

Firebrand 41

Chapter 41: It was Pity Killed the Beast

It was Pity Killed the Beast

Since they had arrived one day early, the small band had to spend a day waiting for the convergence. Master Fenrick kept them busy with various exercises as demanded by their teachers back at the Lyceum. In between, they gathered firewood and filled their waterskins, and they explored the ruins further. The latter did not yield any results as such; anything of value had long since been removed. Only the subterranean chambers remained.

"What do you think is behind?" The question came from Maximilian. He stood in the moon chamber with Martel and Eleanor, all three of them staring at the stone door.

"Probably just the wine cellar." Eleanor giggled at her own jest.

"There could be all sorts of magical artefacts," Maximilian speculated.

"If so, don't you think all that would have been looted long ago?" Martel asked.

"Maybe they saved a little enchanted sword for me," the mageknight suggested, wiggling his eyebrows.

"I would admire your optimism except for how delusional it is," Eleanor retorted.

"Imagine if any books remained," Martel considered with a dreaming voice. "Think of all the knowledge we might gain."

"I am pretty sure the rats would long since have devoured any paper or parchment," Maximilian told him.

"What rats? Haven't you noticed, there aren't any animals around," Martel pointed out.

"I would not be too sure about that. I heard something scuffle around yesterday when Master Fenrick first showed us the room."

"You think you could hear rats scurrying about from the other side of that?" Eleanor threw her head towards the heavy stone door. Her voice carried a heavy tone of scepticism.

"I will have you know, my hearing is exquisite," Maximilian defended himself.

"Well, so is my sense of smell, and I can smell that lunch is ready." Martel, never one to miss a meal, left the moon chamber as the first; the other two followed after.

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For the rest of the day, the students found it difficult to focus on their exercises; as night-time approached, their anticipation slowly rose. Still, they had to wait until the sun had set and the sky darkened. Only then did Master Fenrick gather them to take them all into the star chamber.

"Spread out," he commanded them. "Surround the stone and keep your eyes on it."

As they watched, the stars rose in the night sky until the three brightest stood arraigned directly above the gap in the ceiling. Faint light reached the top of the obelisk, gently illuminating the top, while the rest remained the same, dark colour.

"Now watch this." Fenrick stepped close to the stone and placed his hand upon its surface. Slowly, light travelled from the top of the obelisk down hitherto unseen veins until it reached the tip of his fingers. Once the connection had been made, the light began to spread through the rest of the obsidian stone until it glowed with white light. "I was born under the star of Glund." He pulled back, removing his hand, and the stone lost its lustre. "Marche. Try."

Hesitating slightly, the mageknight removed his glove, took a step forward, and placed his hand against the obelisk. Again, the light travelled down from the top to reach his fingers and turn into a soft, blue glow.

"The star of Perel. Unexpected, but it happens. Now another."

One after the other, they all stepped forward to touch and have their star revealed. When it came time for Eleanor, the obelisk became alighted with red.

"Malac. Not a surprise for those with martial inclination." The same happened for most of the mageknights, except for Cheval, who also had blue.

Martel waited as the last, letting the acolytes have their turn first. Once he finally placed his hand against the obelisk, a moment passed where the stone remained the same dull hue, and he feared to be revealed as a fraud without magical skill. Then, the light spread down the veins and finally began to fill the room with white luminescence.

"A fellow child of Glund. I did wonder if there would be any. We do seem fewer in number, at least in groups of mages more inclined to the martial arts." Fenrick observed Martel as he stepped away, and the stone returned to its dormant form. "Now, as we are fortunate enough to have a full moon, allow me to demonstrate the brilliance possessed by the wizards of Archen."

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The group ventured into the moon chamber. The light of that celestial object entered the room from a gap above, as in the previous space, but with a key difference. Rather than a singular beam of light, it became scattered into three separate rays, each of them striking one of the sigils on the ground.

Master Fenrick arranged for Maximilian to step onto the symbol that represented the rogue. "The jester for you." He gestured for a girl, Elaine, to take the position of the warrior. "Martel, if you would please." He gestured towards the third sigil, showing the sage. The novice quickly stepped over to take his place.

Entering the moonlight on his designated spot as the third and last, the very thing happened as promised by their teacher. With a grinding sound, the stone door slid to the side, disappearing into the wall.

"You may step away. The door only closes once you activate the mechanism again," Master Fenrick explained. He summoned a flame and let it drift towards the now open doorway. The light illuminated many more symbols on the inside of the frame, continuing down the revealed corridor. "If you are wondering, the inscriptions serve as a barrier to prevent passage. Though not for humans." Stepping forward, Fenrick extended his hand to reach past the doorway. "The barrier is not to keep us out, but to keep something in."

"What?" breathed Eleanor.

"We do not know. Nobody has ever passed this threshold and returned." Master Fenrick turned around to look at his students. "Let me stress that. Death has claimed every single mage who ever dared to go beyond this door. I trust none of you are so foolish to even contemplate the idea. Maximilian, Elaine, and Martel. If you would please return to the sigils."

The three students did as instructed, and the stone door closed again.

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Back at camp, a fire burned to provide warmth in the cool spring evening. The students sat around, catching some heat before it was time to sleep. "I promised Mistress Rana I would gather some rare herbs for her potions while the moon is strong. I assume that I can leave you alone for a bell," Master Fenrick considered. "Should there be any doubt, let me be clear. You are all forbidden from leaving the camp while I'm away. Do not enter the ruins."

The youths murmured their assent. Fetching a bronze sickle, their teacher disappeared into the dark night.

The students glanced at each other. "So, what do you think is down there?" Maximilian asked.

"Maybe a dragon, sleeping on a hoard of gold and jewels." Alain, the third boy among the mageknights besides Cheval, sat with a dreaming expression. As the son of a minor noble, his family could barely afford to pay for tuition at the Lyceum, yet they were too proud to have the Empire pay for his education.

"There could be a whole library," Martel reiterated, still imagining the same thing as this morning.

"I doubt it is books that kill everyone who enters, except from boredom," Maximilian snorted.

"I am not afraid to enter," Cheval declared with an arrogant voice. "Master Fenrick just told us that to frighten us like little children. I bet there is absolutely nothing left beyond that door."

"Easy boast to make when we can't leave the camp," Martel pointed out.

"I will show you," the mageknight declared. "We can go there now. Open the door and I will go through."

"We are not allowed to leave camp," Martel mumbled.

"Now who is afraid?" Cheval asked with contempt.

"Master Fenrick made it very clear we should not cross that threshold." Elaine crossed her arms.

"We do not have to cross it, but are you not tempted to get a better look? The symbols on the door keep us safe while we are inside the chamber. We just need some better light to look down the corridor," argued Maximilian. "Martel is good at creating light. He can send a flame down to illuminate the place while we all watch from a safe distance."

"We shouldn't leave camp," Martel reiterated.

"Master Fenrick will not know. He is gone for a whole bell. It will take us ten minutes to the door and ten minutes back," Maximilian claimed. "Come on, Martel, we need you to open the door."

"You are wasting your time. Who ever heard of a scarecrow with courage?" Cheval smiled.

"Nothing wrong with being sensible," Eleanor chimed in.

Martel looked at the other students. Some regarded him with condescension, some with expectation, and one with pity. The last hit him the most, coming from someone he wanted to impress.

