

Firebrand 411

Chapter 411: What's in a Name

What's in a Name

The following day, Martel was once again a simple fire acolyte, learning magical skills. As it was Manday, he began in the laboratory of the workshops, practising his enchanting. He was improving at a decent speed; his heat spell lasted for a few days now before extinguishing. As Master Alastair had instructed him, he would keep practising on the stone, dull as it was, until he no longer seemed to make much progress. Then it would be time to once more try enchanting the fire pots.

Making himself comfortable on the stool, Martel touched the stone with his hands and began weaving his spell.

Compared to his phlegmatic thoughts about enchantment, Martel was excited to step into the Hall of Elements. He recalled how he had managed to draw lightning from the sky, even if it had completely drained him of spellpower and left him ill afterwards; in the moment, channelling such power innate to him had felt right. He could not think of anything that compared. And today, he would begin learning this spell, more complex than anything else he had mastered.

"Fire and air. Two related elements, and yet lightning is among the more complex spells to cast. The process might feel easier during a storm, where the elements are already at play," Master Alistair explained. "The presence of the clouds can even allow those with an affinity for water to draw lightning from the skies as well. But to do so on a calm and clear day, through no power but your own, requires complete control of fire and air." He held up his hand, and for a moment, energy crackled between his fingertips.

Martel watched, fascinated.

"Now, I know you have the basic skill required in either element, so that is not in question. Rather, you must learn to channel both with precision. Especially for us fire-touched, our natural tendency would be to favour that element, using air to feed our flames rather than using them equally."

The acolyte nodded, doing his best to understand.

"Thus, the challenge for you is to summon both elements at the same time, with equal power to each, and eventually combine them into a single spell." His teacher extended his hands to either side. In one, fire appeared; in the other, air whirled around in a loop. "Do exactly like this."

Licking his lips, Martel extended his hands as well and tried.

A letter, with elegant writing on the envelope, awaited Martel in the entrance hall on his way to dinner. Recognising the seal as that of Legate Fontaine, he frowned and opened the message.

Master Martel,

As battlemage of the legions, you are cordially invited to the solstice celebration at the home of Legate Fontaine this Solday at sixth bell.

Lord Richard Fontaine, Legate of Legio I Urbis

Odd. He saw Eleanor twice every five days if not more; she could simply have told him, like she did last year.

Glancing into the dining hall, he spotted her with some of the other mageknights, waiting for the meal to be served. Catching her gaze, he raised his hand with the letter, prompting her to get up and join him by the entrance to the hall. "Is something amiss?" she asked.

He showed the envelope with the broken seal of her house insignia. "Bit late to be invited, but luckily for you, I have no plans."

An expression of chagrin took over her face. "My father promised he would not invite you. I guess your performance yesterday made him change his mind."

Martel had not expected to hear that. "Why don't you want me to attend?"

She cleared her throat, lowering her voice. "Duke Cheval will be present. I thought it safest for you to stay away. But my father is always looking for opportunities to build reputation among the legions, and you are the most noteworthy of the battlemages here at the Lyceum. He could not resist, I guess."

"I appreciate the concern, but if the duke wishes me ill, I doubt he'll forget about me just because I'm out of sight. If my presence somehow can bolster your father's reputation, even if I don't quite see how, I'll be happy to go."

She bit her lower lip. "I guess now he has invited you officially, it would look strange if you did not attend. But are you sure? Really, it will be fine even if you do not go."

He smiled, looking into her brown eyes. "I'll be there. As long as your father doesn't spring a duel on me like last year."

She laughed a little. "I shall inform him of your condition in the strictest terms."

Martel's brief encounter with Eleanor reminded him of another promise he had made to her, albeit in unspoken fashion. Tyrian skálds visited Morcaster from time to time, prompted by the Nine Lords requiring their services. If his and Eleanor's search among the Tyrian runes for a cure to her sister was to prove fruitful, enlisting the aid of such a bard would be necessary. Eleanor envisioned sending for one all the way from the lands of Tyria; she did not move in the same circles as Martel did, after all, or she would probably have gotten the same idea as him. Regardless, it was time he began using his network of acquaintances to find the sort of person they needed.

Of the various Nine Lords, Martel only felt comfortable approaching the Friar. Since the Keeper of the Pact refused to act as a go-between, Martel needed to find him on his own. Their previous meetings had been at the shrine of Saint Laurentius, but obviously, the old monk did not spend his time there otherwise. Nor did Martel have any reason to assume that any clergymen attending that shrine would necessarily know who the Friar was, or whom Martel referred to; the religious orders had plenty of friars, after all. Instead, the wizard went to the one place which he knew the Friar was connected to. The convent for the Sisters of the Sun.

Reaching the compound, Martel saw no other recourse than simply knocking heavily on the gate. It took a while, but finally, a hatch opened to reveal a pair of eyes framed by yellow cloth. "What is it?"

"My name is Martel of the Lyceum. Tell the Friar that I wish to meet with him. Any evening next fiveday will be fine."

The eyes behind the gate narrowed. "Plenty of friars in the city, and your name means nothing to me."

"There's only one Friar who matters, and my name will mean plenty to him."

The hatch was shut. Without any certainty that his message had been received or would be delivered, Martel accepted this outcome for now. If nothing came of this attempt, he would have to try again later, perhaps another method. Turning around, he began the walk home to the Lyceum.

Chapter 412: Watching Steps

Watching Steps

Solday was the last day of the solstice festival, but Martel did not mind that it was nearly over. He had enjoyed himself, watching a play at the Golden Goose, and his friends of the actor troupe would remain in the city even after the celebration had ended. His feelings were more mixed when it came to the festivities among the nobles, but ultimately, the food was good, and he did not have to worry about his secret being revealed like last year.

Of course, an encounter with Duke Cheval might prove just as troublesome tonight, but Martel would stay out of the nobleman's way. He figured it was also in the duke's interest to avoid open conflict rather than risk embarrassment. Certainly, his attempts at causing problems for Martel had been discreet, striking from the shadows and letting others do the dirty work, like when he used the inquisitors to set a trap in the beginning of the year.

As Martel got dressed, choosing the clothes that Eleanor had bought for him last year, he remembered the jar of oil she had also procured for him. It sat in a drawer, not used since then; Martel had forgotten all about it. Now, he took it out, removed the lid, and enjoyed the scent. It brought him back to that afternoon, Eleanor applying the oil to his hair with a firm touch. He suddenly wished the moment could be repeated while knowing it would not.

