

Firebrand 431

Chapter 431: Light Eater

Light Eater

Martel's life settled into the usual routine over the next five days. Lessons in fire magic and combat continued at what felt like a snail's pace. At least trying to wield the staff of a stormmage gave him a challenge, even if it did not seem pertinent to his education as a battlemage; he would never control air magic to such a degree that he might prefer it over fire, which he mastered unlike any other element.

While enchantment would not avail him in battle either, Martel preferred spending his efforts on that skill. He could measure his progress, which encouraged him, and he knew how he wanted to put this ability to use.

Sitting in the laboratory that formed part of the workshops, Martel held a stone in his hand about the size of his fist. It was almost perfectly round except for the flat bottom, allowing it to stand on a surface without rolling away.

Focusing, Martel pushed his magic into the rock, filling every inch of it with the essence of fire. It was similar to enchanting the larger heating stones, but with a key difference.

Heat and light walked hand in hand when it came to fire; increasing one did the same to the other. But a lightstone filled with heat might burn anybody picking it up, ignite fabric it touched, or just make a room unbearably hot on a summer's night.

Thus, Martel had to strengthen the spell while also weakening it; or rather, enflame one aspect while quelling the other. Ideally, he should have learned this already when practising on the heating stones, which required the reverse to keep a room hot without blinding its occupants.

It had not occurred to Martel that this might be an issue until Master Alastair pointed it out to him, giving him a new challenge. At the same time, it tied neatly into what else he was being taught; whether channelling magic through gems or summoning two elements with precisely equal strength, it was all about control.

A year ago, Martel simply called upon magic and released it; he allowed himself to feel good about how far he had come before returning his attention to the dormant lightstone.

Soon after the bell rang, Master Jerome appeared. "How's that light coming?"

Martel looked down at the rock in his hand with a faint glow. "Not quite there yet. Though I meant to ask, where did you get this stone?" He held up the almost perfect sphere in his hand, clearly shaped by human intention.

"It's made by stonemages. One in particular who supplies these for Morcaster's streetlamps," Master Jerome explained.

"Is it possible to buy them? I should like to have some for myself."

"Not for ordinary folks. But tell you what, the Lyceum pays ten silver a piece. You bring me the coin, I'll get you the stones."

"That sounds great, thank you!"

The artificer smiled. "Certainly. By the way, may I borrow your belt? I brought another that you can use meanwhile." He extended his hand, holding the offered item.

Martel had wondered why Master Jerome walked around with a belt, but he assumed the artificer was in the middle of working. While curious what this was about, he trusted the craftsman implicitly. "Of course." Unbuckling his black belt, Martel swapped it for one of brown colour.

"I'll get it back to you," the artificer promised with a wink.

As the day waned, Martel left the Lyceum. A task awaited him that he had postponed for as long as he could. Being the last day of the month, he could not delay further. He either had to pay rent for Julia's room for the next month or accept she would not be returning and fetch his belongings from her place.

Walking to the harbour, Martel had not made a decision. He carried silver in his pocket should he choose the former; if he decided the latter, he had a bag in his hand to carry his cauldron and jars.

Reaching the insula, Martel approached the reeve's small office. The short man looked at him questioningly, but without saying anything.

Finally, Martel spoke. "Let me have the key. I'll take my possessions. Anything I leave behind, you may keep."

"Very good, master wizard."

Soon after, burdened by his belongings and the fear that he might have chosen wrong, Martel left the insula again.

He had not walked far before a Khivan man suddenly approached him. Immediately watchful, Martel extended his magic. Being in a crowd of people on the street, he got a disrupting impression of countless heat sources around him. This was to be expected; more importantly, he felt no cold areas from the Khivan, suggesting a lack of golden weapons.

Relaxing a little, but keeping his shield ready to be summoned, Martel addressed the other man.

"What do you want?"

"Forgive me, Master Martel. I bring a message from my master."

"Give it here, then."

"It is spoken. He did not wish to introduce himself in a message that could be read by others." The Khivan stepped towards the edge of the street, indicating for Martel to follow. He did so, extricating himself from the crowd. "My master is known as the Fire Eater." He looked expectantly at Martel.

It took him a moment to remember. The Ninth Lord of the Khivan quarter. Martel's instinct was to throw the man aside and tell him to eat dirt in the Nether – but after Martel stopped the fire in the enclave, this Fire Eater had sent a considerable sum as a gift. While it did not earn him Martel's goodwill or necessarily an audience, the young wizard could not help but think of Shadi. Or the other Khivans he had seen on his visits, especially those thrown out of their homes by the cruel minions serving Duke Cheval. Knowing he might regret this, Martel inclined his head. "What does he want?"