"Let's go."

Chapter 42: Burnt Children

Burnt Children

The small band took a few branches from the campfire as torches and headed for the ruins. The dark hindered their progress. And they stumbled around a bit until they found the door that led down.

Light still streamed in from above as they entered the moon chamber. Without hesitation, Cheval stepped onto the sigil of the Jester. Alain joined him on the next symbol of the Warrior. All of them stared at Martel. Swallowing, he entered the beam of moonlight by taking the place of the Sage. Stone grinding stone could be heard as the door retracted.

Maximilian threw his torch as far as he could down the corridor. It landed on the ground, creating a small ring of light in the otherwise near impenetrable darkness. "That is a long hallway," he considered. "I wonder how far underground this place stretches? Martel, send your fire down."

Stepping away from the sigil, Martel conjured a bright flame in his hand. Straining his focus, he pushed the fire to move away from him and travel down the corridor. It illuminated the stonewalls, which carried the strange markings or letters unknown to him; at times, as the light went further, it disappeared to reveal unseen doorways.

"This place is a maze," Eleanor said softly.

Suddenly, Cheval pushed his way past them to cross the threshold.

"Stay back!" Eleanor reached out for him, but he simply took another step further in.

"What is the matter? Scared?" Cheval turned around to face them. Behind him lay the torch; further down, Martel's light still floated, though he struggled to maintain the connection.

An eerie sound reached them. Like a gust of wind or the snort of an animal. For a moment, Martel's magelight became reflected in something that resembled metal, or perhaps another material. Whatever it was, it moved, straight into Martel's fire, which dissipated. Once more, the farther end of the corridor lay in darkness, concealing everything.

"Cheval, get back!" Eleanor urged him.

The mageknight simply laughed, running his fingers over the inscriptions on the stonewalls next to him. He turned around to look down the nearly black hallway, where Maximilian's torch still lay on the ground. "Cowards, all of you."

Fifty feet ahead of him, something stomped on the torch to extinguish it, plunging the rest of the corridor into darkness once more.

"Cheval, run!"

The boy stood frozen in fear, rooted to the spot. None of them could see what hid in the black, but they heard a terrifying roar that turned their blood to ice, followed by the sound of something charging.

A shape rushed through the chamber. Reaching the doorway, Master Fenrick stomped his foot into the ground, and a wall of earth rose from the ground to block the foreboding corridor further ahead. Grabbing Cheval by the collar, he pulled the acolyte back into the moon chamber. "Close the door!" he shouted.

Maximilian, Eleanor, and Martel jumped onto the sigils. Slowly, too slowly for Martel's liking, the stone door slid back into place. Behind it, they heard the sound of something tearing Master Fenrick's earthen wall down.

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Their heads low, seven students followed their teacher out of the chambers. "I specifically warned you about this place. I told you to stay at the camp. I hope this has taught you all a lesson. Two, even. To listen to your teachers, and never to underestimate the dangers of meddling in things you don't understand." Even walking behind him, Martel could tell that Master Fenrick was fuming.

"Yes, master," the students muttered.

"And I still have herbs to collect for Mistress Rana before all the moonlight is gone. I shall be lucky to get a single bell of sleep after I am done. I assume that this time I can rely on you young fools to stay in camp as told."

"Yes, master."

"How – how did you know to find us so quickly?" Eleanor asked.

"My runes. They alerted me of movements in the camp as soon as you left. Which is why if any of you trip one of my wards again tonight, that student can look forward to being expelled."

"But did you know we would do this?" Eleanor continued.

"I suspected it. You tell children that fire is hot, they won't believe you. Not until they burn their fingers. At least this way, I was around to pull you morons out of the fire." The teacher gave Cheval an angry glare.

They reached their campsite. Left unattended, their campfire had died, and it looked as pitiful as Martel felt.

"Sleep. Now!" Master Fenrick barked the command, and none dared to disobey. He was still muttering about foolish students as he stalked away in search of herbs, brandishing a sickle.

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The next morning, mood in the camp remain low. With only a few hours of sleep, Fenrick had a sour disposition as he ordered the students to break camp and get ready for the return journey.

Placing their belongings onto the mule, Eleanor glanced at the teacher. "I cannot believe he placed us in such danger," she whispered, looking over the back of the animal at Martel.

"Well, to be precise, he let us place ourselves in danger. After he explicitly warned us and forbade us from doing so." Martel patted the mule.

"What do you mean?" Eleanor placed her hands against her hips, looking a little offended.

"I am simply saying that maybe Master Fenrick has a point. A burnt child fears the fire," Martel explained, repeating a Tyrian proverb.

Eleanor crossed her arms. "I doubt that would help him against our parents if one of us had died."

Nearby, Clarissa giggled. "I cannot imagine what your father would do if his only child had died on a school trip."

Eleanor stiffened. "I have a sister. You know that."

"Sure, but it is not like... You know what I mean."

"I do not." Turning her back demonstratively, Eleanor finished packing.

Walking past them, Cheval scoffed. "My father expects me to face such danger. He even bought a healing potion for me to carry with, costing twenty golden crowns. I came prepared."

"Let's go!" With a face as surly as his tone of voice, Master Fenrick set their small party into motion, and they began the journey back to Morcaster and the Lyceum.

Chapter 43: Against the Stream

Against the Stream

The journey home proved uneventful, which Martel was thankful for. The visit to the Stone of Archen had given him more excitement than he needed, even if the students themselves were to blame, himself included. And while Martel was no stranger to rough sleeping, he had gotten used to his own bed in his own room. Not to mention proper meals and freshly baked bread that the kitchens of the Lyceum could provide. As much as he respected Master Fenrick's knowledge of all matters arcane, his skills in organising a small expedition like this had proven to be basic, meaning rather simple fare for all meals of the day.

They arrived on a Manday, nearly two fivedays after they set out. Passing through the gate, the sounds and smells of the city immediately struck them from all sides. Martel had not missed this particular aspect of life in Morcaster, but as the Lyceum came in sight, his first thought was the feeling of returning home.

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The afternoon was still young as Martel placed his few belongings back in his room. This gave him plenty of time to visit Shadi later and relate everything that had happened on his trip, and he could even take care of something else first.

He wondered briefly how and where to approach Mistress Rana. In the end, he decided on the apothecary rather than her personal chamber, considering he had never spoken to her before. It did necessitate walking through the infirmary, and he spent a moment steeling himself as the sound, sight, and smell of sick people reminded him of his father's last days. Rushing past the beds filled with ill people, almost knocking a nurse over, Martel reached the apothecary.

Opening the door, he found two people at work. One was the apothecary's assistant, whom he had met before; the other, a tall woman wearing a richly embroidered green robe, had to be Mistress Rana.

"Excuse me, Mistress Rana?" As Martel spoke, the two women turned around.

"Yes? What is it, boy?" The apothecary spoke Asterian with a slight Sindhian accent; the only other trace of her heritage were some coloured beads woven into her hair.

"I would like to work for you." Originally, Martel's had hoped to gain permanent work for Master Jerome, like Henry did for the overseer by manning the desk at the entrance hall. But the artificer only employed acolytes who had acquired the magical skills to make them useful. By the time Martel got that far, most of his days at the Lyceum would be over. If he wanted to learn a trade, something he could combine his magic with, he needed to start earlier. And although he was loath to give Cheval any credit, the acolyte's mention of a healing potion had roused Martel's interest.

