar could be called that.

It occurred to him that another spell in his arsenal might resemble this earthen armour much more closely; the elemental counterspell that Master Alastair had taught him. While not intended to provide the same kind of protection, it seemed similar; a quick reaction based on honed instinct to ward off an attack.

Perhaps he could teach her the way he had learned the elemental counterspell; divide it into different parts and have Sparrow practise each step to perfection before continuing to the next.

It would require lots of patience on Sparrow's part, but the girl was eager to learn, after all; given her progress, Martel assumed that she spent plenty of time practising on her own in between his visits. Tomorrow, he would begin teaching her the spell; tonight, he had another appointment.

The shrine of Saint Laurentius looked as it had on Martel's previous visits; he assumed the lack of worshippers was due to the Friar requiring privacy. He found the old monk seated on the same bench as last and joined him.

As they both sat, the entrance to the crypt visible in front of them, Martel could not help but remark, "I sincerely hope you haven't had another theft. My days as thief-catcher are behind me."

A chuckle came from the Friar. "No need to worry. The locks have been changed, and a sentinel watches at night. Given the rarity of the Archean wardstones, I doubt we'll suffer another break-in."

"Good." Martel hesitated a moment; even though the Pact protected him, he still wondered who of the Nine Lords had orchestrated the theft, considering that same person had sent the Silver Serpents to assassinate him. "Did you ever learn who was behind it all?"

"No. I assume that Lady Pearl knows, given her access to the only surviving member of the thieving band, but all information is like secrets, really. The more they are shared, the less value they have."

Given that he was on bad terms with that bald woman, Martel doubted she would be inclined to inform him either. He would have to trust in the Pact and otherwise keep his eyes open and his wits about him. "So, what did you wish to talk about?"

"I heard back from the inquisitors who went below ground. But as they are not mages, their perspective is – lacking. I should like to hear from a wizard what you experienced."

"I didn't think you really cared about this. You seemed to have no particular interest in organising this little expedition."

The Friar shrugged. "Hunting down a maleficar has little to do with me, but in some ways, I think of myself as responsible for the spiritual well-being of this city. One of those responsible, anyway. Those are our ancestors in those tombs, their peace disturbed by heathen rituals and ill magic. If I knew how, I would have the catacombs cleansed once and for all."

"It's not an impossible undertaking," Martel claimed. "Enough inquisitors and wizards working together, with clear command and understanding of each other's strengths – or even just mageknights and battlemages, we train together all the time."

"You may be right, but that would require an allocation of a most rare resource that the Empire needs elsewhere." A smile could be heard in the old monk's tone. "Getting enough inquisitors and wizards to trust each other for such a task, fighting together in the dark tunnels below, surrounded by undead abominations... I fear it is official policy that while the dead do not disturb us, we shall not disturb them either."

That sounded about right. "So, what did you wish to know?"

"Tiberius, leader of the patrol, reported the destruction of a malign artefact. He believed it exerted some kind of power over the undead, noting that they collapsed once the pendant had been broken. Would you agree?"

"Yes. It seemed to lend its power to the particular bearer, who otherwise did not seem different from the other rising skeletons. Furthermore, I felt the distinct presence of magic from it, necromantic in nature. Perhaps it likewise noticed our presence, awakening its otherwise dormant power that it might in turn awaken the dead to attack us," Martel speculated.

The Friar nodded to himself. "If so, that is valuable to have learned."

"Is it really? If there is no will to enter and cleanse the catacombs, does such knowledge matter?"

"Perhaps not yet, perhaps not in this regard. But who knows? Future inquisitors will be taught of this, and they might carry on, continuing deeper than we ever made it." The old monk gave a smile. "At my age, you come to accept that some destinations must be reached by future generations. All you can do at this point is prepare the way."

Chapter 398: A Father's Fear

A Father's Fear

Training in the Circle of Fire had returned to the regular duelling, meant to hone their spellcasting and reflexes. Martel had his doubts this accomplished anything for him; any further improvement might come about if he was put under real pressure, fighting for his life. This, despite the stinging sensation from the other acolytes' spells, would not be enough. Martel felt he had reached the limits of what repetition under relatively safe conditions could achieve.