Still, in honour of the evening, Martel poured a bit of oil onto his fingertips and spread it through his hair.

Much like the other night, Martel joined Maximilian in his carriage to bring them to the feast. Eleanor was already at her family's home. Unlike their last journey out, the viscount was in a talkative mood. "Everyone congratulated me on our performance, Nordmark. And the engagement too, of course, but I find that less praiseworthy. Our spectacle was harder to pull off, after all," he laughed.

"I'm glad it was a success. I trust your father is also pleased."

The mageknight nodded. "Tremendously. He believes that with Legate Fontaine's assistance, it is only a matter of time before I become captain of the Praetorians Guard. And of course, our performance helped to build my reputation as worthy of that post."

"That's great to hear."

"What about tonight? Any duels planned? I remember last year, how you and Eleanor put Guillaume in his place!" fr eeweb novel

"Nothing of the sort," Martel responded, trying not to sound irritated. "I'm not looking for trouble. I'm just here to show my respect for Legate Fontaine as a battlemage, or something of the sort."

"You say that, mate, but trouble always finds you."

Martel dearly wished he had a retort to that.

As the pair arrived at the celebration, they met the expected scene. A courtyard filled with carriages, nobles dressed in silk and jewels making their way into the house, and frazzled servants inside the hall serving beverages to the guests. The main difference, other than the home of Fontaine being smaller and built more like a fortress than the estate belonging to House Marche, was that Martel recognised many of those present as fellow students of the Lyceum.

His fellow fire acolytes stood scattered around the room, all of them dressed in their usual robes; besides the three Martel had classes with, he also saw a handful younger than him. And of course, plenty of mageknights, though most of them wore festive clothing rather than the black tunic of their uniform.

"Try this, Nordmark," Maximilian suggested, extending a glass of wine towards him. "Unless my nose betrays me, this is from the eastern provinces. Smells like home."

Martel accepted the drink, tasting it. He suspected that Maximilian made up his observations about wine; as far as Martel could tell, they all tasted pretty much the same. "Yeah, that's really good."

"Ah, there is Eleanor. Excuse me for a moment, mate. I am supposed to walk some rounds with her, on account of the engagement and everything. Let all the guests see us together. I will come find you later."

"Sure." Part of Martel felt almost relieved at being left alone; he could not remember why he had agreed to attend when Eleanor had given him the opportunity to refuse. He did not feel in the mood to be merry. He wondered if at some point he could excuse himself and simply walk home; he might not get back to the Lyceum faster than if he took the carriage with Maximilian, but it would allow him to leave earlier.

"I cannot believe you have the nerve to show up. Like a pig getting dressed up, thinking it belongs in the company of your betters."

Of course. Martel wondered if Cheval – the son – had waited until Maximilian had left before daring to confront him. He turned towards the shrill voice. "Move along. We have nothing to say to each other."

"You are half right, maybe because you are a half-breed." The young nobleman snickered at his own jest, swirling wine around in his glass. "Indeed, you have nothing to say to me worth hearing. But it would behove you to pay attention and listen when those of superior rank speak to you."

"Superior in title, but inferior in magic. As I proved last year in this very hall. Unless you wish further humiliation, I suggest you run along."

A sneer ran across Cheval's face. "You only win through cheating and unfair tricks. Meet me in an honest duel, you shall find yourself flat on the ground."

"You should not anger a battlemage," Martel said coldly. "We are not known for our restraint." The glass in the young nobleman's hand suddenly broke apart.

"My son, be careful. Have your hands cleaned. Remember, you are a representative of our house." Appearing by his son's side, the duke of Cheval gave a smile devoid of warmth with his unfeeling eyes glancing over the battlemage. "Master Martel, always a pleasure. Watch your step." Drops of wine had spilled to the floor.

"I always do. That's why I can be here, tonight, regardless of your ploys. You failed to ensnare me, and you'll fail again." As soon as he had spoken, Martel knew it was a mistake, but he had felt compelled to tear a rift in the duke's arrogance. He became aware of people glancing in their direction, probably alerted by the glass breaking.

Duke Cheval had begun to turn away, but Martel's voice arrested him. He broke into an overbearing smile that seemed genuine for once. "Master wizard, I have no idea what you allude to." He stepped forward, careful to avoid the small puddle on the ground, and spoke with a quiet voice, only for Martel to hear. "I decided your fate long ago, and I have not given you a single thought since then. And as soon as I turn away, I shall not think of you again except briefly on a distant day when I am told that you have suffered the consequences as chosen by me. Rest assured, when it happens, it will be done by an invisible hand that none may link to me, and yet you shall know without a doubt that I was the architect of your fate." Swiftly, he turned his back on Martel and marched away, followed by his son.

Around Martel, the celebration continued. He emptied his wine, retreated to a corner, and waited it out.

Chapter 413: Intangible Bonds

Intangible Bonds

The duke's words haunted Martel for the rest of the evening, and it interrupted his sleep at night as well. He had been certain that Cheval had attempted to exact revenge on him. Gathering information about Martel and his exploits, such as his apothecary business in the copper lanes or completing tasks with the Night Knives. Using this information to get Martel into trouble, setting a trap at the docks with the inquisitors; it had to be the duke.

Except Martel had another enemy, the mysterious employer of the Silver Serpents. He had been so convinced of Cheval's guilt, it had never occurred to him to look for another culprit. But it did explain one thing that had bothered Martel about the ambush at the docks. It had been a primitive attempt at catching Martel for a man with the duke's reach and resources.

Furthermore, the inquisitors had not appeared to understand exactly what or who they were up against, underestimating the mages, which allowed them to escape. Nor had the mage hunters seemed to know Martel's identity or to look for him at the Lyceum; the duke knew perfectly well who he was, yet apparently, the inquisitors did not on that fateful night.

Eventually, Martel reached an unpleasant conclusion. The duke had most likely not tried to take vengeance on him, which meant it could still happen. Furthermore, someone had tried to get rid of Martel on several occasions now, and he had no idea who it was.

Morning brought no relief; as soon as he woke, Martel felt troubled by last night's realisations. He had assumed the Pact kept him safe from whoever hired the Silver Serpents, but given how persistent someone had tried to remove him, it seemed prudent to find out more.

This all appeared related to his work with the Night Knives; both the attack against Martel done by the Serpents and the ambush at the docks had involved the mercenaries somehow. Perhaps a rival of theirs, wanting to remove Martel as their ally. If this was yet another company of sell-swords, newly arrived in Morcaster, they might not respect or even know about the Pact.