"I have an apprentice, and you are a novice. The answer is no. Nora, get back to work."

"I'll work for free," Martel said quickly, surprising everyone including himself; Nora, who had just picked up her knife to continue cutting herbs, arrested her movement. "As long as I'll learn. I don't have the luxury of time, waiting until I am an acolyte."

The Mistress of Elixirs gave him a scrutinising look. "You understand that you must follow my directions to the slightest detail. The smallest deviation and you could ruin my labours. There will be no excuse for sloppy work. Sleepiness, hunger, a headache – it does not matter. One mistake, and you are banned from my apothecary."

"I understand." Martel nodded eagerly.

"I will expect you to work one bell every single day, either the second or the third."

"I'll be here."

Mistress Rana crossed her arms. "Very well. I will give you the chance to prove yourself. Come over here." She turned back towards her table, and Martel joined her. "This herb is called strangleroot. I need it finely chopped in as small pieces as you see here." She pointed at the bits of green on the table next to a knife. "Here is the important part. Now the herb has been dried, it must not touch moisture. One drop of your sweat will ruin its potency."

Martel thoroughly dried his hands in his robe.

"Show me your work."

Having eviscerated his share of vegetables in the past, Martel confidently grabbed the knife and began cutting.

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Supper was a bell away, but Martel figured that if he made haste, he could squeeze in a visit to Shadi and make it back home for mealtime. Mistress Rana had shown if not enthusiasm, at least acceptance of his skill so far, and he was invited back tomorrow. This did not make him an apprentice to the apothecary yet, but it felt like something to be excited about and one more thing to tell Shadi.

Leaving the Lyceum, Martel went south. He had barely reached the market district when he noticed a change. When he and the others had entered the city earlier this day, they had come from the north and passed through the affluent districts before they reached the school. The southern parts of Morcaster, holding more inhabitants and less wealth, seemed different. The market, which should be bustling with trade and the jangling of coin, had closed shops. Not from a lack of footfall, as Martel found it difficult to get through the crowd; but the citizens of Morcaster had not come to buy or sell.

Anger lay in the air. People shouted and raised their fists. Pushing, shoving, trampling. Martel became caught in the throng of people, forcing him along. He tried to summon his magical shield to protect himself, but it availed nothing against the constant push and pull of the crowd. He could not properly hear or understand any of the furious words that surrounded him, nor did the people seem inclined to elaborate.

Finally, he managed to draw himself to the side and duck in between two stalls. Trying to control his rising panic, Martel pressed himself back and kept out of sight as the horde of people continued to move through the district. Only as the multitudes began to thin did he dare to leave his refuge. The angry mob had seemed directionless at first, but it appeared to mostly move southwards. Already, the horizon had darkened, and Martel had not even made it out of the market district. Abandoning his goal for now, he turned around and went back to the Lyceum, still mindful to avoid the crowds.

Chapter 44: What Ails the Heart

What Ails the Heart

Next day was Solday and the resumption of Martel's regular schedule with the addition of his new daily task in the apothecary. First though, his old duty of assisting the artificer beckoned. Two hours of doing small works of maintenance followed. Dull, but Martel felt no need for excitement. Between the journey to the Stone of Archen and yesterday's troubling event, his appetite for adventure was sated. Still, he could not help but feel curious about what currently took place in the city, and so he approached Master Jerome when time permitted it.

"Yesterday, I went into town," Martel began to explain. "I didn't get far. What's happening on the streets?"

"Ah, right, you were away. With the return of spring, the Khivan war has come out of hibernation. Last month, our forces attempted to storm Nahavand."

"What's that?"

"A great Khivan city that lies by the river Savena. We have besieged it for years, but the Khivan cannons make a direct assault foolish." The artificer shook his head. "I cannot imagine what madness possessed them to try."

"So what, people are mad about the attempt?"

"Among other things. Mad that we tried and failed, that the war has dragged on for so long yet we've barely pushed into Khiva, that so many have died for nothing. Two days ago, the first ship with the wounded from the assault reached the harbour," Jerome explained. "Along with the news of the casualties, people are incensed."

"But what are they gaining by taking to the streets?"

Master Jerome shrugged. "I doubt that's on their minds. They are animated by anger, not reason, Martel. And if nothing else, they are letting our leaders know."

"But innocent people could get caught up and get hurt."

"Yes. Which is why you should stay off the streets until the anger simmers down. Just a few days should suffice. In fact, stay at the school."

Martel nodded mutely, even as he had no intentions of doing that.

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Straight after assisting Master Jerome, Martel went to his new employment. Forcing himself to walk naturally, he crossed the infirmary and entered the apothecary. He found only Mistress Rana, poring over a great tome.

She looked up hearing his approach. "Good. I dislike when students are late."

"What's that?" He nodded towards the book.

"The sum of my knowledge and far too advanced for you." She closed the tome and gave him an examining look. "What is your specialty? Assuming you have any particular talents."

"I'm working with Master Alastair to become a weathermage. I am starting to learn control of the elements, but I have only been practising for a few months."

"I see. Well, skill with water can be useful for an alchemist. So can fire, controlling the temperature when you brew. But I imagine that is low on Master Alastair's list of priorities for you to learn."

When the time came, Martel did not think fire would be an issue for him.

"Regardless, do not expect to come near a cauldron for the first year. Even if I agree to let you stay, you will spend that time learning your herbs and ingredients, not to mention how they must be prepared and preserved."

"Understood."

"Good. Here is your first lesson. Pay attention, for I shall only explain this once." Rana gestured at the countless ingredients lining the shelves around them. "In Sindhian alchemy, magic is simply life. All living things thus contain the potential for magic. With the right methods, we may coax that magic forth to create wondrous elixirs."

"On our trip to the Stone of Archen, Master Fenrick mentioned gathering herbs in the moonlight. That last bit seemed very important, given that he sacrificed his night's sleep for it."

The alchemist smiled sardonically. "He will live, I'm sure. And yes. The light of the moon seems to fill certain herbs with magic, or reach their full potential. Thus, harvesting them during a full moon gives the most potency."

Martel considered what he had learned in astronomy and whether there was a connection.

"But before you can learn to gather your own ingredients, you must first know them and how to treat them, so they do not lose their properties. This is foxglove, one of countless reagents for a healing potion, and among the most common. So if you mess this up, at least the loss is limited."

Not the most encouraging speech, but Martel did not let that discourage him. "What do I do?"

"We want the leaves. First, you pluck them this way..."

~

Despite Master Jerome's warning, Martel ventured into the city after lunch. He stuck to smaller streets, circumventing the market district. It added half an hour to his travel time, but he saw no sign of trouble. As he entered the Khivan enclave, it felt cold and unwelcoming. Even with few people

outside, hostility hung in the air. Keeping his hood up, Martel hastened to reach the watchmaker's workshop.

As he pushed on the door, he found it locked. Instead, he knocked several times. Finally, he heard the door unlock; as it pulled open, Shadi stood behind. "Martel! Come in." He slipped inside, and she closed the door behind him, turning the bolt. "We were just upstairs."