Yet he knew that any word of this to Moira would risk him detention, a further waste of time, so he kept quiet and flung another fire bolt at William.

In between classes, he picked up a letter waiting for him; a proper one, inside an envelope bearing Father Julius' handwriting. A message from home. While tempted to immediately read it, Martel decided to postpone that he might enjoy it properly. Given that it took months for correspondence back and forth to Nordmark, he could not expect another anytime soon. Best to savour it. He left the letter in his room as a treat for himself tonight, after he had taught Sparrow.

Unlike with Julia, who used the dark hours to move about, Sparrow and the rest of Weasel's gang mostly used the daytime to conduct their affairs. After all, most traffic and trade took place during the day, providing them with their opportunities. Martel still felt uncomfortable knowing that they stole, but since the city was content to let them starve, he could not blame them either.

And he would only teach Sparrow defensive spells to let her protect herself or get away from danger – no earth bolts or the like. Of course, if she really wanted to, she could probably find a way to use magic for harm; but the same aim could be accomplished with a knife. At least this way, she gained control over her gift, making it less likely she would accidentally hurt others.

"Martel, look! I have gotten much better!" Sparrow held out her hand; several yards in front of her, a pile of dirt pushed up from the ground. It lasted for several moments, Sparrow's face twisted in concentration, before it fell to the ground. "I could do much longer earlier today," she complained.

"Have you been practising a lot today?"

She nodded eagerly.

"You've probably tired yourself out. That's why you can't do it as well now as you could earlier. You should probably rest before you do any more magic," he cautioned her.

"Does that mean you won't show me anything new?" Sparrow asked, disappointed.

"I guess I can explain a little to you, so you'll know what to practice. Tomorrow," he added, sternly.

"I will!"

"Very well. I think I mentioned before the spell I have in mind. It's a way to make the earth protect you, should someone attack you. I'm sure you can make it work even better than I imagine. But it'll take you a long time to learn, going through different steps. You understand?"

She gave an almost exaggerated nod.

"Good. The first step is for you to practice raising the earth up as a wall in front of yourself." Martel demonstrated, pulling up dirt in front of his feet until it reached the height of his ankles. "Unlike me, you'll be able to cover your entire body – not that it would take much at present," he continued, which made her giggle. "But you'll also be able to do it much faster. Perhaps even so swiftly, you can do it as a reaction or on instinct. But one step at a time."

She held out her hand, and earth rose up towards it, though it fell back after a few moments.

"Not tonight," Martel admonished her. "Remember, rest now, practice tomorrow. And another thing, try not to use your hands. That'll just cost you valuable time. Practice by casting magic while holding your hands behind your back or something." That was probably enough instructions for one small girl to handle. "Everything clear?"

"Yes!"

He smiled. "Good. I'll be back maybe next five day or so, and you can show me your progress."

"Will do!"

On his way back to the Lyceum, Martel spent a few pennies to buy sweet cakes for himself. Once he had returned to his room, he made himself comfortable in his bed and opened the letter from home while indulging in pastry.

Dear boy,

I write on your mother's behalf, as she has been distraught ever since your last letter arrived. She bursts into tears every time I broach the subject, hence why I am writing instead of her. I have been able to piece together enough of the story to inform you. I could have waited until your mother was of a better disposition, but given how long it takes for letters to go back and forth, I did not wish for you to wait longer than necessary before you heard from us here in Engby.

As it turns out, though your mother never shared these fears with me, she apparently knew of the danger that you might be conscripted as a battlemage. Your father, before he settled in Engby, was a smith in an army camp. Thanks to his knowledge of the legions, he knew straight away what your gift with fire would mean. Hence his strict command that you hide your talent, and his reluctance to have you working in the forge or learning any skill associated with flames and heat.

Alas, that his death left your family struggling, and that your parents never took me in their confidence. I would have done my best to find some arrangement, but your mother sought the advice of Master Ogion, and given his knowledge of these matters, perhaps she was right to do so. I asked the wizard about his role in all this, and he confirmed and added to my knowledge of these events.

