

Firebrand 421

Chapter 421: A Revelation

A Revelation

Solday morning afforded Martel another bell working on his enchantment skill, but to much the same result. Infusing the oil with the spell seemed like balancing an egg; no matter how many times he tried, regardless of how, his attempts fell flat. But experience had taught him that consistent practice persevered; he would continue until he cracked this particular egg and made it stand upright.

In comparison to his practical efforts at learning magic, studying the Tyrian runes with Eleanor was a relaxing affair; it almost felt like a leisurely activity, reading interesting texts and stories in the quiet company of a good friend. That description also fit the result, perhaps; however frustrating, his practical studies led him to constant advancements in magic, whereas reading in the library was unlikely to yield much.

That said, it could provide a foundation to learn more, with theory supporting practice. Reading the account of a frostmage serving in the northern legions, Martel came across one of the rare instances that not only described a rune, but also depicted it. To his surprise, he recognised it. More importantly, it also showed the activating word, which he had never known before.

He quickly grabbed parchment and a quill to draw the rune carefully and write the pertinent word beneath.

Across the table, Eleanor looked up, interested. "What have you found?"

"Oh, sorry, nothing relevant to our search. I just wanted to make a note of this and learn the rune later."

"Well, what is it?"

"The rune of revelation," Martel explained. He had been subjected to it more than once. Trying to enter gambling establishments or the convent of the Sisters of the Sun, this symbol inscribed on the floor had become illuminated to reveal his magic.

It had to be a passive rune, he realised, meaning once activated, it lay dormant until something triggered it, such as the arrival of a mage. Even more interesting, the rune persisted even after it had been triggered, else the gambling dens of Morcaster would need to have a northern bard constantly on hand to reactivate it.

It fascinated him how the various Tyrian symbols worked in different manners, according to need.

"It's how they detect magic," he continued after realising that Eleanor waited for him to elaborate.

"It allows someone without any talent to discover if someone has magic, for instance."

"Martel, you are a mage," she reminded him with a slightly overbearing voice. "You can sense magic without any need of such symbols."

"If someone is using it, sure. But if it lies dormant in a person, if they are hiding it, I can't. At least not yet." Thinking about it, Martel had grown more sensitive towards magic; he wondered if he could train his sense to become sharper, better at detecting magic. You could not improve your

eyesight or hearing, but magic seemed more to function like a muscle, allowing it to grow stronger with frequent use.

Eleanor frowned. "Why would anyone hide their status as a mage? It would be like a noble pretending to be a commoner, losing the status this affords."

"People can be strange. Besides, any knowledge of magic is worth having," Martel declared, finishing his drawing.

With a little shake of her head and a good-natured smile, Eleanor returned to her own book.

With the rest of his day available, Martel had supper and went into the city afterwards. While his responsibility to Julia was gone, he still had an apprentice of sorts that required his attention and presence. And given the presence of the inquisitors, he had not discharged that duty in a while.

Once he approached the copper lanes, Martel kept an eye out for any blue uniforms. Fortunately, it seemed like they had abandoned their patrolling and left the slums to its own devices. Although he remained cautious, Martel proceeded forward and made his way towards the home of Weasel and the others.

The children soon greeted him, and he parted with a few silvers; if Julia did not return to her room, he would have a lot more money in the coming months, courtesy of his salary from Mistress Rana. He still needed to collect his few alchemical supplies, though; his unhappiness at her departure should not prevent him from being sensible with his few belongings.

The children fetched Sparrow for him; as always, Weasel followed behind, keeping watch of their lesson. Ignoring him, Martel turned his attention towards the girl. "No more inquisitors, I noticed."

She nodded eagerly. "We've kept our heads down. I've not even done any magic for a long while. Only did it again today, in fact, and I made sure to practice indoors. Grabbed a handful of dirt and practised how long I could keep it floating."

"Very good." Just to be sure, Martel glanced either way down the desolate alley. "How about the spell you wanted to learn. Should we train that?"

"Yes!"

"Very well. Stop my hand with your wall." Martel moved his hand through the air, slow enough that she had a chance to react.

A look of pure concentration overtook Sparrow's face, and she stomped one foot into the ground. It responded, earth rising up to protect her. But it only reached her waist before it fell back, her spell at an end. Frustration replaced her expression. "I could do much better the last time, I swear!"

"I'm sure you could. If you practiced earlier today, you've probably spent all your spellpower. Remember we talked about that?"

She gestured affirmatively.

"Don't worry about it. You're still small, and it'll take you a long time to build up your strength. You'll get there, and then you will be able to cast several spells at a time."

"Could you also only do a little spellwork when you were my age? I bet you could do loads more."

He laughed a little. "At your age, I wasn't doing any magic at all. So you're already far ahead of me. Keep at it, and you will make a great mage one day."

"I will!"

Looking at her pure smile, Martel understood some of the rewards of being a teacher. Her success would be his success, and hopefully, thanks to his tutelage, a better life awaited the small girl. "I know you will."

Chapter 422: The Next Step

The Next Step

It was a new fiveday, and Martel began like most mornings in the apothecary. As he entered, the resident apprentice turned and nodded at him in greeting. "Hullo, Martel. Mistress Rana was out last night, gathering herbs. I started, but if you could dry those?"

"Certainly." Martel took position at his worktable and looked through the plants. It was an eerie sight; they looked familiar, yet he did not feel certain he could recognise them. He picked one up; it resembled coltsfoot, but the colour was wrong.

"Oh, these have been infused with magic. Have you dried those kinds of herbs before?"

Martel looked at Nora, shaking his head. "Just ordinary ones."

"Right. Well, the process is the same, but it will feel different. You'll sense the essence of magic, I suppose you could call it. Be gentle when you pull the water out, or you might disturb the magic as well, making the herb useless. I don't have to warn you what Mistress Rana will think of that."

"Indeed you don't." Martel closed his hand around the plant, letting his magical sense fill it. He understood what Nora meant: the herb almost felt alive, as if it could grow and sprout on his palm. It tingled with power.

As gently as he could, Martel let his magic connect with the water present inside the green and yellow flower. He pulled on it, dragging it out to form drops on his skin. It took him a while, much longer than any ordinary herb, where he did not have to worry about his magic interfering with another force. Water being the opposite of his natural talent did not make it easy either, though he was accustomed to the process by now.

At length, he felt satisfied and tied up the plants in the rafters. A trained watermage could probably have emptied the herb of every bit of moisture, but Martel lacked the talent for that. Still, he had reduced what could have taken days to hours.

"Another thing, before I forget," Nora suddenly spoke up. "Mistress Rana is asleep right now, but she asked if you could return this afternoon and see her in the laboratory."