"It's good to see you're both unhurt!"

"We know to stay close to home when trouble brews," Shadi replied. "It usually dies down before they reach the Khivan quarter anyway."

From atop the stairs, Master Farhad appeared. Seeing Martel, he made a grumbling sound. "Tell the boy." He disappeared again.

"Tell me what?"

Shadi cleared her throat. "It's not just Asterians who are angry. People here have relatives on the Khivan side. And many of them don't like mages either, especially not with the war going on. Already some complain because my dad is doing this big work for your school."

"I'm sorry to hear that, that's unfair."

"So the thing is..." Shadi bit her lower lip. "My dad says, unless you're bringing a message from your master, you shouldn't come around here anymore. Having a mage visit could give him trouble, more than he already gets from the neighbours."

Martel stared at her, his heart sinking. "You mean we can't be friends anymore?"

"No, no, of course we can! We just can't meet here. But we can still get together out in the city."

"The way things are now, I don't think that's an option."

"Not right now. But it will cool down soon. It always does, after some days. I was thinking we could meet next Solday? Assuming everything's calm. In the market district, say near the statue of that old legate on his horse." She gave him a hopeful look.

"Alright. If you think that'll be safe." Martel tried to hide his reaction; he could not help but feel downhearted.

"At fifth bell."

Master Farhad showed himself at the top of the stairs again. "Enough. Boy, go home."

Shadi mouthed an apology to him and undid the bolt, opening the door. He gave her a mirthless smile and left.

Chapter 45: The Monster Within

The Monster Within

Hitherto, second bell on Peldays had been empty on Martel's schedule. Thanks to his new arrangement, those free hours were now devoted to the apothecary. When he arrived, he saw no trace of Mistress Rana; instead, her apprentice Nora waited for him.

"Hullo," he said cautiously.

"Hey there. Today it's just you and me, so I get to order you around." Her mirthful expression took the sting from her words.

"Alright. Is Mistress Rana teaching a class?"

"Nah, she is in the laboratory. Got some potion brewing that needs constant attention."

"The what place?"

Nora grinned. "The laboratory. Where the actual alchemy happens. This place is just to prepare ingredients, and on occasion, supply the infirmary with basic remedies." She pointed at a door in the back of the apothecary. "Stairs there lead to the upper floor where Mistress Rana does her work. Big, nice room with tall windows allowing lots of fresh air. But don't expect Mistress Rana to show you any time soon. It'll take you a long time to earn her trust."

"That's fine. So I'll be helping you today?"

"Yes. Mistress Rana mentioned that you are learning water magic?"

"Yeah, to be a weathermage."

"Great. Well, anyone with a basic grasp of elemental magic can do this. So anyone in this school, except for the mageknights." She rolled her eyes. "Their elemental skills always stink, and they get away with it because nobody would dream of preventing them from graduating."

"I had no idea."

"Yeah. So anyway, we have a fresh batch of herbs to prepare." Nora pointed at the worktable where she had already begun dissecting the plants. "And an important part is to dry them and avoid rot. Time to put those water skills to use, blue eyes. Pull all the moisture you can out of them, and I'll inspect your work afterwards. Understood?"

"Clear as a cloudless day." Stretching out his hand to hover over the herbs, Martel began drawing all the water out.

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While it seemed a slow route to knowledge, doing chores in the apothecary with the promise of one day being allowed into the laboratory, Martel did not mind. Learning and practising how to treat the ingredients was necessary, and for once, he had put his magical abilities to practical use that did not involve physical violence. No mageknights or berserkers to fight in the apothecary. And if doing these simple tasks also helped him train his elemental skills, all the better. As monotonous as the last two hours had been, it was still miles better than many of the exercises that Master Alastair made him do.

He kept that last thought to himself as he entered the Hall of Elements, inclining his head in greeting to his teacher.

"Martel, good to have you back. How was your journey to the Stone of Archen?"

"Eventful, to say the least. Do you know about the moon chamber and what lurks beyond?"

"I have heard the stories. They have given me no desire to investigate further."

Master Alastair was smarter than his students, evidently. "I still have trouble sleeping."

"What? Did you enter the maze?"

"No, we just opened the door. We didn't see anything, really, but we heard it and felt it." Martel shivered lightly at the thought.

"Master Fenrick opened the door and waited while this menace approached?" His teacher stared at him in disbelief.

"No, he showed us how the door opens and closes. He told us to stay away, but we didn't listen. So we went back to the door. It was a mistake, we know that now." Martel suddenly regretted telling any of this.

"Fenrick," Alastair grumbled. "He knew how you would react. He baited you just to teach you some kind of lesson, I bet."

"We certainly learnt something." Martel hesitated, almost a little afraid to ask. "Master, what is behind the door? It seemed more like a beast than a man or a spirit, but what animal could survive down there?"

"Few things," Alastair mumbled, "unless it is something undead."

Just hearing the word made Martel feel chilly.

"Enough of that. What about your exercises? Did you find time to do them?"

"I did. I can control the earth to some extent, but it doesn't obey me entirely. I can't quite imagine it in my mind, so it always feels a bit wonky."

"Show me, and we'll see if we can improve on it."

~

When supper came around, Martel filled his bowl with stew and took as many pieces of bread as he could get away with. Eating only the first dish, he stuffed the bread into his robe and left.

The streets still lay uneasy with bands of people that looked like trouble, but by keeping an ear out for noise and sticking to smaller streets, Martel managed to avoid them.

He finally stopped in front of a familiar alleyway. "It's me," he called out, unpacking the bread from the dining hall.

Scrambling noises came from different piles of trash as the homeless children emerged. Martel recognised the little Mouse and the boy acting as their chief, while Badger seemed absent. He extended his hands, offering the bread, which they eagerly snapped.

"Sorry, I know it isn't much."

"Any food is better than no food." The little chief shrugged and took a bite of his bread.

In the fading sunlight, especially in the alley between tall buildings, Martel did not notice it at first. But as he looked at the children, something roused his suspicion. Extending his hand, he summoned his magelight.

Some of the children became startled and shied away. Others stared with wide eyes at the magical flame. The chief scowled. "What's that for?"

Martel dismissed the magelight. "Sorry, it was just so dark here." He had seen what he needed to see, but he was not sure how to broach the subject. He sensed that the wrong word would send these skittish children away beyond his reach forever.

"We like the dark. It lets us hide."

Not only that, Martel thought. Besides the filth and malnutrition, it also hid the fresh bruises on several of the children, including the little chief. Someone was hurting them, and Martel's first instinct was to fight. But he did not know who or what, and he was learning not to rush into things. He needed advice. "I'll be back when I can with more food," he promised. Around him, the children savoured the last few bites of their bread.

Chapter 46: Bread and Balm

Bread and Balm

Martel rarely if ever enjoyed his lessons in combat magic on Maldays, but today, he was more eager to get through them than usual. When he had made it home last night after visiting the homeless children, it had been after last bell, and Eleanor was already asleep.

He tried to catch her alone at breakfast, but her friends did not allow that to happen, and Martel was not interested in discussing anything within earshot of them. His first lesson and his work in the apothecary kept him busy for two bells after that; Mistress Rana reproached him for being distracted and warned him not to take his place for granted.