He recognised you as being what he called fire-touched; you know better than me what that means, I am sure. However, he disagreed with your father's decision that you ought to suppress your gift and avoid magic as much as possible. He compared it to holding back the tide. I raised the question of why he did not choose to train you himself and gained a rare glimpse into our resident wizard's past.

Before becoming a weathermage, Master Ogion was a frostmage, assigned to the northern legions dealing with Tyrian incursions. After serving his time, he wanted a peaceful, quiet life, thus taking up the post in Engby. His primary element being water, he did not feel able to teach you as you needed, and thus he advised your mother that you should be sent to the Lyceum, where you could be trained by another fire-touched wizard, who was also an old friend of Master Ogion's.

Whether this was the best course of action, given that your father's fears have come true, I shall not say. It does not appear so, but lacking any knowledge of magic, I cannot judge whether our local wizard was right or not. I hope that you yourself may be able to determine this, and find some peace in the decisions that others made on your behalf.

You shall be in my prayers every day.

Father Julius

Martel lay the letter aside. He had always assumed that his father disliked magic just on principle; it had never occurred to him that there could be a deeper cause. Until arriving at the Lyceum, Martel had never even heard of fire-touched or known about the possibility that he could be made a battlemage. Nor had his father ever spoken of his past working as a smith for the legions.

In a way, the news made him feel better. His father did not hate magic as such, and thereby Martel for possessing it; it had only been concern that made him tell his son to hide it.

As an opposite reaction, the thought that he could have stayed in Engby under Master Ogion's tutelage made him frustrated. Another thing he had never really considered, knowing so little about the affairs of wizards; the old weathermage had simply declared that Martel needed to attend the Lyceum, and he had not questioned it.

Martel could perhaps have been spared all of this – most of all, been spared a future in the legions, short as it might be. It seemed the worst possible outcome, just as his father had feared; at the same time, it was a bitter herb to chew that he would never have met Eleanor, Maximilian, or Shadi. When John fell ill, Master Ogion was away, once more acting as frostmage to the legions; would Martel have accompanied him north and only returned when it was too late, and his brother dead from a preventable disease?

Unable to find a satisfactory answer, Martel put the letter and half-eaten cake away, seeking sleep instead.

Chapter 399: Bloody Reactions

Bloody Reactions

Martel stared at the little clay jar in his hand, which continued to frustrate his efforts. He knew it would be difficult to learn but he thought that his experiences with Sindhian and Tyrian magic had taught him patience. Perhaps they had, but it did not lessen his frustrations. Every time he thought that he had managed to trap the spell inside the oil, nothing happened when he removed the lid to allow airflow back.

Martel had not really seen Master Jerome during these bells, and although a master craftsman and enchanter, presumably, it did not seem useful to ask him for advice. By his own admission, enchanting with fire lay beyond his skills. It was time to get some help from Master Alastair, who fortunately had a lesson with him later that day; this time, Martel would not allow anything to distract him. Inquisitors, maleficars, nothing.

"Master Alastair, I have a question!"

The Master of Elements stared at his pupil as they stood within the hall of his domain. "Yes?" he asked, seeing Martel take a look over his shoulder rather than continue. "What is it?"

"Sorry. I half expected someone to burst through the doors. Anyway, Master Jerome is trying to teach me enchanting, but I use the term loosely, as he doesn't really have much expertise with fire. I'm supposed to enchant these little fire pots, but I can't get it right, and I could really use some advice."

His teacher laughed. "Is that what's twisting your socks?" He adopted a more solemn expression. "Sorry. Creating fire pots is one of the more demanding tasks that enchanting with fire can present. I'm a little surprised that Master Jerome started you with that rather than something simple, to teach you the basic skills first."

"As mentioned, not his area of expertise."

"True enough. How long have you been trying? You could have come to me straightaway."

He could have, but Martel had somehow convinced himself to try sailing by his own wind first. "I'll remember that next time. You mentioned I should learn the basics first. How?"