"Sure." Martel glanced at her. "Do you know why she wants to see me?"

"I don't think you need to worry," Nora laughed. "Her jaw wasn't clenched when she told me to tell you. Probably she just wants to discuss the next step in your training."

"Ah, I see." He grabbed another plant and began drying it out.

Next bell, Martel stood with the other acolytes in the Circle of Fire. When Moira arrived, the magical items in her hands revealed a continuation of the lessons from the previous fiveday. Three staves for the other students; one wand for Martel. As he took position away from the others to begin practising, he remembered what Master Alastair had told him. He could see how some of their training under Moira fit with what Martel had been told; a lot of their spellwork focused on honing their basic fire magic.

Whether it had increased their range, he could not tell, given that the circular walls of their chamber did not allow much distance; he wondered if they would at some point change location. He could also see how channelling magic through a ruby could increase their power, as desired by the legions.

But having Martel train with the sapphire did not seem aligned with the current military doctrine. Presumably, he would never use water magic in combat. He wondered why Moira had decided to let him practice this; he half expected she simply wanted to see him struggle with the element opposite his affinity. But she had been remarkably quiet during his previous attempts with the sapphire. Perhaps it was at the behest of Master Alastair, wanting him to improve his general abilities with the elements.

Regardless, Martel set to work. Water was not his friend. It came to him with resistance. Doing normal spellcasting, Martel had more or less overcome this obstacle; discipline and practice had bent the element to his will. Now, channelling through the gem, it felt like starting over. His magic moved at a slower pace through the silver to reach the jewel; instead of ice shaping around the tip of the wand, at best, he made a few drops appear. He even felt one of them as it trickled down the wood to reach his hand. Releasing the spell, nothing happened. No magical bolt of water flew out to hit the wall. Staying focused, Martel tried again.

At fifth bell, he made his way back to the apothecary, passing through it to the stairs in the back. He knocked on the door to the laboratory before entering. Inside, he saw Mistress Rana holding a mouse in a tight grip, a small vial in her other hand. "Come inside, boy," she muttered, her attention on the animal. Carefully, she dripped the contents of the flacon into the critter's mouth.

Hoping he had not been summoned to be the next creature testing her potion, Martel approached while staying silent.

The mouse squirmed, but could not avoid drops of the liquid entering its mouth; satisfied, the alchemist placed the creature back into a small cage. "Still alive. That's good."

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. There is much left to teach you about alchemy, but time is running out, which means we must prioritise. While there are still some useful recipes I would like to teach you personally, something else must take precedence."

"Yes?"

"A lot of herbs are blossoming at this time of year. Now, for simple potions, you can use ordinary plants that any old fool can harvest. You simply awaken their dormant magic as you need it. But more complex elixirs need reagents where the magic is fully realised already at the time of gathering. Other factors may influence their potency and uses as well."

"Such as the light of the moon," Martel considered.

"Very good. Yes. For this reason, we shall pause our work in the laboratory. You may resume working Manday mornings again instead of afternoons. Instead, we shall go gathering on Soldays. I spoke with Mistress Juliana, who said you have no classes on that day, only your chore in the workshops."

True, though Master Jerome had given him leave to practise enchantment during that bell. Still, Martel needed and wanted to learn herblore. It was obvious that this was the next and necessary step in his studies of alchemy. "I'll be ready, mistress."

"Good. Our first journey will be this Solday. Meet me in the entrance hall as soon as you can after first bell. We'll have to leave the city, so it'll take all day. We'll be back late at night."

"Understood."

The alchemist turned around to look at the cage. The mouse lay on its back. "Still too soon to try this recipe on a human, I guess."

Chapter 423: A Spell in a Jar

A Spell in a Jar

The next days progressed in typical manner; Martel attended his lessons and chores, occasionally thinking about his trip on Solday. Nora had already gone on such forays a few times and told him what little there was to relate. It was exactly as it seemed; a trip to the fields outside the city, gathering herbs. Mistress Rana would explain the exact details and methods, but as Martel already knew how to awaken magic in the Sindhian manner, he should not have any difficulties.

Done with enchanting large rocks, Martel had not spent any more time practising enchantment since the previous fiveday; he no longer needed to stop by the workshops regularly and see how long the stone remained enchanted. Instead, he had to trap a spell in a jar, in a manner of speaking. Manday morning, he returned to the small laboratory and renewed his efforts on how to enchant a fire pot.

As expected, he found it difficult to hit the balance. Too much power or too eager casting, and the oil ignited immediately. Too cautious, too slow, the spell did not take. Again and again, Martel wove magic into the liquid, slamming the lid on the jar shut the moment that he ceased casting. Every time, his attempt failed.

Until it succeeded. At least, Martel began to hope that it had. It was easy to tell when he had overdone it; the flame spewing up from the pot told him as much. And when he had been too meek, he could feel the lack of magic inside the closed jar. This time, as he reached out to sense what lay trapped inside the clay – the material blocked his ability to feel the magic to some degree, but he believed that he sensed something.

Martel looked around; even if he and his clothes could probably withstand the fire, it did not seem wise to shatter the pot inside the small room. Plenty of valuable items and tools that might take a scratch or worse.

Leaving the workshop, Martel's first thought was the gymnasium, which lay nearby. But he found it full of mageknights practising weaponry. Although they could probably handle having a fire pot

thrown at them, it seemed best to find an empty space; Martel was not keen on spectators, in case his enchantment had failed.

Thinking of a better place that would be unoccupied at this hour, Martel crossed the castle and walked up the steps to enter the Circle of Fire. Feeling a little excited, and at the same time trying not to get his hopes up in case of disappointment, Martel shook the fire pot in his hand and flung it at the wall. It broke upon contact with the bricks, and a ball of fire burst out.

Martel could not help but laugh seeing this. He had feared it might take him ages before learning the necessary control to weave such a volatile enchantment. The timing was also great; he would no longer be able to practise enchantment on Soldays due to his trips with Mistress Rana, but he should be fine using what other hours were available to him. He still had to practise further, so that he could do it reliably and much faster, but the first time was always the most difficult. Still smiling, Martel walked over and picked up the shards of clay.

At supper, Martel sat by himself as usual, though he noticed Eleanor across the hall with her female friends, which reminded him of an issue; he could not help her study magic on Soldays if he were out of the city. He had meant to speak with her about this earlier, but he kept forgetting. Since Solday was tomorrow, this was his last opportunity to talk with her before he left.

Martel waited until he saw her get up to leave, and quickly, he moved over to intercept her. "Got a moment?"

"Of course." They moved through the doorway to stand in the northern corridor, stepping away from the flow of students moving in and out of the dining hall. More than one of them sent a look at the gangly fire acolyte talking to the elegant mageknight. As for Eleanor, she looked up at him with her brown eyes. "Is something going on?"