Lessons in the Circle of Fire interrupted Martel's speculations, and he had to spend his bells practising his spellwork. But later in the day, a message for him returned his mind to the matter.

Master Martel,

Tonight at the shrine. Last bell.

A note from the Friar, he surmised; nobody else would mention a shrine without specifying which one. As Martel had another reason to meet with the monk, he would be able to ask him two questions tonight for the price of one.

The sun still shone as Martel walked towards the temple district. Although solstice had passed and the days would now get shorter, summer with all its heat still lay ahead. Martel pulled up the sleeves of his robe, revealing he wore no shirt underneath. At least with the festival being over, traffic on the streets was bearable; the pilgrimage to the great temples of Morcaster on Sol's holiest day was massive.

Reaching the shrine, Martel found the old monk waiting for him on the bench, where he joined him. The Friar nodded in quiet greeting, still looking ahead. "Why are we meeting?"

"Did you ever learn who was behind the theft of the relic?" Martel glanced at the crypts in the middle of the temple. "Who hired the Silver Serpents?"

"No. Their small number was wiped out, as you should know better than anyone. The only survivor was taken in by Lady Pearl, at your behest. She is the only one who would know, and she has no reason to trade that knowledge freely."

As Martel had expected. He had originally given up trying to find out who stood behind the Silver Serpent for this reason, not wishing to get further entangled with Lady Pearl; now, it looked to be inevitable. He would have to force a confrontation and trust in the protection of the Pact, or his own powers.

"Is that all? I would not appreciate going through the trouble of meeting for the sake of a simple question."

"No. I have a request."

"Let's hear it."

Martel took a deep breath. "I know the Nine Lords at times make use of northern bards. The wards protecting the convent of the Sisters of the Sun, for instance. If one such skáld is in the city, I should

like to hire their services. But it has to be someone with great power, especially in restorative magic."

"If I know of such a person's arrival in Morcaster, you will be informed."

No questions about why; Martel appreciated the discretion.

"But you must understand that this goes beyond our old agreement. We had one arrangement, trading favours. Continuing this creates a bond, which you should be aware of."

"What sort of bond?" asked the young wizard.

"Its weight cannot be measured, nor can its value be counted in coin. It is intangible, born of favours and made of expectations. When others hear of this, they will consider you to be attached to me, which might open some doors, but close others. Furthermore, I will expect that I may call upon you, and should you disappoint me, you shall find all doors closed. Do you understand?"

Nothing for free in the underworld of Morcaster. But if this meant he could help Genevieve – if it allowed Eleanor to save her sister, the way Martel had not been able to save his – he did not mind paying the price. After all, in half a year, he would not even be in the city anymore. "I understand."

The Friar nodded. "I shall let you know if your request can be met. In the future, if you require a meeting, the Grey Brothers tend to a small temple just east of your school. You may leave a message for me there."

The deal was struck; Martel could only hope something came of it. He got up and left the shrine. Outside, night had fallen. Pulling down the sleeves of his robes, shivering slightly in the cold, Martel walked home to the Lyceum. Tomorrow, he would have another Ninth Lord to deal with.

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Chapter 414: In the Market for Trouble

In the Market for Trouble

Combat training had returned to its usual dull state. They did not practice with golden weapons or in any kind of challenging conditions, such as twice the number of mageknights against fire acolytes; it was once more individual sparring or else battlemages practising together with protectors, learning to fight in synergy. While useful, Martel doubted that much more could be gained, at least for him; it had become routine, practising the same moves over and over, facing the same challenges again and again. He suspected that only actual combat, with all the confusion and unexpected difficulties thrown in, would improve his skills. He would much rather spend his time and spellpower practising enchantment, for instance; while equally boring, at least he might progress.

"Martel, I meant to talk with you after the celebration, but I could not find you yesterday." As the lesson approached its end, Eleanor approached him. "I heard that you had an argument with Duke Cheval." She looked at him with concern.

"Just a few words exchanged. Nothing to cause hurt. Don't worry."

"Very well, if you say so. It is exactly what I wanted to avoid. I'm sorry I was absent when it happened. I did intend to stay close, but there were so many well-wishers and guests I had to speak to, and when I looked to find you, I had no luck."

Understandable, since Martel had made himself scarce for most of the evening. "Don't think about it. Everything is fine. And please accept my well-wishes also," he added with a smile that he had to fake.

"Thank you." She glanced away, looking almost shy. "I should get myself to the baths. I will see you at the meal."

"Sure. Or on Soliday if nothing else."

She gave him a parting smile, hurrying along.

His lessons at an end, Martel walked east through the city towards the bridge district. While making his way to The River Pearl, he had time to plan his approach. He knew Lady Pearl would be disinclined to tell him anything, and his mere presence might start trouble. At the same time, she was restrained by the Pact, which protected him. She could not attack him, but she could refuse help. The question was if Martel could straddle the line between demanding answers, using the threat of his powers or position to gain them, without going so far that he forfeited the protection of the Pact by being the aggressor.

Probably not if he asked Lady Pearl; but he might get somewhere if he approached Ruby. He knew the bald woman to be not only cunning, but also entirely cold and calculating. While it would not do to underestimate Ruby either, she had given Martel aid when she felt that she owed it to the wizard; even though Martel knew she had exploited him, she did not seem entirely ruthless. Perhaps with the right combination of words, she could be swayed.

He was about to find out; looking at the entrance to the Pearl, Martel steeled himself and walked forward. The guard outside tried to speak, but a gesture from the mage silenced him.

As Martel entered the common room, he received various looks as could be expected. Those from patrons were typical; some curious, some disinterested, probably depending on how intrigued they were by a wizard's presence. As for the staff, at least some of them seemed to recognise Martel, as their expressions became apprehensive. Tellingly, none of them approached him with offers to satisfy various appetites.

Martel looked at the nearest serving girl. "Tell Ruby I am waiting for her outside." He turned around and walked outside again, loitering around on the street. Doing so served in part as a gesture of goodwill, seeing as his presence inside the common room could be considered a provocation; it also lessened the risk that Lady Pearl walked by and saw him.

"Leave."

Martel turned his head to look at Ruby. Seeing her in this place, outside The River Pearl where they had once spent an evening of festivities together, almost made him regret how things had turned out. But he was not to blame for that, nor could anything be done. He had come for another purpose. "I will, once you tell me what I need to know. Who hired the Silver Serpents?"