He considered asking Maximilian for advice, but he already knew the mageknight would advocate for swift action involving cracked heads. Since he would not be able to leave the Lyceum until his classes and chores were done anyway, he armed himself with patience and waited for his second lesson to be over.

~

After two hours where the mageknights sparred with each other and Martel practised his empowerment, he could finally catch up to Eleanor on her own.

"Hey, can we talk?"

"Sure. Do you mind if we walk towards the girls' tower? I really need a bath sooner rather than later."

"Yeah, no problem." They began to walk. Martel scratched the back of his head, not sure how to explain. "So, you said before I dive into something, I should ask you about it first."

"Yes...? Martel, are you in trouble?" She stopped to look at him.

"Oh no, I'm not. But there are these children living on the streets... I'm trying to help them."

Eleanor resumed walking. "That is admirable, but there must be thousands of such children in Morcaster. What could you hope to do?"

"But why doesn't anyone do something? The Faith of the Sun or the emperor."

"I think they do. I am sure the priests give out food and other charities as they can, but the resources are limited, and the emperor has other concerns."

"Then he is not a very good emperor."

Eleanor stopped in her tracks. "You should not say that out loud. You cannot know who is listening," she spoke softly.

"Fine. But what about the Lyceum? I do tasks for Master Jerome. Can't he hire some of these kids to work for him, so they don't have to live on the streets?"

"I doubt he has that great a need. Most of the work is done by the servants already employed. I am not sure there is much you can do for these children, except perhaps spare them some food or coin when you can."

"It's not just that. They have bruises all over, Eleanor. Someone is hurting these kids." Martel's dismay could be read all over his face. They slowed down as they approached the girls' dormitory tower.

"That sounds like someone I once knew." Eleanor stopped just short of the common room. "I need to visit the baths. Martel, this does not seem like anything you should tangle with. Morcaster is full of brutes. If they are willing to hurt children, think about what they are willing to do to you."

"They just looked so pitiful. I brought them some bread, and it felt like a drop in the ocean."

"It all helps. Do you still have the balm I gave you?"

"Of course, good idea. There's plenty left. Thanks."

She gave him a quick smile. "I am glad. Now if you will excuse me, I really need to soak."

~

After supper, Martel left the Lyceum armed with a jar of ointment, some slices of bread, and two apples he had saved from lunch. The unrest on the streets had become quiet, giving him no trouble to reach his destination.

As he stepped into the alleyway, he pulled out the food. "Here. I brought some more."

Quickly, seven children clamoured around him to get their share. The little chief took out a rusty, broken blade to carve up the apples. Even as he did this, distributing the slices, he regarded Martel with a suspicious glance. "What's your purpose here, beanstalk? Nobody gives away their food without wanting something in return."

"It's not really my food," Martel replied. "We have plenty of it at my school. Might as well share it."

"Well, if you're trying to recruit us, it won't work. We can do the odd job for you, like following someone around, if you got the silver to pay. But we won't earn for you."

"I just want to help. I have brothers and sisters. If any of them were in need, I hope someone would help them."

"Weasel, don't annoy him," the little Mouse exclaimed, looking at her leader. "He might not come back."

Martel smiled. "It will take more than that to stop me. Does that hurt?" He nodded at a purple mark on her upper arm, visible through the rags she wore.

"Sometimes. But that distracts me from feeling hungry."

Martel pulled out his small jar. "Would you like me to make it better?"

Her eyes widened. "Is that magic?"

"Be careful," hissed Weasel, their small chief.

"It certainly works like it. I use it myself." He undid the string that tied the leather around the opening and dug out some of the balm. Carefully, he smeared it on to Mouse's arm.

It did not take long for surprise to fill her face. "It feels better!"

Martel laughed a little. "I told you it would."

The other children pressed forward, pulling up sleeves or removing ragged shirts to reveal their own injuries, and Martel set to work.

"How did this happen?" He asked as he tended to a large bruise on Badger's back.

"It was big Gerald," Badger replied.

"Quiet," Weasel exclaimed.

"Who is this Gerald?" Martel asked.

"He's one of the bigger boys," Mouse explained. "He collects what we earn, and if we don't earn enough, he beats us."

"Don't tell him any more," Weasel shouted.

Martel's expression darkened. "Where can I find this fellow?"

"He comes every night after sunset to collect what we earned today," Badger helpfully said.

Martel looked up at the sky. Its colour matched his mood; it would not be long.

~

Frail moonlight and distant streetlamps struggled to illuminate the alley when a gangly youth of some eighteen years entered. With hard eyes, sinewy arms, and a few scars on his face, he was the sort of boy that would have scared Martel a year ago.

"Come out, Weasel, you little weasel." The boy laughed at his own joke. He fell quiet as Martel stepped out from the shadows. "Who the blazes are you?"

"You are done here. Don't you ever return."

Gerald howled with laughter. "Do you know who you're messing with? I'll be joining the Broken Blades soon. They got my back. And they'll carve you up, assuming I let you live." He drew a knife with a snarl and sprinted forward.

In a flash, Martel remembered Master Fenrick in the ruins, and how he raised an earthen wall to protect himself. Acting quickly, he stamped his feet into the ground pouring his magic through the motion. He saw it clearly in his mind and willed it to happen.

From the stamped dirt, earth shot up in front of his charging adversary. Not quite as impressive as Fenrick's wall, it only reached ankle height, but it was enough to trip Gerald. The scraggly boy fell, planting his face in the ground. Martel stepped forward to pin him down with a knee against his shoulder. Igniting flames around his hand, Martel held it in front of Gerald's eyes. f(r)eeweb(n)ovel

"I am a mage. If you ever come back here, I'll set you on fire."

Martel rose up and stepped back, letting the boy get on his feet, all the while maintaining the flames around his hand. Gerald stumbled backwards, turned around, and ran for dear life.

Chapter 47: A Cold Touch

A Cold Touch

Martel woke refreshed after a solid night's sleep, feeling good about himself. He had witnessed an injustice and used his power to correct it. Even his weak skills in magic had been enough to handle that thug and scare him off. He could only dream of what he might accomplish once his powers grew further.

In the apothecary, only Nora was present like yesterday. She greeted him and gave him some quick instructions on his work for the bell.

"Hey, I have a question for you," Martel said as he picked and dried the seeds from bellthorns.

"Yes?"

"You make that salve for bruises, which the mageknights use. Is that a complicated bit of alchemy?"

Nora laughed. "Not at all, it's an apothecary remedy. Just a few simple ingredients. Think you can probably get them all cheap at the market. Mash them together, add a bit of time, and you got yourself a nice, thick paste. We wouldn't sell it for seventeen pieces a jar if it required more."

"Right, that makes sense." Martel hesitated. "Could you show me how to make it?"

"I'm not sure Mistress Rana wants me teaching you anything other than what she says. Plus, we are not allowed to use any of the ingredients here for our own purpose."

"There can't be any harm in me learning something so simple, right? What if I buy all the ingredients? You said I could get them from the market." Martel felt a little uncomfortable pressing her, but the thought of learning something so useful ignited him. Besides helping people, if he could make and sell this ointment for seventeen silvers a jar to mageknights and others with money, he would not have need of other work.

"I'm not sure. Mistress Rana doesn't just let us make these things. She doesn't want us running our own little apothecary, making our own stuff and selling it around. Someone might get hurt, and it's against the rules of the Apothecary Guild." Nora chewed on her lip.