"Of sorts. Mistress Rana is taking me outside the city tomorrow. Probably on other Soldays too. Learning about gathering herbs." As Martel said the words, he felt a little silly, conjuring the image of him picking flowers. He cleared his throat. "Some of it has to be done the right way, using magic and such."

If Eleanor thought the same, she hid it well and only looked at him with understanding. "I see. So you will not be available tomorrow afternoon in the library. Well, your pursuit of alchemy is more important."

"We could do it today?" he blurted out. "Well, not today, since it's already evening. But on Mandays instead of Soldays." Even if Martel doubted that they would ever find a cure for Eleanor's sister among the dusty tomes of the library shelves, he knew that he would miss spending that bell in her quiet company. Otherwise he would only see her regularly during combat lessons, which was anything but relaxed. "My sixth bell has opened up."

"That will work. I have training at fifth bell. I may arrive late though. It will take me some time to make myself presentable after sparring."

"Even after training, you're more presentable than anybody else in this school," Martel remarked, only partly in jest.

Half a smile wandered across her lips. "Perhaps in your eyes, but I doubt the librarian agrees."

"You're probably right. Well, I'll see you Manday afternoon, whenever you find it fitting to appear."

"Fitting or not, you shall indeed see me." She winked and left, walking down the corridor towards her dormitory tower. Martel watched her for a long moment before he went his own way, going to his own chamber to practise Master Alastair's exercise.

Chapter 424: In the Meadow

In the Meadow

As soon as first bell rang, Martel got out of bed. Yawning, he splashed water into his face and washed himself before changing from nightshirt into his acolyte robe. He tied his belt around the waist with his dagger in its sheath, wondering if he should bring anything else. Mistress Rana had not given him any instructions beyond simply appearing as early as possible; obeying this command, Martel made his way down to the entrance hall.

He ended up waiting a while, sitting down on the floor with his back against the wall while watching a handful of novices on their way to kitchen duty. At length, he saw Mistress Rana approach, visible to him through the doorway that separated the entrance hall from the dining counterpart. He scrambled to get on his feet and look alert.

"Good, you're ready. Follow me." She turned around, and he hurried to catch up to her as they crossed the castle. After passing through the infirmary, they left through its back entrance. Outside, a donkey stood tied to a ring with bags placed across its back. Mistress Rana untied the creature and set into motion, Martel walking on the opposite side.

They crossed through the nobles' quarter, eventually leaving the city through its gate. Martel wondered at the sight they made; the tall and gaunt Sindhian woman and the even taller fire acolyte on each side of the donkey. Mistress Rana did not speak, and Martel was unsure how she felt about questions at this hour, so neither did he.

Once outside the city walls, the alchemist led them down a dirt path going east towards the river. After a while, the trail disappeared, leaving nothing but marsh terrain beneath their feet. Martel appreciated his sturdy boots with each step, but he also understood why they had gone to this place; as far as his eye could see, the area was lush and wild with growth.

Finally, after hours of walking with only a few breaks, Mistress Rana stopped. She removed the harness from the donkey's head, allowing it to graze. "Follow me, boy."

After such a long silence, her words took Martel by surprise, but he gathered his wits and did as she said.

Finally, she stopped in front of a tall plant. "This is?"

"Hemlock. A few drops can help with seizures, but it is poisonous and must be used with care," Martel recited.

"Its use in alchemy?"

"When awakened, its magical properties are useful in potions of cold."

"Correct. However, that is only one of its properties. So far, you have only handled ingredients already dead. When we awaken their magic, they react predictably, but also within limits," the

alchemist explained. "Magic is life, and when used upon the still living, we achieve different results. Reach out and touch the hemlock. Awaken its magic."

Martel had never guessed there would be a difference whether the plant had been harvested or not. Curious, he reached out and carefully touched the plant, drawing its magic to the surface. Usually, when he had done this, it gave the glow, but little else. This time, he gasped to see the white flowers turned blue in colour.

"As you are new, I would not expect the change to last for long. An experienced alchemist can make the plant keep its magical transformation for hours. In this case, I expect it would not last many breaths before the flowers returned to white."

Martel stared at the blue colour, wondering if he could actually see it slowly fade, or if he merely imagined it because of what Mistress Rana had told him.

"At the moment, I have no need for blue hemlock either, so this one escapes the knife. But perhaps its brethren will be more useful." She approached some of the other plants growing around the same cluster and bent down to touch one of them. Immediately, not just the flowers but also the stem became dark red, almost purple. With a swift motion, she pulled a bronze sickle from her belt and harvested the herb. "Severing the plant makes the transformation permanent. This particular specimen will make an excellent remedy against seizures, with less side effects than ordinary hemlock causes. Also, wash your hands before you touch your face again, unless you want to make it numb."

Martel looked around and found a small stream of water allowing him to do just that.

Meanwhile, Mistress Rana placed her harvested plant in as saddlebag and took out a few other items. "A list for you of what to look for, and a sickle to gather them with. Arm yourself with patience," she warned him. "You can never predict how awakening the magic will affect a plant. You may have to try many times. Go in that direction, and I shall go the other. When noon approaches, we'll eat and see how far we've progressed."

Armed with a sickle and parchment, Martel went gathering for herbs.

They spent both morning and afternoon working through Mistress Rana's list, with a few meals being the only interruptions. As evening beckoned, Martel handed over his sickle and harvest, and they began the journey back to Morcaster.

"Why a bronze sickle?"

"Steel can affect the herbs, as the metal is mixed with coal. A sickle of pure iron would work, but bronze draws upon both copper and tin. Two of the metals made by the primary stars. It yields the best result."

Martel chewed on this; he recalled dimly that Master Fenrick had once spoken on this, and how different metals might respond to various kinds of enchantment. Martel had hoped to learn more of this, waiting for the day he began studying enchantment; that had quickly become irrelevant, as he was only supposed to learn how to create fire pots. But he had managed to do this, more or less; perhaps he could continue learning more about all of this. Surely Master Jerome would teach him if possible.

With these and other thoughts to occupy him, Martel walked silently alongside the donkey, as the walls of Morcaster grew taller on the horizon.

Chapter 425: Nocturnal Visitations

Nocturnal Visitations

As Moira arrived at the Circle of Fire, Martel noticed that she once again carried four staves rather than three and a wand. Perhaps she was no longer amused by the jest of seeing a fire acolyte wielding the tool of a weathermage, or she considered it in vain. In a way, Martel felt a little disappointed; even if he would never use a sapphire for his magic on the battlefield, he would rather spend his time learning how to use it than waste these hours with the ruby staff, which he had already mastered.