"I have no reason to tell you. I suggest you leave. If you provoke my mistress, she will be within her rights to demand the protection of the Pact is rescinded from you. Don't let it come to that."

"It is in your interest that I know. Whoever stole the relic tried to frame Lady Pearl. We have a mutual enemy. But I can't do anything against them unless I learn their identity."

Ruby pressed her lips together, looking hesitant.

"I have no reason to tell others," Martel added. "And I would make a powerful ally against this person, should the day come."

Finally, she glanced at the traffic outside and made a throw with her head. Martel followed her some steps away, walking around the building to enter the nearest alley. "He is known as Ironside," she finally spoke with a quiet voice. "Ninth Lord of the market district."

"Why would he target your mistress?"

"His territory lies in the middle of Morcaster. To bring goods in and out, he must go through someone else's district. He used to do this through the harbour, but it's under new leadership. He's been negotiating with Lady Pearl, but clearly, he did not like the fees she demanded for him to use the bridge gate. Now go!"

Martel gave half a smile before he turned around and walked away.

The walk home gave Martel the opportunity to reflect on what he had learned. It was always possible that Ruby lied to him, of course. Perhaps she or her mistress had some reason to incite feud between Martel and this Ironside. But the answer made sense, especially when paired with other bits of information, which Martel doubted that Ruby knew about.

Searching his memory, Martel thought back on the one task he had done with the Night Knives on behalf of Ironside. Guarding goods and transporting them from Smallport through the bridge district to the market. That aligned with what Ruby had mentioned about needing routes through other districts than his own.

Furthermore, something had happened which none of them could make sense of. They had been ambushed by a group of brigands, though swiftly dispatched. It had happened deep in the market, suggesting that Ironside had arranged for them to be attacked; at the same time, it had been easy for two mages to disperse their assailants. Martel had a feeling that this explained it. The ambush had been to test their abilities; making use of some worthless thugs to get a measure of the mages working for Lady Pearl.

The ambush at the docks had been the next step in removing them, while also stealing the relic to fan the flames between Lady Pearl and the Comtesse. All for what - control over the routes leading in and out of Morcaster? Sadly, that seemed exactly like the thinking of a Ninth Lord.

Martel had thought himself safe due to the protection of the Pact, but he realised that the assault upon his life had not been a singular event orchestrated by Flora. This Ironside had been planning Martel's demise for a long time. Reaching the gate of the Lyceum, Martel had only one thing left to ponder; he needed to decide how to respond.

Chapter 415: Rising to the Top

Rising to the Top

Next day, in between lessons, Martel hurried into the city. He walked around for a while, checking some regular places for his quarry. In the end, he found what he was looking for, scurrying along

the house walls from one hiding place to another. Moving to intercept, Martel went over and sat down on some crates. "Hullo, Mouse."

A small girl appeared, climbing out from behind a barrel collecting rainwater. "Hullo. I don't mean to be rude, but I'm supposed to be working." She glanced out at the carts and people passing by.

"Do some work for me, and I'll pay you better than what you might grab here." *freewebnovel.com*

She walked around to stand in front of him, looking up. "How much? What's the job?"

"Five silvers in advance. Another ten when you're done." Martel could afford to be generous, and he did not mind paying the street children more than was necessary. He untied his purse from his belt and hefted it in his hand.

The girl's eyes widened. "What do you want done?"

"Do you know a man named Ironside?"

"Aye, he runs the market. But Weasel told us we can't steal from him."

He had that much sense, at least. Martel hoped the little chief had stopped exploiting Sparrow's magic for dangerous thefts, but he would have to follow up on that another time. "You won't have to. He has a lieutenant. Short, bald, with pointy ears. Looks like a goblin, really."

Mouse giggled.

"I want you and your friends to find him and trail him. Two days from now, I'll be back here, and I want you to take me to where he is. That's all you have to do. I'll take care of the rest."

"Sounds good!" She stuck out her hand, and Martel counted out five silver pieces.

Normally, Martel would have preferred to handle this matter straight away rather than postpone for a few days; but he knew the street children needed time to find the fellow, and delaying until Soliday worked for himself as well. With his little spies put to work, Martel went through the rest of the day, trying not to think more about Ironside.

The following Manday proved its usual relief from schemes and the troubles of the outside world. Practising enchantment seemed the very opposite of the fast-paced events that Martel became embroiled with in Morcaster, forcing him to think swiftly and act on instinct. Weaving magic into a dense stone, on the other hand, was the slowest and dullest work that could possibly exist. His only reward was that each time, the spell lasted a little longer. He imagined that soon, he could proceed to the next step.

Summoning lightning from his fingertips was more likely to get his blood flowing than enchantment, but Martel was a long way from that. He had only just begun learning the spell, and like any kind of complex spellcraft, it was a slippery eel to catch.

In the Hall of Elements, Martel stood with eyes closed and hands extended to either side. In one, he had summoned a flame; the other had a constant band of air flowing in a loop around it.

"Too much fire," Master Alastair chastised him.

"Yes, master." How his teacher knew, Martel could not say; he adjusted the flow of magic, lessening its stream to his right hand. To be able to cast the spell, he needed to have both elements equally present before he could combine them.

Controlling the release of magic was not only difficult; it felt strange. Normally, Martel just channelled his power as seemed natural, focusing it into a spell and releasing it with one burst. This was closer to enchantment, letting the magic seep out of him, drip by drip. Except it had to be done doubled, keeping two spells active at the same time. It was like concentrating on his own breath, deliberately slowing it down while also blinking; the moment he lost focus or got distracted, natural instincts took over, and the flame in his right hand grew larger.

"Too much fire."

"Yes, master."

Martel knew he could learn this spell. He had figured out everything else the Lyceum had thrown at him. He just needed to stay concentrated. Keep his thoughts from straying. Remain disciplined. His biggest obstacle would be if he let himself become frustrated, which would only make it harder to focus.

"Too much fire."

The acolyte's response came through gritted teeth. "Yes, master."

"Today's elixir is for the blue plague," Mistress Rana explained. "It is perhaps less severe and contagious as other diseases, but all the same, you should know the cure and signs. It resembles bloody flux in that the patient has difficulty retaining water. This leads to symptoms such as skin feeling cold or looking blue, hence the name. Best way to tell the diseases apart is whether blood is present when the patient relieves themselves."

Martel wrote it all down, hoping he never had reason to search through such liquids to diagnose a patient.