"You know the heated stones that we use for the warm pools in the baths?"

Martel not only knew them; he thanked Sol for them every day in winter.

"My work, I am proud to say. I enchant one of those stones from time to time, as Master Jerome needs. Now, my skill is not at a level to create a permanent artefact, but they certainly last for a winter or longer. Master Jerome should have some old stones in need of being enchanted again. Ask him to give you one to practice on first."

"But a stone is earth," Martel pointed out. "Won't that be much harder to enchant with fire? At least the oil is easy to connect with fire."

"Yes, but that's not necessarily a disadvantage. While connecting your magic to the stone will be challenging, once you master it, you should have no trouble with other materials. Furthermore, a stone will not burst into flames. You can push your magic as hard as you want without any risk of it suddenly combusting, ruining your efforts. In some ways, although it sounds counter-intuitive, you may find it easier to learn enchanting when you work with something unsuitable for fire."

That made a lot of sense. Rather frustrating that the last five days had been in vain where enchantment was concerned, but at least it sounded like he would be on the right track. Tomorrow, he would try out Master Alastair's advice for his Solday bell in the workshops.

"With that out of the way, let us test your counterspell."

"I think I learned it as well as I can," Martel argued. "Last lesson, I reacted to all of your attacks." He really wanted to move on to the next spell that Master Alastair had promised to teach him.

"Yes, last lesson when we both stood still and with nothing else happening. Get ready for a duel, lad, and let's see how well Mistress Moira has taught you!"

Up in Mistress Rana's laboratory, Martel stared at the ingredients laid out on the worktable. One of these was not like the other. He had received the list yesterday as usual, so he already knew what it was, but he still found it difficult to believe. On a small plate, pieces of a chicken heart lay in a puddle of its own blood.

At least it was not a human heart, though Martel wondered what potion required this. So far, he had only used things like claws or fur when it came to reagents made from living creatures; he had once opened a jar on the shelves that turned out to contain eyeballs, and even if he could not see them – or the reverse – lying inside their clay container, he made an effort to never look in the direction of that shelf.

"Another elixir for another disease. Note that the heart may come from any living creature, though chicken will be the easiest and cheapest to obtain. You may find this recipe particularly useful, as it is a cure for the bloody flux, which is a common disease in army camps."

Martel was unfamiliar with the malady, but the name sounded unnerving. He did find himself curious why it would spread through camps in particular, as compared to a city or such. "Why is that?"

"A question I cannot answer, unfortunately. My guess would be that the high concentration of people so closely together somehow causes it, but there must be a deeper reason, as all diseases spread more easily, the closer people live together, yet somehow, bloody flux is the most prevalent."

Intriguing, even if it also sounded unpleasant. Martel wondered if Mistress Rana ever made studies into what caused diseases; being able to prevent them in the first place had to be far more efficient than afterwards scrambling to cure them, once they had taken hold.

"In any case, the heart is a reagent like any other, to be awakened and used along with others. Only difference is, you will want to wash your hands both before and after you have handled it. All right, get to it. You know what to do."

So he did. Martel gathered up the ingredients, carefully balancing the heart on its plate, as he moved to the hearth with its awaiting cauldron.

Chapter 400: Circumstantial Studies

Circumstantial Studies

Next day was Solday, where Master Jerome had kindly allowed Martel to practice his enchantments rather than do his regular chore for the Lyceum. However, instead of proceeding directly to the laboratory, Martel sought out the artificer. "Master, I spoke to Master Alastair, who suggested I begin by practising on the large stones that he regularly enchants for you. The heated stones you use in the baths and such."

"Are you sure? That seems only more difficult to enchant with fire. Well, if Master Alastair says so. I'll bring you one, you go sit at your usual place."

Martel went to the laboratory and waited. Soon after, Master Jerome appeared holding a large rock with both hands. It was slightly elongated, but generally round and smooth, suggesting a stonemage had shaped it. It probably weighed fifty pounds or more, and the artificer placed it on the floor rather than the wooden tables. "Enjoy yourself, lad. I must get back to my own work."