Martel's dream of becoming a rich apothecary at school died as quickly as it had been born. But he could still use more of the salve; he had emptied the small jar yesterday, and he knew not all of the children had been present. "What if I bring you the ingredients? Could you make it for me? I can't afford seventeen silver pieces, but I have some friends that have need of it."

Nora stood, wavering. "I suppose this one time wouldn't hurt. But I can't promise it will be as good as Mistress Rana's. I have only made it a handful of times."

"My friends aren't picky. You should see them eat." Martel smiled.

"I'll make you a list of the ingredients then."

~

Martel arrived for his lesson in elemental magic in high spirits. Besides his success in helping Weasel and his friends, he had something to show Master Alastair.

"Martel, come in." His teacher stood waiting for him in the Hall of Elements. "How is your progress?"

"I think I have made some. Let me try." Martel thought back on last night, how he felt, and how the need to act had spurred his magic. He stomped his foot against the dirt floor. One yard ahead, a small mound of earth shot up. It was smaller than yesterday, but it held. Even as Martel stopped focusing on it, it remained stable.

"Very good!" Master Alastair slapped his hand onto Martel's shoulder, and the novice glowed with pride. "We will practice for a while longer with earth, but you may soon be ready to take on air. Though I'm curious about one thing."

Martel looked at him questioningly.

"This does not resemble any of the exercises I showed you," Master Alastair pointed out with a wry smile. "How did you learn this?"

"I'm sorry, master, I have been doing all of them, I swear."

His teacher raised his hand in a calming gesture. "All that matters is that you learn. I am only curious how you did learn."

Martel hesitated a little. "I saw Master Fenrick do something like this at the ruins of Archen, only much better, of course. And out in the city, when someone came running at me, I just reacted as Master Fenrick did."

Master Alastair scowled briefly at the mention of the name before his expression cleared. "Well, at least you gained something from that ill-fated trip. And given your nature, our shared nature, I can see why emotions might help to release your magic in certain situations."

"So wouldn't it be easier for me to learn in that way?"

"If no other method seemed to work, it might be required. But it cannot teach you how to reliably summon and control your magic every time you need it. And especially for mages like us, control is everything."

Martel thought back on the fight in the basement against the Tyrian berserker and his henchmen. He had been able to summon a stream of fire against the first bandit, but not the second. Master Alastair's words held some wisdom, he had to admit.

"This does remind me, I forgot to ask. Did you ever learn your star sign?"

"Oh, I did. I was born under Glund."

"Ah, I see. I'm a man of Malac myself." Alastair smiled.

"Does it make a big difference for our magic? How the stars shine and all."

His teacher shrugged. "Perhaps it does to those who are new to magic, or whose power is volatile and susceptible to influence and fluctuations. But that is why we learn control. To set ourselves above."

~

Once his tasks and lessons were done, Martel went to market. He had Nora's list of ingredients for the salve and his few remaining coins in his pocket. Normalcy had returned to Morcaster for now,

and he saw no signs of unrest. Trade had resumed, and the vendors were eager to make up for lost days of sale.

Making his way through his list, Martel noticed something new. Here and there, he caught glimpses of children observing him. Of course, there had always been lots of children at the marketplace, but he had never paid them much attention before. Now he was much more aware. And he saw them watching or even following him around, from a distance. He wondered if they were part of Weasel's crew, or if word had spread. After all, Morcaster had lots of children in need.

He had nearly finished his purchases when a beggar approached. "Pennies for the poor," cried the man, wearing rags and with one eye covered. "Spare a copper for an old and broken soldier, unable to serve his emperor anymore."

"Sorry," Martel mumbled, "I got no money left." It was even true; he needed his last few pennies to finish his list.

"No harm, good master, no harm. Sol bless you." The beggar extended his hands and took hold of Martel's.

A shock ran through the novice. It felt like death itself had grabbed his hand as an icy chill pressed against his skin. He staggered backwards and quickly walked away.

Left behind, the beggar looked down at the gold coin hidden in the palm of his hand.

Chapter 48: Strung Along

Strung Along

Arriving at the apothecary for his morning work, Martel once again met only Nora. "It's starting to feel like you're here more than Mistress Rana," he jested.

"Oh, she's here on occasion, except if she's out of the city to gather herbs and such," the apprentice remarked. "But I think she's waiting to see if you stick to it before investing more time in you. Not a lot who'd work one bell every day for free."

"I guess I'm not like a lot of people." Martel smiled.

"I suppose not. But anyway, once you seem committed, I imagine she'll begin instructing you personally. She has a bit low opinion of Asterians," Nora explained. "Doesn't think we have the patience for slow work like alchemy."

"I feel like patience is the one thing we learn above all here at the Lyceum." Martel scratched his neck. "She's from Sindhu, right? I never met anyone from there before."

"I can't imagine they like to travel up north. Too cold for them," Nora considered with a wry expression. "But their alchemy is unrivalled. That book of hers, it has recipes for things I could never imagine before. Potions to turn your skin to stone, for instance."

"That sounds unpleasant." Martel could not imagine why anyone would want skin made from stone. "Have you seen her use some of all these strange potions?"

Nora shook her head. "She says most of them require ingredients that are near impossible to get, especially here in Aster."

Ingredients like those harvested from a living mage, Martel thought, thinking back on how that berserker wanted to sell Regnar for parts. "Oh, before I forget." From his pockets, he drew out small bundles of herbs and dried plants. "That's everything on your list, right?"

Nora looked it over. "Yes, looks fine." She bent down to open a cabinet and pulled out a small jar. "Here, you can have this. It's already done. So you don't have to wait." They exchanged items and Martel carefully placed the little jar in a pocket.

"Thanks! I'll put this to use as soon I can."

"You're welcome. Now we better get to work before Mistress Rana catches us doing anything but work."

~

When he went to his class for theory of magic, Martel already knew the question he wanted to ask. As soon as Master Fenrick entered the room, he raised his hand.

"At least one of my students asks questions," he mumbled. He regarded Martel from behind his spectacles. "What is it?"

"Master Fenrick, what can you tell us of Sindhian alchemy?"

"Not much. Mistress Rana is the expert on that. She will introduce you all to elixirs and the like when you are acolytes. Some of the faculty are fortunate enough to be spared the burden of teaching novices," he muttered.

"But their magic is based on an entirely different tradition than ours, right? Like the way they think all living things have magic, and therefore they can use it in their alchemy."

Master Fenrick narrowed his eyes. "Someone has been learning outside of class. Yes, that is true, but I have never made a study of the Sindhian traditions. You will have to ask Mistress Rana."

"But if it is based on a different tradition than ours, how come we can use it? If we learn magic the Asterian way, but Mistress Rana teaches potions the Sindhian way, won't there be an issue?" Martel stared at his teacher. He had been thinking of this question for a while now.

"An insightful question for once. I would wager the answer is the same if you asked why we can use Tyrian runes when we have no knowledge of their galdr?"

"Why can we?" Out of the corner of his eye, Martel noticed that the other novices did not seem to pay attention. He could not fathom why; understanding the nature of magic seemed to him the most fascinating of subjects.