"Other than that, it is a simple elixir to make, with mostly common reagents. The only difficulty might be getting a proper attercop. Too small won't do." She picked up a small jar with a large spider inside, shaking it. The creature jumped around inside its glassy prison to no avail. "Careful it doesn't escape when you pour it into the cauldron."

Martel tried to imagine the taste of any potion brewed with a dose of spider. He wondered if having the blue plague would feel worse than the cure. Hopefully, he would never find out.

"Alright, no reason to dally. You know what to do."

He nodded and began picking up all the ingredients laid out for him, paying particular care not to drop the jar. Soon after, everything boiled merrily over fire. Stirring the concoction with the liquid, Martel tried to use the ladle to keep the spider below the surface and out of sight; every time he did so, it floated back up.

Chapter 416: Trading in Fear

Trading in Fear

Solday afternoon, Martel spent a bell with Eleanor in the library as usual. However, towards the end, he began copying her notes about all possible runes that might possess healing powers.

"You could just borrow my notes if you need them," Eleanor said, as she looked up and noticed what he was doing.

"This way is better," Martel just replied. He did not wish to tell her his intentions, should nothing come of it. When he was done, he made sure to use the library to confirm what he dimly recalled Master Fenrick had once told him about different gems and their magical powers. Lastly, he wrote a few words down in Archean, similar to how he had seen it on the wardstone that unlocked the chest guarding the relic of Saint Laurentius. With everything ready and the bell ringing in the distance, he helped Eleanor clear away the table they had used before they split up; she went to training, he left for the city.

Swiftly, with a sheet of parchment safely folded inside his robe, Martel went to the market district where he had met Mouse the other day. Unlike last, she was not hiding; she sat on a piece of debris, watching the surrounding crowd. As soon as Martel approached her, she jumped to her feet and walked towards him. "Your guy is in a tavern right now. Or at least, he was when I left him. He'll probably be there all day though, if yesterday's anything to go by. Mole is watching the place, he's real good at staying unseen."

"I have no doubt. Lead the way."

"Our money?"

Martel handed over ten silver pieces. While he did not trust Weasel, the other street children had always been honest in their dealings with him, however surprising that might seem.

Stuffing the coins into hidden pockets of her ragged clothing, Mouse set off, leaving Martel to catch up. They hurried through the winding roads of the city, the small girl using her knowledge of the streets and her small size to cut corners, squeeze through openings, and duck under the occasional scaffolding, sometimes with workmen shouting at her to stay out of their way. Despite his long legs, Martel almost struggled to keep up, forced to circumvent many of these obstacles. He was a little relieved when she suddenly stopped, and a small boy crawled out from a pile of trash.

"He's in there." Mole pointed across the street at the tavern.

"Very well. Thank you." Knowing that he might have a long wait ahead of him, Martel looked around and found a small alley, where he might stand around the corner and wait for his quarry to emerge. The children meanwhile, both of them laughing, ran away.

Using a small stone as seating, his back against the house wall, Martel waited. A bell rang in the distance, and still no sign of Ironside's lieutenant. He was tempted to practise his elemental magic, summoning fire and air in equal measure, but it would undoubtedly attract attention. He could try enchantment, which did not appear visible to ordinary people, but he was already hot from the sun; it felt unnecessary to begin heating up his surroundings. More importantly, he might become so engrossed in the spell that he missed his prey.

From time to time, he got up and glanced across the street, just to make sure he had not missed the bald man and his pointy ears leaving the place; no, still inside.

The bell rang again. If he had brought his Khivan clock, he could tell for sure how long he had waited; at least two hours, probably three.

Finally, the middle-aged man serving as the right hand of Ironside appeared on the street. His walk was slightly staggered, as could be expected from someone spending hours at a tavern, but he moved otherwise with determination, and Martel hurried to follow.

It would not do to strike here on the street. It would attract a lot of attention and be difficult for Martel to control. A little more patience was required.

Fortunately, his opportunity came soon after, as the rogue turned down an alley. Martel made his move. Across the opening from wall to wall, he raised his own obstacle made of fire. The inebriated, goblin-faced man suddenly stood face to face with flames taller than himself, burning hot. He turned around to face Martel blocking the other exits from the alley, and he seemed to quickly sober up.

"Please, master, don't hurt me! I have five kids to feed and a quarrelsome wife!"

"I am Martel of the Lyceum," the wizard responded, stepping forward. "You should know the name as your master tried to have me killed."

"I wouldn't know anything about that! I am a day-labourer, hauling crates around a warehouse."

Martel summoned a flame in his hand. "Don't lie to me again. I know who you are, and your master. He hired the Silver Serpents to kill me. They failed, and now they are dead."

The man fell to his and knees, clasping his hands together in supplication. "Please spare me! I told him not to do it! I swear on my mother's ashes!"

"Quiet. I'm not here for revenge. I require only two things from you. First, you will let your master know that I am aware of his attempts. If he ever tries to do anything else, I will burn everything he owns, leaving him as the last twig. Should I overlook anything, the Lyceum and the Pact will take care of the rest. Understood? Don't speak, just nod."

The man nodded vigorously.

"Good. As for the second thing. A merchant who trades in artefacts lives here in the market. I'm sure you're familiar with him. You will take me to his home now."

The rogue scrambled to get on his feet. "Right away, master, as you say!" Behind him, the wall of flames disappeared.

After a long walk, they stood in front of a familiar door. Martel recognised the house, though he would never have remembered the way back on his own. His guide stepped forward and gave a series of knocks. Soon after, the door opened to reveal the artefact trader. By his surprised look, he had not expected to see Martel on his doorstep.

"May I go?"

Martel made a throw with his head, and his temporary companion hastened away. Turning his attention towards the merchant, Martel stepped forward to enter the house, pushing the owner back inside. "You remember me, I'm sure."

"Of course. I'd never forget a customer. Or a wizard." He mumbled the last words.

"I want you to find an artefact for me. Something that contains a specific ability."

The trader bowed his head, hiding the relieved expression on his face. As he looked up again, his demeanour had become servile. "Happy to serve. Would this be Asterian, Archean, or Tyrian? Something more exotic?"

"Archean or Tyrian, either will do." Martel took out his parchment with his notes from the library and unfolded it. "If the latter, it may contain one of these runes. If the former, it will most likely bear a topaz or one of these words inscribed. You read Archean, I presume?" He handed over his writings.