He only realised his error when Moira distributed the weapons. His was made of pale wood – ash, by the looks of it. More importantly, as he glanced at the tip, he saw a diamond placed into it.

"Get to it," Moira barked at the other students before turning back to Martel. "Sapphire was perhaps too hasty. Took a lot of persuading, but Master Gilbert finally let me borrow that one. Stupid git, he's got plenty of them for his few acolytes..." She continued to mutter something incomprehensible.

Martel had not expected that she actually put any thought into his progress; he had assumed she just threw challenges at him, content to watch whether he would sink or swim. Inspecting the weapon in his hand, he found it similar to the staff of a battlemage with silver lines leading up to the gem. The only difference was that it amplified air magic rather than fire; the weapon of a stormmage.

For a moment, Martel imagined himself on the deck of a ship, dispelling dark skies and raising the wind to fill the sails with a course for distant lands. Going to Sindhu to further his studies in alchemy or beyond.

"Why are you dallying about, boy?" Moira shouted, almost making him flinch.

He returned to the present; his future lay on land, not at sea. At most, he would only board a ship to sail to war. Trying to focus on spellcasting instead, Martel sent his magic through the staff, channelling a spell through the gem.

Martel continued to practice with the same staff for his second lesson of the day; nothing else worthy of note happened, and he spent his evening practising Master Alastair's exercise. When his Khivan clock showed two hours before midnight, he carried out his final routines and went to bed.

Sleeping, the strangest sensation intruded upon him. It felt like someone grabbing his arm and pulling him in one direction, and it was enough to jostle him awake.

Sitting up in bed, his mind addled by being pulled from sleep, Martel tried to make sense of his surroundings. The moon, one fiveday from being full, gave enough light that he could recognise his room, but he could not see what had caused him to wake. A strange shimmer of light on his door caught his eye, and Martel recognised it a moment later. It had become a habit every night before bed to place the rune of warning on the entrance inside his chamber. Now he watched as the handle turned downwards, and the door slowly opened.

A shape in dark clothes pressed through to enter Martel's room. Sensing heat, the wizard could guess at the nature of his intruder even before the moonlight revealed anything. "Hullo, Weasel." Martel threw his blanket aside and stood up, preferring to face the boy on his feet rather than in bed.

A look of shock crossed the urchin's face. "But I didn't make a sound," he protested, as if him being caught was somehow against the rules.

"I have other methods. You made a mistake, Weasel. I don't know if you came to rob me or worse, but you won't get away with this. You've crossed the line one too many times with me."

"I'm not here to hurt you, I'm here to get help," Weasel hissed. "Sparrow's gone!"

Martel stared at him with a cold demeanour. "If you're lying simply because you got caught, this will only make it worse for you."

"I wouldn't lie about something that important," he claimed. "The fact that I'm here, asking for help, should tell you how serious it is."

"Assuming that you're telling the truth, which I have no particular reason to believe that you are." Despite his words, Martel could not dismiss a growing sense of concern. He had taken Sparrow under his wing and felt responsible for her. The maleficar had already tried to take her once; perhaps he had come back to finish what he had started. The acolyte looked over his shoulder and out his window; it would be several days until the next full moon. That seemed too early for another victim to be taken, but perhaps he had made an exception with Sparrow.

"What you looking out the window for? I thought you'd want to help, if you meant all that about her being your apprentice."

Suddenly, Martel realised what had happened. If he had not been rustled from sleep, he probably would have guessed sooner. "You didn't heed my warning. You kept up your conspicuous thefts, and now Sparrow will pay the price!"

The little chief glared at Martel, who expected some angry rants. Yet when Weasel spoke, his voice quivered with emotion. "You don't know what it's like! How much I have to pay Kerra every fiveday, or she'll kick us out, back to the street. Or worse, let some thug take charge of us, just like the Broken Blades did. Thanks to Sparrow's magic to steal, it's the first time we've done better than just scrape by." As he spoke, anger asserted itself in his voice, replacing the earlier sense of despair. "You can judge me when you spend a day in my shoes!"

A pang of guilt touched Martel's conscience. Perhaps he was also to blame. He had taught Sparrow, but given no thought to her other needs. His salary from Mistress Rana would probably not have been enough to cover Weasel's needs, but it might have meant they did not need to take such risks. It had not even occurred to Martel that he should offer some of his money, content with letting Weasel bear the responsibility for looking after his band of urchins. Having taken no responsibility himself, it was not Martel's place to judge.

Besides, arguing about blame would not help Sparrow. If she had been arrested for using magic to break the law, the outlook was not good. But Weasel's words gave Martel an idea. "If you are paying Kerra for protection, isn't this the sort of situation where she's supposed to protect you?"

Weasel shook his head. "We are not officially part of her people. More like, she tolerates our presence. And she only does it because we steal from outside her district. Which is also why she

won't help us. If we are caught stealing in another district and she intervenes, she's acknowledging that her people are doing their business on another Ninth Lord's territory. That's a whole other headache, could even be considered a violation of the Pact. She'd never do that for Sparrow."

Unfortunately, that sounded plausible. "Alright. Who has Sparrow? It must be possible to negotiate her release."

"The guards," Weasel replied. "They set up an ambush for us along with the mage hunters, though they weren't much needed. The kind of disturbance Sparrow does for us, disrupting the earth, it tires her out. With the guards waiting for us, she was an easy grab. I barely got away myself."

"The inquisitors were present? So they would have taken Sparrow into custody?" Martel's heart began beating faster.

"No, I just said the guards have her," came the frustrated reply. "They ran after all of us, but she's the only one who got caught. One of them took her away while the mage hunters kept after us. I lost them, doubled back, and followed the guards taking her to the Hole."

"What hole?"

"You know, their station in the market district. With the dungeons, the Hole, where they throw us when they catch us," Weasel explained impatiently.

"So she's a prisoner of the city guard," Martel summarised.

"As I've been explaining all along!"

"Alright, quiet down. Don't wake up the rest of the floor. This is better than if the inquisitors have her – no telling what they'd do to her."

"No telling what the guards will do either," Weasel argued. "Usually, they throw us in the Hole for a night or two. We're too small to work in the mines or galleys, not worth the bother of a trial over a few apples, but with the kind of expensive stuff we've nicked..." Despite his frustrated demeanour, concern could be heard in his voice.

"Still, we'll get her out. And I know how." The young wizard began dressing himself.

"So, you'll help?"

"Yes." Digging through his drawers, Martel found his small hoard of silver. "I can't abandon my apprentice."

Chapter 426: Help from the Hedge

Help from the Hedge

It was barely midnight when Martel left the Lyceum, accompanied by Weasel. He hurried south to the market district; with speed and a little luck, he would reach his destination before people had gone to bed. At some point, Weasel wanted to go left, but Martel continued straight ahead.