"You will understand better when you actually have to learn the runes, which I'll teach you when you are acolytes. At least for that class I won't have to deal with children," he grumbled. "The answer is that we are only able to in a limited fashion. All the runes we master have to do with the elements and the physical world, same as our own magic. But I have seen bards cause insanity and cure it again. Magic of the mind far beyond our understanding."

"And you think it is the same with potions? That the Sindhians can create concoctions we never could hope to do?"

"I think you should ask Mistress Rana. When you get the chance as her student."

Martel figured that Master Fenrick meant when he was an acolyte and had to learn elixirs; fortunately for him, he would not have to wait that long.

~

With a fresh jar of skin salve and the bits of food he could scavenge from supper, Martel left the Lyceum. He whistled as he walked the streets of Morcaster. It was a pleasant evening, warmer than it had been in a long time as spring prepared for summer's coming.

"Hullo," he called out as he reached the alleyway that served as home for Weasel and his people. As usual, he could not see any sign of them unless and until they chose to reveal themselves. But unlike the other night, the children did not appear. Not even to partake of his gifts. Instead, only Weasel appeared. "Hey," Martel greeted him. "Where are the rest?"

"Sorry," the boy mumbled. "They threatened us."

Behind him, a figure emerged from the shadows. He looked rough both in appearance and demeanour, though Martel especially took note of the large club in his hand. "Get him!"

Martel threw out his hands, and a stream of fire erupted to strike the club-wielding brigand in his chest. Since his outburst had alerted Martel to the fact that other attackers came, he kept the flames burning around his hands as he turned on his heel to face them.

Three men waited, armed with daggers and clubs. They stood slightly apart, blocking the exit from the alley while approaching him from different sides. Martel sent bursts of fire against all of them as swiftly as he could, ignoring how quickly he felt exhausted.

The thugs closed in, two of them; the third was busy trying to extinguish the flames in his clothes. They struck out with their weapons, while trying to stay beyond Martel's reach with his long arms and burning hands.

From behind, the first of the brigands struck Martel against his back. He fell to his knees groaning. Quickly, they rushed him to grab his arms in a tight lock. "The collar!" One of them shouted.

The last bandit, his garments no longer burning, hurried over and placed a leather string around Martel's neck. He tightened it until it almost choked the boy. Worse than that, Martel felt an icy chill against his skin, and the fire in his hands disappeared.

"I told you!" the bandit crowed, still fiddling with the string. "Just as they said, gold kills their magic. Turns a lion into a lamb."

"Still felt like a bloody stupid gamble," muttered one of the others as they struggled to tie Martel up.

"No, I saw it at the marketplace," argued the first man. "As soon he felt the gold on his hand, he ran like he had seen a ghost."

"Quit yapping about and finish up!"

A gag went into Martel's mouth and a bag over his head.

~

When the sun set, Morcaster became a quiet city in the northern districts. Few walked the wide streets except for the city guard or nobles in the carriages, as entertainment, drinking, brawls, and general activity moved further south beyond the market district to the harbour and surrounding

areas. Despite this, a small shape made its way north, taking care not to be seen by anyone, until he could reach the Lyceum.

Chapter 49: The Broken Blades

The Broken Blades

Martel could not see, speak, or move. He felt the bandits carry him around before ungently dropping his body down again. The rumbling of wheels told him he lay in a cart, being transported somewhere. All the while, the leather string with golden coins tied to it choked his throat. Worse than his difficulty in breathing was the suffocation of his magic. As he had never been without his gift before, he had never known how its loss would feel. A chill had sunk into his bones. When he tried to reach out with his power, nothing happened, like trying to move an amputated limb. It felt like being bereft of yet another of his senses, blind twice over.

~

Martel did not know for how long he rode in the cart; being bound and sightless made it hard to tell time. His heart racing did not help either, nor did the smell; the bag over his head had been used to carry fish, evidently. Finally, the cart stopped. Once more, his captors moved him around, and he heard a door being slammed. Other sounds followed. The creaking of a chair as someone sat down. Someone flushing drink down their throat and letting out a satisfied sigh. Iron striking flint to start a fire with crackling flames. Had he not been inhibited, Martel would instantly have known the location of that fire in relation to himself; now, the sounds only reminded him of how he had been declawed.

"I can't wait to get some hot grub! Waiting hours in the cold for that Nether-born bastard to appear," grumbled one of the bandits.

"I can't believe we went through all this trouble. We should have just cut his throat and be done with it."

Underneath his hood, Martel shivered. He could not recall ever feeling so powerless before.

"Can't we ransom him? Lad with rare skill like his, someone must want him back."

There was the sound of someone hitting another. "Don't be daft! Who would pay? That fancy school of his? Yeah, let's tell all these mages who can kill with a single look that we took one of their own."

"Then what do we want him alive for?"

"He's worth a lot to the right people. You know what the Khivans might pay? If anyone hates Asterian mages, it's them."

"Yeah, or we take him to Cathai. I hear they know how to break down mages and make them into useful pets."

Martel wondered if that would be a worse fate than becoming reagents for some Sindhian alchemist.

"Whatever can be done the fastest. It creeps me out, having him over there in the corner like some ragdoll, except he can shoot lightning from his eyes."

"Don't soil your pants." Raucous laughter followed. "With that pretty necklace on, he is harmless."

"We sure he's still alive? Marcus tied that string tight."

"I'm not so dumb I'd accidentally strangle him to death," came the offended reply.

A moment of silence followed. "Check on the boy," spoke the raspy voice that Martel figured belonged to the leader.

A rough hand pulled the hood of Martel's head. At least he was freed from the stench of fish. Blinking as his eyes adjusted to the wavering light of the kitchen fire, he looked around.

"Yeah, he's fine. For now, anyway." More laughter ensued.

"Maybe we should cut a few pieces off? Just to show around, so everyone knows not to mess with the Broken Blades."

Martel tried to get a sense of his surroundings and his company without being obvious about it. Besides the four who jumped him, he noticed others. At least half of them wore the short sword that Martel knew was part of the equipment in the legions, and as he got a better look, he noticed something else. One of them was missing several fingers, another the entire hand. Their leader had half his nose gone, and a fourth man limped as he crossed the room.

As for the location, it looked entirely ordinary. The whole floor was one large room with a kitchen fire in the middle for warmth and cooking, along with a table, chairs, and bed rolls along the walls. It could be any of the houses that filled the southern districts, from the slums in the west to the harbour or the Khivan quarter in the east.

The thug with only three fingers on his one hand showed that he could still easily hold a knife with it. Grabbing Martel's hair with his whole hand to lift up his head, he pressed the blade against the boy's cheek, just under his eye. The sudden threat disrupted Martel's observations, and he felt his panic returned to the fore.

"How about it, boy? You mind if I scoop out one of those eyeballs and pass it around the neighbourhood?"

Through his gag, Martel tried to protest, while at the same time, he focused on keeping his head entirely still; the knife felt cold against his cheek.

"Let the boy be. Don't ruin the merchandise," the raspy leader commanded. "Those street rats will spread the word for us. Nobody else will try to muscle in on our territory."

The half-handed man pulled his blade away, and Martel felt a quick sting of relief that only lasted until he remembered his situation.