"Of course. A necessity in my line of work." Accepting the parchment, the trader glanced over the runes and ancient words. "I must confess, I've never seen anything like this. But I may come across it, of course," he hurried to add.

"If you do, send a message to Martel at the Lyceum. You will be paid accordingly for your service."

"More than happy to serve," the merchant reiterated with a bow.

Martel gave a nod in farewell and left. This time, he made sure to notice the location and the way to the nearest square, allowing him to find his way back.

Chapter 417: Fading Gems

Fading Gems

Another fiveday began with Martel back in the Circle of Fire. Hopefully, his quarrels with the Nine Lords were done with, and he had tried his best to help Eleanor find a cure for her sister. He would just have to wait for any results. Until then, he could return his focus to his schoolwork. Holding an enchanted staff in his hand, staring at the slit in the wall ahead of him that served as his target, Martel once more practised channelling his magic through the ruby.

He went for the strategy that had worked best for him so far. Rather than think of magic as something only originating from himself to be flung into the world, he imagined it was already connected with his target; a potential bridge lying dormant, waiting to be realised.

Martel tried again and again, and at last, even before it happened, he felt it. The surge of magic leaving his body came with stronger force, more focus. It travelled through the silver sinews of his staff, making the ruby glow before a blast of fire burst out to fly swiftly across the room and through the opening in the wall.

He felt out of breath, but also elated that it had worked. Almost on instinct, he glanced around the room to see if anybody had noticed. The other acolytes were all busy with their own attempts; judging from their struggles, they still had aways to go. It reminded Martel that in a sense, he was privileged compared to them. They were resigned to the same fate as him, but they probably had to work twice as hard to master the same spells. And that excluded the extra elemental magic that Master Alistair taught him, or learning things like enchantment and alchemy.

"Enough dawdling!" Moira's words cut straight through Martel's thoughts. "Don't think doing it once is enough. Keep at it!"

Trying to ignore her shrill voice, but still doing as he was told, Martel turned back towards the wall and began channelling another spell.

After class, Martel gathered up a heap of coins and left the castle. He had not seen Julia in a long time; last he tried, discovering Weasel exploiting Sparrow's magic for his thievery had distracted Martel. Since it was nearly a new month, he could also take the opportunity to pay her rent. Not that he imagined the reeve of her insula would press a wizard for payment or dare to throw her out, but still best to have it done. It was an easy thing to forget or postpone, after all.

Plenty of people filled the streets, but compared to the busy solstice on other days, it did not feel particularly crowded. Martel made good time walking across the market district to finally reach the harbour. He entered Julia's insula and made straight for the reeve's office.

"Master mage," the man exclaimed as he opened the door, stepping back to allow Martel entry into his office.

"Just here to pay next month's rent." Martel began digging out coins.

"Very well, master. The young mistress will be returning then?"

Martel's movements froze. "What do you mean?"

"Well, she hasn't been in the building for a number of days now."

"How do you know this? Did someone tell you to keep watch for her?"

"Not at all, good master! It's just, I have the key to her room, so unless she climbs up the wall several floors high to enter through the window, she couldn't possibly get in." With nervous energy, the reeve opened a drawer and took out a key.

The young wizard narrowed his eyes, staring at the middle-aged man. "Start explaining. Fast."

"Of course, of course. The neighbours alerted me. Her door stood open with the key in the lock. Not wanting anyone to steal her things, I locked the door and took the key with me. Figured once she got back, she'd come find me or the neighbours would tell her, and I'd hand the key back. But she never did. This was more than a fiveday ago."

Dread creeping into Martel, he realised that the stammering fool could not do anything other than irritate him further. He needed to investigate this. He reached out and grabbed the key from the reeve before turning around and marching out of the office.

Swiftly ascending the stairs, he soon reached Julia's room and unlocked it. For the most part, it looked as expected. A mattress with some clothes. The cauldron and some of the herbs that Martel used for alchemy. A jar, half filled with stale water. Crucially, he noticed no food, no blanket, nor her doll. This suggested she had left by her own volition rather than dragged away by inquisitors.

Of course, if she had fled her home because someone was chasing her, they might have caught up to her elsewhere and taken her into captivity. But Martel doubted that the mage hunters had ever pursued her in the first place. Most likely, she had gotten scared and decided to make herself scarce.

Nothing he could do about that. If she did not wish to be found, Martel knew he could not expect to do so. He had never been able to find her the last time he went looking.

He left the room, locking the door. Returning to the reeve, he gave the key back along with instructions to hand it over to Julia, should she return. He had paid for the room for the next month, after all. Perhaps she would return once she felt safe to do so.

Nothing further to accomplish at the insula, Martel began the journey home. At least it was still the warm season. Even if she slept on the street, she would hopefully not be cold. Especially not with the blanket that she had taken with her. She had survived for years before meeting Martel; she would be fine on her own – or if nothing else, she would survive on her own. She knew Martel lived at the Lyceum; she could come and find him, or get a message to him, if she needed his help. Trying to comfort himself with these thoughts, Martel returned to the school.

Chapter 418: Eyes Across the Hall

Eyes Across the Hall

A hammer came swinging through the air to strike Martel on the shoulder. Fortunately, chain armour and layers of cloth softened the blow, and it did not hurt. "Slow reactions, Nordmark!"

Martel looked towards Maximilian, taking a step away. They had been milling about, waiting for the next round of sparring. "I didn't realise we were fighting."

"This is combat. You have to be ready at all times," the mageknight chastised him.

"Combat lessons," Martel corrected him. Around them, the other acolytes sparred with each other, and the sounds of metal clashing and physical exertion could be heard.

After finishing his own skirmish against Alain, Martel had become lost in thoughts. Even though it seemed most likely that Julia had chosen to disappear, he could not help but worry. He realised that he ought to have questioned the neighbours; if Julia had been taken against her will, surely someone would have noticed. Inquisitors arresting someone in the insula would be gossip spread far and wide, he reckoned. It might be a waste of his time, but for the sake of having peace of mind, perhaps he ought to go back and ask around.

"You're not thinking of laying down your weapon already? There must be at least a quarter bell left of the lesson!" Maximilian raised his weapons in a threatening manner.

"Alright, alright." Martel held up his staff, happy to think of ways to make his friend lose a friendly bout.