"Where are you going? The Hole is this way." Quickly, the boy returned to Martel's side.

"We're not going to the guards. If we are lucky, they don't know about Sparrow's secret, but a wizard of the Lyceum appearing in the night to inquire about her might alert them, in turn drawing the attention of the inquisitors. No, we are going to seek advice from someone who knows what to do, discreetly."

Continuing down the mostly deserted streets, Martel kept up the pace until they reached The Golden Goose.

Inside, a handful of patrons sat, making the most of the last few opening hours. The stage was empty with no performances this late, but some of the actors had joined the customers, sharing drinks and merriment. Martel swiftly crossed the room.

Noticing him, the performers raised hands in greeting along with smiles, which he did not reply to. "Where's Regnar?"

"Old man doesn't last late these days. He probably already crawled into bed," the storyteller answered.

"Where's his room?"

"Through the back, going left after that door." A finger gestured to give the direction.

Without further words, Martel hastened through the door to enter the living quarters of the people working at the Goose. "Regnar!"

He repeated the call a few times, walking up and down the corridor. Various heads poked out of the different rooms and doors; seeing a frustrated wizard, none of them remarked upon the disturbance of their sleep, retreating behind closed doors.

"What's this ruckus?" came the question from an old voice, soon followed by an equally aged face peering from one of the rooms. "Martel?"

The young wizard pushed into the chamber of the hedge mage, street child in tow. "I need your help. You remember Weasel?"

"I do."

"One of the kids from his gang has been arrested by the guards. Last year, when it happened to your troupe, you negotiated their release."

"With money we helped you gather, so it's only fair you help us out this time," Weasel inserted.

"Quiet. Regnar will help," Martel declared, giving his small companion an annoyed look. "The girl has magic," he added, turning his eyes on the hedge mage. "And the inquisitors may have guessed as much, or they will if given time. You can guess what will happen to her if they take her into custody."

The old man released a sigh, sitting down on his bed in the sparsely furnished chamber. "Poor thing. Yes, I'll ask my contact in the administration. But I don't know how much coin I have to get her released." He got up again and pulled out a drawer.

Martel threw his purse on top of the furniture, heavy with silver. "All I have."

"That should be enough. If I can get her out of the Hole, I will. That's the promise of a hedge mage to a hedgeling. But if the inquisitors have already taken her... If I try to approach them, they'll strangle us both."

"I know. If that's the case, I have my own way to handle it."

Regnar looked at him with respect. "If so, I'll be impressed. Regardless, time is of the essence. I'll leave now and send word as soon as I know something."

"Good. I'll wait to hear more." Martel looked at Weasel. "Go home. Nothing further you can do."

The young chief looked at the two adults. "Alright. Just - please get her out."

Martel exhaled. "That's the plan."

Martel returned to the castle and did his best to sleep the remaining hours of the night, though concern for Sparrow kept him from rest. The girl had to be frightened out of her wits, cold and starved on a dungeon floor. And that was probably the best he could hope for; in the worst case, the inquisitors had already seized her and begun planning her execution. Martel did not know the laws regarding unlawful use of magic and the specific punishments for different wrongdoings, but he suspected the inquisitors happily gave the harshest sentences where possible.

These thoughts continued to disturb him through his first lesson, which seemed to drag on endlessly. As soon as the bell rang, Martel swiftly left the gymnasium. He did not even bother removing the chain shirt from weapons practice, drawing odd looks as he strode to the entrance hall to check for messages. Martel did not notice, his mind solely on the scrap of parchment in his hand.

Sorry, lad. Too late.

Those in blue got

her first. I'll hold

your coin until

you collect it.

All of Martel's fears concerning Sparrow's fate seemed confirmed in that moment, and his hand shook. This was his fault. He had shown Sparrow how to improve her magic; he should have known that she would eventually use it to steal, or rather that Weasel would make her do so, drawing the attention of the mage hunters. If that girl died with a golden chain around her neck... Martel's conscience would never be pure again.

But he was not beaten yet. He had one card left to play. After a trip to the armoury, removing his superfluous iron, he ran up the stairs to reach his room. Quickly, he scribbled a message on a torn piece of parchment.

Please find out if inquisitors

have a small girl, six or eight

years old, in their custody.

Street child, goes by Sparrow.

Have her released if possible.

Thank you. Martel.

After setting his quill aside and picking up his message, his fingers smudged the ink as he ran down the staircase again. He pushed his way through some of the other students, attracting angry yells and glares without paying them any heed.

Leaving the castle, Martel hurried towards the shrine attended by the Grey Brothers. "A message for the Friar. The matter is urgent," he stressed, approaching the nearest monk. "Please see it delivered to him at once."

The Grey Brother accepted the message with a nod of his head before he turned around and walked away. Martel stood, watching his back and suppressing the desire to shout at him to walk faster. He had done what he could, for now, at least.

Leaving, Martel set a course back for the Lyceum. He had another lesson today, and he needed sleep; at the same time, he could not care about either. He had endangered a small child with his behaviour; he could only pray that he was not too late to save her.

Chapter 427: Harvestmen

Harvestmen

The following day, Martel checked for a message straight after breakfast, and also after first bell had ended. Henry gave him odd looks, but the clerk did not dare say anything other than inform Martel that no missives awaited him.

During his chore in the apothecary, Martel chopped the plants with vicious blows, practically turning them to powder. If Nora sensed his mood, she had the wits to remain quiet and let him work out his anxieties with the herb knife.

Appearing from the laboratory, Mistress Rana had no qualms about addressing her helper. "Martel, we will not be gathering herbs on Solday, so you may have the day off to do as you wish. Instead, we shall go Glunday, and we will be out late, taking advantage of the full moon. I'll pack what we need. Don't worry about your lessons," she added. "I told your teachers you would be absent." She glanced at the current efforts of his toils lying on the worktable. "You're meant to chop it finely, not turn it into dust." Martel made no reply, his mind barely able to focus on what she had told him, and she swiftly left the apothecary.

Martel went again to the clerks after his first lesson, after dinner, and on his way to his second lesson in fire magic, all in vain. Yet as seventh bell rang, his sojourns to the entrance hall were finally rewarded. Mutely, Henry gave him a note, which Martel basically tore open.

The girl is where you feared.

Getting her released will be hard.

Meet at Grey Brothers at last bell.

Martel's heart pounded at double speed. Sparrow in the hands of the inquisitors was his worst fear now confirmed. But he seized onto the second line of the message; it might be hard, but as long as it was possible, Martel would see her freed.