Martel dragged a stool over to sit in front of the stone. He reached out with his magic; it was cold, but otherwise completely ordinary. It also felt massive, unlike when Martel poured his magic into the earth or water, which felt more intangible with the risk of his spell dissolving in every direction. This was more like striking his fist against a brick wall. He sensed that it would not be easy for his magic to affect the stone, but he saw what Master Alastair had meant; there was not really any risk of Martel damaging the rock. He could pour as much magic into it as he wanted. Placing his hands on the smooth stone, Martel exerted his will to make the material heat up.

When the bell rang, Martel was unsure whether he had made any progress. Any heat he attempted to instil seemed to dissipate as soon as he ended his spell. The stone did feel warm to the touch, but only where Martel's hands had pressed against it. He did not get the sense that the warmth had taken up residence in the rock, able to create its own heat.

Well, first attempt. Next fiveday, he would have two more bells to practice, and if it did not suffice, he would have to continue practising on other days. He did not know when, as his classes on the remaining days exhausted most of his spellpower, but perhaps he could take it light such as during combat lessons on Maldays. As long as Moira was not in attendance, of course.

As always, Eleanor was present in the library, already reading before Martel arrived. Initially, he had been impressed by her punctuality; having a Khivan clock meant he arrived on time, and yet she always appeared first. Eventually, he realised that she probably started much earlier than him, driven by her motivation to do what it took to help her sister; it was just Martel who only spent the one bell.

She greeted him with a quick smile, and he grabbed one of the books to begin reading. He had his doubt they would ever find something to help her sister, given it was such a specific need; it did not seem reasonable that even if the Tyrians possessed the necessary magic to heal her, the pair would happen to come across it in one of these books.

Interrupting his reading, Martel considered another possibility. Eleanor's plan was to find proof that Tyrian magic to cure her sister existed and thereby convince her father to summon a skáld with the necessary power. But Martel knew that sometimes, the northern bards found their way to Morcaster on their own. The fellow who had sold rune-enchanted arrows for the mageknights at the games last year, or whoever had inscribed the wardstone that Ruby used when breaking into the convent of the Sisters of the Sun. Granted, magic to cure the mind seemed vastly more complicated than those examples, and Martel did not feel confident they would have that power. Certainly, nobody would bother selling rune arrows if they could sell healing instead.

But maybe, if Martel used his network in the city, he could find out if a skáld with such power had arrived in the city. He and Eleanor could ask directly whether Tyrian magic existed that could provide what they needed, rather than search endlessly among texts written by Asterians.

He decided to investigate that tonight. For now, he would help his friend as she had requested. Sitting up straight, he continued reading.

After saying farewell to Eleanor, Martel made a quick trip outside the castle. If he were to gain the help of Morcaster's underworld, there was only one of the Nine Lords he felt comfortable approaching. But unlike Kerra or Lady Pearl, the Friar did not seem to have a public house or similar establishment where he might be found. So if Martel wished to contact him, he had to do as last time, which meant asking the Keeper to set up a meeting. Which in turn meant buying an oatcake from the girl across the square.

She raised an eyebrow seeing him approach. "You're just buying this because you're hungry, right?"

"No, why? I need to speak with him."

"That's the issue. He said your business has been concluded, and he's not your errand boy. Whatever you need, you'll have to figure that out for yourself." She gave a sudden smile. "But you're welcome to buy all the cakes you want."

Not bothering with a response, Martel turned around and walked back. He felt that he had showed extraordinary goodwill towards the Keeper, going to great lengths to find the relic, and he would certainly remember being dismissed this way, should the rogue ever turn up asking for favours, hat in hand.

Perhaps this was for the better in the end, though. Talking to this girl just to be able to talk to the Keeper, solely that he might put Martel in touch with the Friar – it was a rather laborious way of communicating. Maybe he could try to locate the old monk himself and speak to him directly. Or perhaps this was a sign from above that this was a bad idea, and he should not indebt himself to those people. He would have to give it some thought. Another night, anyway; tonight, he would spend the rest of his magic trying to enchant a stubborn rock.