"Mages." The leader basically spat the word out. "I saw so many of your kind in the legions. Always looking down on us ordinary soldiers, always thinking you're better." He emptied his cup and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "But sooner or later, that Khivan bullet finds you, and you're just as dead as any other man."

"Unlike us who made it back home alive! So who's the smart one now?" Marcus crowed.

"Yeah, made it back with scars and limbs missing, left to starve because the legions can't use you anymore, and you can't get work here either with all the Khivans everywhere," another said bitterly.

"That's why we stick together," said the raspy chief. "That's why in the Broken Blades, we take care of each other. Because nobody else will. And that's why when someone tries to make a move

against us, we take them out." He leaned back in his chair and refilled his cup from a pitcher on the table.

Deafening noise shattered the air as the front door exploded into a cloud of splinters and dust. In walked Maximilian, weapons in hand.

Chapter 50: Cutting Strings

Cutting Strings

Maximilian had surprise on his side as he strolled through the shattered door, wielding a war hammer and a shield. Yet the Broken Blades were all veterans, accustomed to danger and swift to react. Recovering quickly, they grabbed the nearest weapon to fight back, whether club, sword, or spear. In the back, one man reached for bow and arrow.

A spear came against Maximilian, who deflected with his physical shield. At the same time, he brought his hammer down on the shaft of the spear with an empowered blow to break it apart. An arrow flew straight at Maximilian's head, but it met his magical shield an inch before and fell harmlessly to the ground.

"He's a mageknight," their leader roared. "Spread out!"

Still tied up and rendered powerless, Martel's mind screamed out at watching his friend be surrounded. The weak light from the kitchen fire cast eerie shadows across the room, making it all seem like some dreadful nightmare.

The archer continued to shoot each time he had a clear line to do so, forcing Maximilian to maintain his shield and burn through his spellpower. From one side, a soldier with a club struck out while still keeping his distance to avoid retaliation. As Maximilian turned to protect against the blow, a soldier stepped forward from the opposite side to slash a blade across his back. It cut through his surcoat but nothing more, giving a screeching sound as the edge met the chain rings underneath.

"He's wearing mail! Switch!" Even as he barked the order, the leader advanced with his spear to strike at Maximilian, forcing the mageknight to defend from a new direction. This gave an opening for the soldier with the club, who closed in to smash the blunt weapon against Maximilian's shoulder.

In the faint light, Martel saw how Maximilian's magic shield glistened to soften the blow, but he still grunted and took a step back. Going on the offensive, the mageknight leapt forward to smash his hammer against the soldier's skull, caving it in.

The remaining soldiers took up new positions to outflank the acolyte, keeping their distance while waiting. From the back, arrows continued to whistle through the air. Martel saw the light reflected on Maximilian's face from sweating, and he doubted it was caused by physical exertion; the mageknight was pushing his magic to the limit.

Shadows moved down the stairs. Nobody seemed to notice except Martel, and he thought it to be a trick of the light. Yet the shadows continued to move, quietly sneaking along the wall to reach him. A small, rusty blade came out to cut the leather string around his throat, nicking his skin in the process. He gave a small yelp of pain, muted by his gag. The blade quickly cut his bonds as well, and Martel was free.

As the string and gold fell from his neck, Martel felt a rush of power more intoxicating than wine. The chill left his body, replaced by heat. He rose from the floor with vengeance in his eyes. But first, assist Maximilian.

He felt the heat of the archer's bowstring where fingers held onto it. Increasing that warmth, the twine combusted to burn asunder, ruining the weapon.

The kitchen fire provided further munition for Martel. Grabbing hold of a flame with his magic, Martel flew it across the room to land on the leader's head. He yelled in fear and surprise as his hair caught on fire. Maximilian helped him by using the distraction to step forward and extinguish the flames with his hammer. As the blow landed, the leader sank to the floor.

Martel's eyes fell on Marcus, who had tied the string around his neck, and the mage gave him the same treatment. Screaming, the bandit fled out of the building with his hair burning.

Something smacked Martel on the side of his head, and he fell to the ground. Wielding his bow as a staff, the archer struck at Martel again, aiming for his head.

Maximilian's hammer came flying through the air thanks to an empowered throw. It struck the brigand on his chest, audibly cracking his ribs. Wheezing for breath, he staggered backwards and took to flight.

~

A hand came down to grab Martel's, pulling him up to stand. "You alright?"

Despite Maximilian's casual demeanour, Martel could tell the fight had worn on the acolyte. Besides the intensity and danger of the situation, breaking a man's skull with your hammer had to leave an impact. The novice nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. You?"

"Same here."

Martel looked around the room. Two of the bandits lay dead; the rest had fled. The gruesome sight of blood and broken flesh made his stomach turn, now that the emotions of the fight had gone; good thing he had not eaten a while. "Thanks for saving me." He grabbed Maximilian's hand with both of his own and squeezed it.

"No sweat," Maximilian replied even as he wiped his brow of that same liquid. "I could not very well leave you. Though let us not make a habit of this."

"Agreed. But how did you know?"

"That little rascal came to get me. Your little mate from the streets."

As if summoned, a small figure emerged from the shadows. "I figured he could get the job done."

Maximilian glanced at Weasel and back to Martel. "You need better friends, mate. More friends like me, who keep you out of trouble rather than get you into it."

The young boy shrugged. "We never asked him to get involved. Pretty sure I told him to stay out of it."

"Come on. Let us get back to the Lyceum," Maximilian suggested.

Martel looked at the two bodies in the room. The flickering light only made the whole scene look creepier. "What about them?" He nodded at the corpses. "Shouldn't we tell the city guard?"

"You think the guards care what happens in the copper lanes? This is not a berserker or anything like that. A couple of dead thugs? They would see that everyday, if they bothered to come down here." Maximilian picked up his hammer.

"Leave it to us," Weasel suggested. "We know what to do with bodies. And since this building is now vacant, it'll make for a nice hideout for us. We'll have a roof over our heads, and the Broken Blades won't be taking our earnings anymore."

"Wait... Did you plan for this to happen?" Martel stared at him.

"How could I? You decided to mess with the Broken Blades. I didn't know how this would play out."

"But you are certainly reaping the benefits," Maximilian growled.

The boy, who looked to be ten years at the most, gave an ominous smile that felt much older. Martel had the worrisome suspicion that unwittingly, he had just helped to set up a new gang. "Let's go," Martel said to Maximilian.

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The pair of friends walked home. As they moved north, the streets grew desolate, and lamps replaced moonlight as their source of illumination.

"Maybe we should keep this to ourselves," Martel suggested. "Not sure how the school looks at students who get into trouble like this."

"Yeah. That is fine by me."

They walked onwards in silence for a while until the mageknight yawned.

"I cannot wait to sleep," Maximilian revealed. "Hurrying down here, just to pull your chestnuts out of the fire, fighting those bandits, and now walking back home... I will sleep like a newborn."

"Me too. The few hours I'll get." Martel did not look forward to tomorrow morning, where he had four hours of work for Master Jerome and Mistress Rana waiting for him. If the memory of seeing the dead bandits would let him sleep at all.

"You will get no sympathy from me. Though if you are lucky, that nick on your throat will become a nice scar. Give the girls something to look at rather than your face."

Martel touched the scratch on his neck from Weasel's knife. He slapped Maximilian on the shoulder, who grinned in return.