His instinct was to go to the shrine immediately. But he had nearly two hours until last bell rang, and it would take less than half an hour to reach the temple. So he armed himself with patience, waited until supper was served and ate a good meal, in case he might need his strength tonight, and only afterwards left the castle.

Reaching the small sanctuary, Martel was silently greeted by a Grey Brother, who gestured for the wizard to enter. Inside, he found the Friar standing in front of a wall painting; one of the few ornaments that decorated the shrine.

"Interesting, isn't it? The Grey Brothers prefer their temples unadorned, but they make an exception for images that tell certain stories. But not the kind you'd expect, extolling the power and virtue of Sol. Nor do they depict Luna, or even the Triumvirate. No, they decorate with ordinary people doing simple, humble tasks. Perhaps to show that divinity rests in the smallest of us."

Martel glanced at the wall, showing a farmer harvesting wheat with a scythe. Lacking both interest and patience for art, he ignored the Friar's words. "You said that the inquisitors have Sparrow? But there is a way to get her out?"

The old monk turned towards his young companion. "Yes to both your questions. Calm yourself, Master Martel. You look ready to storm the Imperial Palace."

The wizard was not sure what exactly gave that impression; he was dressed as usual. He tried to relax his shoulders and stance. "I assume that won't be necessary, but I am ready to do what it takes."

The Friar scrutinised him. "Good. But it will not be your magical power that frees the girl, however impressive that might be. Brute force will not avail us. The Inquisition is backed by the Empire, and even you might have some trouble standing against them."

"Of course," Martel conceded. Part of him had in fact been ready for a fight, but he had known deep down that it would not be the answer. Assuming he could steal Sparrow away from the mage hunters, it would undoubtedly leave a bloody mess and make them both fugitives, with the full might of the Inquisition coming down on them. Still – he felt the slightest touch of disappointment that this would be resolved using guile instead.

"You did right coming to me. I have connections, goodwill, and favours to draw upon. I should be able to have the girl released."

Martel would have preferred a guarantee stated in absolute terms, but he knew he had to take what he could get. "Good. Please do so."

The Friar, whose eyes had returned to the painting, once more looked at Martel with a penetrating gaze. "Understand that this goes beyond any favours I might owe you. If you had been in trouble, I could point to your standing as a battlemage of the Lyceum and discreetly hint at the services you have provided for me. Helping you would have been a reasonable repayment for finding the stolen relic, and I would not ask anything further of you. But this girl, accused of using magic to steal – I will have to expend all my influence to have her handed over to me. It will come with conditions for both her and you. I will expect you to repay this debt. Do you understand?"

Martel did not see any other option. "I understand. Do it."

The monk nodded. "Without hesitation. As soon as it is done, I shall send word to you."

"Thank you." The young wizard exhaled in relief. He looked again at the painting. Beautifully done, but an odd choice for a decoration; it made the farmer look almost saintly, as if he swung his scythe to harvest the grain as a religious obeisance, rather than because the alternative was starvation. It

seemed more like a city-dweller's idea of what a man working the land should look like, or how he should feel about it.

His mind too tired for debating artwork, Martel kept this observation to himself and left the temple.

Chapter 428: Warmth and Light

Warmth and Light

With the hope that Sparrow's safety had been ensured, a weight fell from Martel's shoulders. He was able to sleep properly that night, even if his meeting with the Friar remained a pin prick in his side. Not that he doubted the monk's ability to get Sparrow out; for all his apparent frailty, the old man was still a Ninth Lord. His advanced age only made it more impressive that he held such a position, and it spoke to his influence and ability to shape the affairs of Morcaster.

At the same time, that was also the reason for Martel's unease. He had incurred a debt, and someone like the Friar did not retain his position by letting such debts go unpaid. But he would have to cross that bridge once he reached it; Sparrow's life mattered more.

For a moment, Martel wondered if going off to war in some months would end up being a relief; if nothing else, he knew where he stood with the Khivans and what to expect from them. Maybe a bullet fired from ahead was better than a blade in the back.

At least with the matter handed over to the Friar, Martel could focus on his spellcraft. Specifically, enchantment. He still had it as a lesson on his schedule every Manday, and he felt that he made progress. Holding a clay jar in his hand, he cautiously entwined his magic with the oil inside. It tethered on the brink of ignition, wanting to unleash its fire, but Martel soothed the desire without quenching it entirely. Placing the lid back on, he withdrew his magic, finishing the spell.

Waiting a few moments, he reached out again; dormant, his magic lay inside the pot, ready to ignite when disturbed.

Martel carefully placed it on the nearby table. He could go to the Circle of Fire and test it like he had done last Manday, but it seemed unnecessary. At some point, it was just a waste of clay. And although he had not brought his Khivan clock, he estimated that it took him at least half an hour to enchant one of these little fire pots; it seemed a shame to destroy it only to confirm what he already knew.

His decision made, Martel picked up the jar again and left the laboratory. He would keep it as a trophy, at least for now; maybe it would come in useful one day, though Martel suddenly noticed a problem with this particular item.

He could not place it in his pockets; someone bumping into him with enough force might break the clay. Certainly, the risk was great in a fight that someone struck him right where he kept the pot. Carrying it around in his hand did not seem useful either; besides how annoying that would be, it also kept him from using a staff to fight with.

Unsure whether these little fire pots would ever actually come in useful, Martel placed the one he had inside his drawer, surrounded by socks.

Arriving in the Hall of Elements, Martel did not waste time. "Master Alastair, I have learned how to enchant fire pots. Do you have any suggestions about what I should learn to enchant next?"

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I once worried that if you studied other forms of magic, like Sindhian alchemy, it would make it harder for you to master Asterian magic. But the reverse seems to be the case," the teacher considered. "Master Fenrick remarked you were among the only students who showed promise with Tyrian runes."

"Me and Eleanor," Martel added, wanting her to receive credit as well. "It's been hard sometimes, no doubt, but I think it does help. It feels like the way we understand magic, Asterians, I mean, it's limited."

"Quite possibly, that's true. But I'll leave such questions up to our Master of Lore. As for your question, let me think. There's nothing obvious that you'll need in battle, but a few items might help once you're in camp."

"Such as?"

"Well, you already started on how to create heating stones. While your inner ability with fire might spare you from feeling the worst of the cold, having such a stone in your tent is a nice comfort during winter storms," Master Alastair told him.

"So, I should practise getting better at that?"

"For instance. Another thing that fire enchanters make would be lightstones. They're pretty much what they sound to be. It's not really needed for you – you can always just summon a flame to give you light. But they work better than torches, and any guards around your camp will be happy to have them."