Martel waited until supper – no need to miss a meal just because he was antsy – before he went to the harbour. Little had changed since he walked the same path yesterday, though he moved with greater impatience, occasionally pushing past others when people were slow to move or get out of his way. At length, he reached Julia's insula. He did not bother with the reeve, who had probably already related everything he knew. Martel needed to speak with the neighbours living on the same floor, and he knew exactly which ones to ask. A family with an inquisitive little girl, who had previously admitted to keeping eyes on Julia.

Martel only knocked a few times before the door opened and said girl revealed herself. Probably not more than seven or eight, she stared at the wizard in surprise. "Mum!"

"What is it now, child? I swear, you don't give me a moment's peace –" A matronly woman appeared, brought to silence for a moment merely by laying eyes on Martel. "Begging your pardon, master," she continued once she found her voice. "Foolish child did not tell me we had distinguished company."

"Never mind that. You know my friend, who lives across the hallway?" Martel pointed over his shoulder at Julia's door.

"I wouldn't say we know her. Maybe seen her once or twice at most. She's a shy lass keeping odd hours, if you'll forgive me saying so," the woman replied.

"She's been gone for a while. When was the last you saw her?" .com

"I can't rightly say, good master. Between minding the children and helping my husband with his trade, I don't have time to look much at the neighbours."

"She's been gone for a long time," the girl added, stressing the penultimate word. "I've gone to sleep lots of nights since I last saw her."

"We only really noticed when the door stood open," the mother elaborated. "It's never done that before. That's when we told the reeve. Must have been ten days ago or longer. But I can't say how long ago she left before that."

"You didn't see anybody else? Someone who doesn't live here. Inquisitors, perhaps?" Martel watched their reactions carefully as he mentioned the mage hunters.

The woman placed one hand on her cheek, the other on her child's head. Neither of them seemed particularly frightened, though. "No, master, nothing of the sort! We are Sol-fearing people, no need for that lot to come poking here."

As Martel might have guessed, they could not offer much information about what had happened to Julia. But it did seem certain she had chosen to leave. There was one last thing he might learn. "You once said that you followed her to the sewers." He looked down at the small girl and dug out some pennies from his pocket. "Could you take me to the entrance?"

The child looked up at her mother, who nodded in agreement.

Soon after, Martel's little guide led him down an alley and pointed at a hatch in the ground before she ran off, back to the insula. Inspecting the entrance, Martel eventually bent down and grabbed the handle to pull up. His own strength failed him, and he had to lend magic to his arm in order to open it. Immediately, the putrid stench of sewer filth reached him, and he allowed it to slam shut.

It seemed unlikely that Julia had gone this way, considering a girl her size would lack the strength to even open it; maybe the child from the insula had been mistaken. Regardless, Martel had no idea if Julia was hiding below ground or above, and searching for her would be impossible. There was not really anything he could accomplish.

Walking home, the thoughts still troubled him, though. While it seemed most unlikely that the inquisitors had taken Julia in, Martel did have a way to make sure it was not the case. He had done

so once before, pretending to be a clerk and going to the actual Office of the Inquisition. That did risk attracting undue attention; he might not get away with it twice. A better way existed.

Thus, on his way home, he took a turn towards the east, occasionally asking local residents for directions until he reached a small shrine not far from the Lyceum, attended by a few Grey Brothers. Martel approached the nearest. "I need a message delivered to the Friar. Tell him that Martel wishes to meet briefly."

If the priest found this odd, his demeanour did not reveal it. "Very well."

With a nod in farewell, Martel left for the Lyceum.

Chapter 419: From Red to Blue

From Red to Blue

Waiting for the lesson to begin in the Circle of Fire, Martel noticed something amiss once Moira arrived. She carried only three of the staves rather than four, despite the full number of acolytes present. She distributed the ruby-tipped implements to the other students and instead pulled out a small wand from her belt. "Well?" she said, directed at Martel as she extended the small tool towards him. "Get to practising," she barked at the remaining acolytes, who mumbled to themselves and dispersed around the room.

The teacher turned her attention back on Martel, who approached and accepted the wand. Looking it over, he found it to be made of beautiful dark wood with silver lines running through it. At the tip, a sapphire had been inserted. The wand of a weathermage.

"I'm told you once fancied having one of these," Moira remarked with her typical touch of disdainful venom in her voice. "And Master Alastair claims you're even decent with water. Almost unnatural for a fire-touched, I'd say, and pointless too. But since you picked up how to make the ruby work, it might be fun to watch you flail around doing the same with this." She nodded towards the part of the circle where Martel usually practised along with the slit in the wall serving as his target. "Don't be shy, boy, let's see what you can do with a wand for weather plebs."

Trying not to let her rile him up – besides rewarding her efforts, it would only make it harder for him to focus – Martel moved over and held up the wand. In a way, it ought to be simple. It seemed to work the same way as the staff of a battlemage; silver lines conducting magic towards the gem, serving as a focus point for his spell. The only difference was the size; a battlemage needed a staff for close combat. The same demand was not made of weathermages, allowing them to have a much smaller and lighter implement to carry.

Thus, while the instrument was much the same, the difference lay in the magic. Summoning a flame was instinctive for Martel; literally the first thing he had ever been able to do and how his power had manifested itself. As the opposite element, water did not heed his command so easily. Inside the Circle of Fire with its dry air, there was hardly a droplet to be found except for the sweat of the other students, which Martel preferred not to make use of.

Seeing no better choice, Martel tried to draw water straight from the surrounding air. If he had done so into his hand, he felt confident that at least a small puddle would have formed in his palm. Now, he channelled the magic through the wand, trying to use the sapphire's power to strengthen his small effect.

Nothing happened; the gem, wand, Martel himself, and his surroundings remained entirely lacking in moisture. Sensing another uphill battle, Martel breathed deeply and tried again.

A message found Martel during the day, and though he did not recognise the handwriting, he could guess the sender.

Master Martel,
Last bell tonight
at the shrine of
Saint Laurentius.

Martel knew that every time he called upon the Friar, certainly every favour he asked for, would incur a price. But so far, the old monk had dealt with him fairly. And expectations or not, there was a limit to how far a battlemage could be pushed; presumably, the Friar knew that. Martel would repay any aid given within reason; he would not allow anyone, even a Ninth Lord, to demand more. As on previous occasions, the small temple was empty except for one old monk. Martel wondered what the other clergymen thought of being asked to leave, or perhaps none tended to the shrine at night; except for the newly added watchman in the crypt, if Martel recalled correctly, watching over the relic.

"Master wizard, we meet again. I'd start to feel flattered if I thought you simply wanted my company, but I sense you have another request."