That did sound useful. Also something Martel could make and sell, if he ever needed money. A candle that did not burn out, left no odour, nor carried the risk of starting a fire – plenty would pay well for such an item. And it would make a good present as well, hard even for his wealthy friends to come by; Martel assumed that few enchanters worked with fire, given that anyone with the aptitude for fire would be made into a battlemage. "How do I make them?"

"You more or less know the principle. Same as weaving heat into a stone, except you focus your spell to be bright rather than hot. Ask Master Jerome to provide you with an empty lightstone."

"I will. Thank you, master. Any other ideas?"

"None come to mind. I'll let you know if I think of anything. For now, let's turn our attention on our own spellwork. How's your progress?"

"Not much," Martel admitted. "I've done the exercise, but that manner of precise control... I can't really feel when it slips. Not like you can."

"I do have decades of experience," his teacher reminded him. "And learning enchantment will help hone your precision, coincidentally. Come on, let me see."

Martel nodded, extending his hands to either side. In one, fire came; the other summoned air to circle around his fingers.

"Too much fire."

"Yes, master."

Chapter 429: Birds of a Feather

Birds of a Feather

Martel woke Solday morning to the strange and almost unsettling feeling of having nothing to do. No work in the apothecary, nor the workshops; not even a study session with Eleanor in the library. With this day originally meant to go harvesting for herbs with Mistress Rana, Martel no longer had any obligations on Soldays; with their excursion postponed until Glunday, that left him entirely to his own devices.

As it turned out, he did not know how to spend his newfound spare time. He did not wish to leave the castle, in case a message should arrive from the Friar concerning Sparrow. He could seek out Eleanor and Maximilian, but he knew that he would probably feel too distracted to relax and enjoy their company; or maybe it was the thought of making merry while Sparrow was still imprisoned by the inquisitors that stole his interest in spending time with his friends.

In the end, he went to do what he would have done on previous Soldays; down in the workshops, in the small laboratory, the stone he used to practice enchantment waited for him. It was difficult to gather the necessary focus for enchanting with thoughts of Sparrow troubling him, but he took it as an added incentive that might help him learn better control.

He spent an hour working his magic into the rock as slowly and deliberately as he could. When he was done, it almost hummed with the heat of his spell. Martel felt he had done better than previously, but only time would tell how long the enchantment would last this time around. He would have to check in the coming days on occasion, measuring how much warmth the stone exuded before finally going cold again.

He realised with winter coming, this might also prove a useful gift similar to his thoughts about the lightstone, assuming he could improve his skills sufficiently. Master Jerome had given him the impression that a master enchanter could easily make such a simple spell last for months. Martel would not increase his skill to such heights any time soon, probably not even before he had to leave Morcaster; but if he could make it last a couple of fivedays at least, he could gift one to the street children in the copper lanes. If he enchanted it just before he left, it would hopefully take the sting out of the worst winter days.

He could also give one to Eleanor, who like him would end up in an army camp somewhere. As for Maximilian, destined for the Imperial Palace – Martel did not feel any pity for him.

After a large dinner – enchanting was hungry work – Martel practised Master Alastair's exercises. He did not know if he had much luck; he needed his teacher present to tell him whether he balanced the magic equally or still continued to favour fire too much. Perhaps it was also too soon after spending so much effort on enchanting; maybe his mind, or his body, or both needed a break before trying something else that also required such focus.

Allowing himself a break, Martel ambled to the entrance hall and checked for messages; the third time he had done so today.

It is done. Meet at the

shrine, seventh bell.

Martel exhaled, relief filling his being. The thought of Sparrow being strangled by inquisitors because he had taught her magic – it had been like a chain around his throat as well. He could breathe freely again. And he still had several hours until seventh bell rang. Feeling his mood increase every passing moment, he went back towards the boys' common room, looking to find Maximilian for a game of cards.

Martel arrived at the shrine early. A Grey Brother washing the floor looked up as he approached, got on his feet, nodded quietly at Martel, and disappeared into the back room of the shrine. Moments later, a shadow ran through the hallowed yet short hall of the temple and threw her arms around Martel's waist.

He hugged the girl tightly, albeit awkwardly, as she was half his height. Behind her, the Friar appeared. "If you could spare a moment before you leave, I should speak with you privately." He gave a knowing look towards Sparrow.

Extricating himself, Martel knelt down to look her in the eye. "Give me one moment to speak with my friend. Just wait here, and then afterwards, I'll take you home."

"Wait, don't leave me!" she cried out as he stepped away.

"I won't, we'll be right here in the room. You'll be able to see me the whole time," he promised, taking the handful of steps to cross the small space and join the Friar. "Thank you," he said earnestly, as he reached the old monk.

"You're welcome, though as I said, there are conditions. Where the girl is related, I had to claim that she will be sent far from Aster, to our enclave on the Western Isles, where she'll be raised in a religious order."

"Alright." Martel saw no harm in that; whatever the inquisitors needed to believe.

"This means that if she is caught again, and they recognise her, there's nothing I can do. They'll not entrust her to me a second time," the Friar cautioned. "If she is discovered using magic to break the law, no matter her young age, expect her to be executed. I trust you will impress the severity of her situation upon her?"

Martel swallowed. He could not imagine the depravity or religious zeal it took to condemn a child to death for the crime of stealing to survive, but he already knew the inquisitors were not to be reasoned with. He could only thank the Stars that somehow, the Friar had managed to do so and get Sparrow released. He nodded.

"Good. As for you, if I have need of a mage, expect to receive a message."

With luck, that would not happen within the next four to five months; given how fortune treated Martel, though, that probably meant it was bound to happen. But he would leave tomorrow's concern for tomorrow. "I understand. Now, I better take her home."

They nodded in farewell, and Martel returned to Sparrow; taking her by the hand, they began the walk home.

"Will you be alright walking all the way to the copper lanes? I know a place not too far where you can sleep."

"No, it's fine. I've spent the last days in a cell. I can walk."

"Did – did they hurt you?"

"They slapped me a few times. Guards always do that, to teach you a lesson or something. But I've heard rumours of others they did much worse to, so I guess I'm lucky."

Martel cleared his throat. "I meant the inquisitors."

"Oh. They put golden chains around my hands. That was probably the worst. I couldn't feel the earth anymore."

Martel recognised it from his own experience, long ago, of having gold tied around his throat.

"They were mean. It's weird. The guards can be cruel, but it's more like an afterthought. They slap you because they can, but they don't really care more than that. Those people in blue, they didn't hit me, but their eyes looked at me with hatred." She shivered, perhaps not just because it was a cold night. "I've known people to be angry at me, run after me while shouting and yelling, but I've never seen that before."

Martel squeezed her hand. "Hopefully, you won't again. I need to tell you, Sparrow, I won't be able to get you out another time. You can't ever use magic for stealing. There's no telling what they'll do if they catch you again."

"Weasel won't like that."

"It's your life that's at risk. You tell that little bastard that I'll set him on fire if he tries to make you."

She giggled a little. "Don't set him on fire, though. He works hard to keep us safe."

Martel sighed. "I guess he does. There's something else." He turned south to walk through the market district on their way to the copper lanes. "Have I told you that I'll be going away in some months' time?"

"Weasel told me. Said you wore the colours of a battlemage, and you'd be going to war soon."

"I'm sure he relished saying that. Well, he's right. I can't stay, as much as I'd prefer to."

They walked for a few moments in silence before she spoke. "I'm sorry you have to go."

"Me too. Which is why I'm taking you this way."

"Why's that?"

"You'll see in just about – just down there. See that tavern with the goose on the sign?"

"Yeah?"

"Inside, there's a troupe of actors. They got an old hedge mage named Regnar. If you're ever in trouble again, and I'm not here, find him. He's my friend, and he knows what it's like to have magic you're not supposed to have," Martel explained. "He'll help you."

"Alright." After another brief period of quietude, she spoke again. "It's weird walking in the middle of the broad street, out in the open with so few people around." At this late hour, they encountered

mostly drunks or others in search of nocturnal entertainment. "Usually I have to hide or run around in the crowd. Keep out of sight. People see me, they grip their purse. Sometimes throw rocks at me."

"They won't tonight." Martel tightened his grip on her hand a little. "Tonight, you walk with a wizard, and he'll boil anyone that tries anything."

She giggled again.

Chapter 430: Below Luna's Light

Below Luna's Light

The next couple of days passed without noteworthy events until Glunday arrived along with Martel's trip with Mistress Rana, replacing their usual Solday foray. As they would be out late to make the most of the moonlight, he did not have to be ready straight after first bell for once; instead, they would wait for dinner and only leave past noon.

Making the most of his free morning, Martel went to the workshops and checked on the heating stone that he practised enchantment on. Improvement was slow, but steady; it was a dull skill to learn compared to some of the breakthroughs he had experienced, especially with elemental magic, but at least progress was reliable. It also encouraged him that he could measure his improvement; after every time, the spell he wove into the stone lasted longer and burned hotter.

Having spent the early hours productively, Martel had his dinner and went to meet Mistress Rana outside the infirmary gate. She was already there with the donkey, packing the bags slung over its back. "Ready?"

"Yes, mistress."

With no further words, they left.

Once beyond the walls of Morcaster, traffic lessened; they mostly met carts driven by peddlers, the occasional regiment of legionaries, or sometimes pilgrims making the journey to Sol's great temple. Feeling bold, Martel ventured a question aimed at the tight-lipped alchemist walking on the other side of the donkey. "Mistress Rana, what is Sindhu like?"

"Different." For a moment, Martel thought that was the only answer he would receive until she spoke again. "As all with magical talent turn towards alchemy, you will find it everywhere. It is not only used for diseases or such. On hot days, those working in the sun will take a potion to stay cool. A watchman with a long night ahead might have an elixir that keeps him alert and awake."

"You must have recipes to brew just about anything," Martel speculated.

"That is often the impression among ordinary people, but if you ask any Sindhian alchemist, they will lament everything we have yet to figure out." She wore a sarcastic smile. "This is not helped by the rivalry of the Towers. Knowledge is guarded so jealously, two of these Towers may very well be pursuing the same study, each expending the same effort rather than working together."

"Sorry, what towers?"

"You would call them guilds, I suppose. Alchemists in Sindhu are organised in this manner after the five great towers of Pataliputra."

"You belong to one of these?"

"I do. They patronised my journey to Aster and continue to support me, supplying me with reagents otherwise impossible to obtain in these lands," she clarified.

Martel's thoughts went to her laboratory, filled with the oddest jars and bottles. He remembered how the berserker had wanted to sell Regnar to Sindhian alchemists to be butchered like a pig for his innards.

They continued in silence.

Reaching the marshlands, Mistress Rana handed over a list along with a sickle. "We are not fortunate with the moon's position tonight," she remarked, looking up at the sky. "It will only be a few hours after the sun has set before the moon sets as well. For now, look for the herbs at the top of your list."

Martel glanced over the parchment and saw the herbs had been divided above and below a line.

"Those are fairly mundane. Gather what you can. Those below, however, if you come across any – wait until the full light of the moon shines, and only that light."

"Yes, mistress." He frowned. "Anything I should do different? When harvesting the plants."

"The procedure is the same." She looked up again. "Come back when it's close to sunset. We shall eat our provisions then."

Bowing his head, Martel went off in search of his quarry.

Unsure what to expect, the acolyte waited with growing excitement for when the sun would set, so only the moon shone down upon the marshlands. When it finally happened, he did not feel any different; if the light of the full moon affected his magic, he lacked the sensitivity to tell the difference.

Walking over to a cluster of herbs on the lower part of his list, Martel knelt down and reached out to touch the stem. As soon as he drew upon the magic inside the plant, it responded; the yellow flower became a deep red.

A clear difference from his previous outings, and Martel saw what power the moonlight held. He also found it interesting that while he, a wizard, personally could not tell the difference, something as simple as this herb responded to the moon with such force. He wondered if being accustomed to using magic dulled his sense; it reminded him of the riddle of three as told by the Friar, and the advice of the last sage to only use magic when needed.

With a quick cut from his sickle, Martel harvested the plant and continued to the next while his mind wandered among musings on the nature of magic.

It was a late hour when they began the return journey; thankfully, tomorrow was Manday, where he might dispose of his morning as he had today. He could sleep in if needed.

"How long until you graduate, boy?"

The sudden question caught Martel off guard. "Uh, sometime in winter. Four to five months, I'd say."

She nodded to herself. "You won't exactly be a master alchemist, but that's enough time to finish your basic training, I suppose. With this herblore, there's little left to show you of the foundation. Whether you can build upon it is up to you."

Martel doubted he would have many opportunities for it, stuck in an army camp; just getting reagents would be difficult. But he would try. "Is that why you left Sindhu, mistress? To build upon your foundation."

She gave a tight-lipped smile before replying. "Yes. Everyone in Sindhu has access to the same ingredients. There seemed little left that could be learned. New lands offer new opportunities."

"Your Tower agrees, I take it, if they support your efforts."

"Of course."

"They don't mind that you work for the Lyceum at the same time?"

She gave a shrug. "Compromises are sometimes needed. Without that position, I'm a Sindhian woman claiming to be an alchemist. For any of those reasons, I might be met with distrust. Yet as Mistress of Alchemy at the Lyceum, I am afforded respect that few others of my homeland are given."

Martel suspected she was right. Ahead of them, the walls of Morcaster loomed.