"Your instincts serve you well. I have a friend, a young girl named Julia. Perhaps twelve years of age, depending on how malnourished she might be."

"What of her?"

"Inquisitors arrested her parents, years ago. She's been hiding from them ever since, afraid the same might happen to her. I've been taking care of her as best I can, getting her a place to stay and such. Now she's gone. Has been for many days," Martel explained.

"If she's a child of the streets, she might simply have gone back to what she knows," the Friar suggested with a careful tone. "Your good intentions are laudable, but some prefer unsafe freedom to the security of a home that depends on others."

"Truth be told, I suspect that is the case," Martel admitted. "Still, I feel that I owe it to her to be sure. If she has been taken by the inquisitors, I can't let her languish in their cells. And if they don't have her, at least I know she's made her own choice."

The monk gave a slow nod. "I can make inquiries. That is easy, and I don't mind doing so as a gesture of goodwill. But if against our expectations, the girl is held by the Inquisition – securing her release is a far more complicated matter."

"I assumed as much."

"It can be done." The Friar, for once, turned his head to look at Martel. "But it will bear a high cost. If nothing else, the previous favours granted you, protection from the Inquisition and such, may be consumed by this. Or I'll expect to be repaid through other services that a powerful wizard may provide."

"Understood."

"Very well." The monk gave another of his slow nods. "I'll ask around."

"You have my thanks." Bowing his head in gratitude and farewell, Martel rose from the bench and left the shrine. While he disliked the idea of Julia living on the streets again or hiding out in the sewers, it would be preferable to captivity in the Office of the Inquisition. For that reason, as much as Martel wanted to know where she was, he hoped the Friar's inquiries would be fruitless. And if against expectations, he should receive a message that Julia was in the clutches of the mage hunters – Martel would have to pay the price.

Chapter 420: The Strategy of the Age

The Strategy of the Age

Entering the small laboratory in the workshops, Martel bent down to examine any residual heat in the stone he used for his enchantment work. He had checked on it during the fiveday, and even this morning, he still found it warm to the touch. Not enough to make much of a difference – it could barely heat enough water to give a warm bath to a mouse – but it was a significant step forward. It meant that his spell had a long-lasting effect now, even if still weak in terms of power; enough that Martel felt encouraged to finally try his hand at the fire pots again.

The oil and jars still stood on the nearby table, patiently waiting for his return. Filling a small amount of the substance in one of the clay containers, Martel reached out with his magic to connect with the viscous liquid. He began weaving his spell into the material, as he had done a dozen times with the stone sitting by his feet.

Immediately, the oil burst into flames. Right, Martel reminded himself; unlike the stone, the black liquid welcomed his fire magic. He could not simply pour it into the connection. Quelling the flames with his magic, Martel poured a new supply of oil into the jar. Slow and steady this time. Fortunately, he had gotten used to this from his practice with the rock; the slower the spellwork, the longer the effect lasted. Cautiously this time, he let his magic entangle with the oil, like drops of water from a bottle.

This time, it did not combust, and he quickly placed the lid on the jar. Shaking it heavily, he opened it up again, pointed away from his face. Nothing happened. Insufficient power from his spell to ignite the oil, it seemed. Exhaling, he tried again.

"How goes enchanting?" asked Master Alastair as his student arrived for the afternoon lesson.

"Doing better with the stone," Martel replied. "Trying my hand at the fire pots again. Still some way to go."

"To be expected. But if any of the acolytes can learn this in time, it'll be you."

"I'm surprised the others won't even be given the chance. Haven't you used the fire pots yourself, master?"

His teacher nodded a little, glancing around the Hall of Elements. "I did. But times change, or rather, the needs of the legions. In the days of the reunification wars, battlemages focused on brute force. Pillars of fire and destruction on a large scale. Crude but effective."

"What happened?"

"Wars against Tyria, including the failed invasion, taught us a different way of fighting. Rather than open battles, it became skirmishes and small engagements in forests rather than fields. I was trained in this method, learning spells to fight fewer enemies, but with greater speed and accuracy, not to mention countering enemy spell casters."

"The way you're teaching me."

"Indeed. But once more, the needs of the Empire have changed. Your fellow acolytes are not learning elemental spells and how to fight in skirmishes."

Martel frowned. He had never really thought about why the Lyceum taught them the way it did; what tactics or strategy lay behind, and how exactly they would be used in war. "How is it now?"

"Between our battlemages and their cannons, neither we nor the Khivans are keen on open battles. But the land we fight on is flat, for the most part, unlike the forests of Tyria. Small engagements are not practical either. So, except for the occasional clash along the border, it has settled into siege craft."

"The siege of Nahavand," Martel remarked.

Master Alistair gave a nod. "Aye. It is a question of range and focused fire. They hide behind their walls, we in our camps, both with the power to destroy an attacking army. The only way to truly end the stalemate is by gaining superior position. They want to take control of the Savena delta, that their cannons may destroy our ships sailing up the river to supply the siege. And we dig trenches to get our battlemages close enough to silence their guns, our stonemages close enough to breach the walls. That is why Mistress Moira trains you to improve the range and strength of your spells above all else."

Martel frowned, digesting all of this. "I suppose being in a trench is better than fighting on the frontline, or storming the city."

"Hopefully. But there's a reason I want you to learn spells useful up close, or how to enchant fire pots. War is unpredictable, and resistance greater than what commanders plan for. There will be a time when, stretched for resources and manpower, your future legate will send in his battlemages in close combat, feeling victory is at hand. When you assault the streets of Nahavand, with a Khivan musket aimed at you from every window, you'll need to fight close range as well."

The young acolyte swallowed. He knew that Master Alistair was only making a prediction; this might never come to pass. Yet he spoke it with such certainty, it felt almost like a prophecy.

"On that note, let's begin. You know what to do. Slow, deep breaths, and focus."

Martel nodded, closing his eyes and extending his hands. He summoned the elements of air and fire, one in each palm, concentrating to keep them even.

"Too much fire."

Before supper, Martel checked for messages and was rewarded with a small scrap of parchment.

I asked my friends.

No new visitors in
the last month or
so that matched the
description of your
friend.

In other words, the inquisitors did not have Julia. Martel felt a touch of relief, or perhaps the feeling of something coming to an end. He had tried his best to help Julia; she had chosen to leave, for whatever reasons she might have. If she ever came back, she knew to look for him at the Lyceum. Otherwise, he would have to trust that she made the right decision for herself. As it stood, there was nothing further for him to do.