"Simply a meeting. Tomorrow, if it suits the good master, the Fire Eater will welcome you in his home, at any bell that is preferable."

"Tomorrow suits me fine. I'll be there in the evening. What's his address?"

The Khivan smiled. "The streets have no names in the enclave. But ask any where the Fire Eater lives, and they'll tell you." The messenger gave a bow and joined the traffic moving up and down the street, soon disappearing from sight.

Chapter 432: The Fire Eater

The Fire Eater

For the lesson in the Circle of Fire, Martel noticed that Moira arrived with only three staves. It seemed his training with the weapon of a stormmage had come to an end. Once she had distributed the staves to the other acolytes, Moira handed him the wand of a weathermage. "You look ready to give water another try."

Martel waited for a biting remark to follow; none did. Accepting the wand, he glanced at it; the sapphire at the tip sparkled in the sunlight streaming in from the windows far above. Turning away from the others to face the wall with the slit that served as his target, Martel channelled his magic through the silver-streaked wood.

From the surrounding air, moisture knitted itself together and became drops on the gem. The water lingered for a moment before freezing to ice, shining with magic as it launched itself at the wall. It hit far from the mark, and Martel felt himself strained from the effort; still, the spell had worked.

When his obligations for the day had ended, Martel set out for the Khivan district. The route was familiar to him, though he could not recall if he had been to the enclave since the last time he saw Shadi. That had been at the year's beginning, some eight months ago. With her gone, he had no reason to visit.

Reaching the quarter, it looked the same at first. Old wooden houses, many of them in need of repairs, lined the streets; built in an earlier age where timber provided cheap and fast construction materials, now generally replaced by stone buildings everywhere else except for the copper lanes.

The local residents regarded him apprehensively, either because he was Asterian or a wizard; probably both. Yet now and then, he caught someone bowing their head towards him; every time, he nodded in return. And when he asked for directions to the home of the Fire Eater, the reply came swiftly and willingly.

His path took him towards the central square of the enclave. He avoided looking in the direction of Shadi's former home; he had no wish to stir those memories more than necessary. And soon, something else stole his attention.

North of the square, where the fire had raged before Martel intervened, a new building took form. So far, little more than the foundation had been prepared, but large slabs of stone lay piled up. No doubt once the building was complete, it would tower over everything else in the district; a brand-new insula that could provide homes for hundreds of people, potentially. Besides the ongoing construction work, Martel noticed at least a dozen heavily armed guards, probably with more elsewhere around the site.

Dismayed by the visible sign of how Duke Cheval's nefarious scheme had come to fruition, despite Martel's efforts, the wizard hurried onwards according to his received directions. His path took him south, past the temple for the Khivan faith until he could see the southern city wall in the distance. At length, he reached a building that stood in the same style as the rest of the quarter; the difference was that it was well-maintained.

Furthermore, a man stood outside, leaning against the wall in the manner that Martel had come to recognise; despite his casual demeanour, he was a look-out, keeping watch of the street. He wore the traditional Khivan robe and headscarf, as did nearly everyone else in this part of the district; as Martel approached, he abandoned his relaxed stance and stepped towards the wizard with a bow.

"My master bids you welcome. Know that you enter his house in peace and shall leave it in peace."

A promise of safe conduct, Martel figured. Regardless, he used his magic to look for golden weapons; the Khivan had none. Satisfied for now, he followed the look-out into the house.

As the first thing, Martel noticed this house had much richer furnishings than would be expected; secondly, it expanded backwards to be twice as large compared to the typical residences of the quarter, though done in such a way as to mask this expansion when viewed from the street.

Two Khivan children in their early teens, one boy and one girl, sat on pillows around a low table; they looked to be studying their letters. They both glanced up with curious eyes, leaving Martel bewildered; he had not expected this.

Martel was rescued by the appearance of whom he took to be the master of the house, and quite possibly the enclave as a whole. He did not look much like the man Martel had seen during the summit of the Nine Lords. While his hair and beard had the same cut, neither was oiled. He did not wear traditional garb, just a shirt and trousers like any Asterian would while at home; lastly, the dark lines painted around his eyes were missing.

"Master Martel. Welcome to my abode. I am Navid." Still taken aback, which was perhaps intended, Martel simply inclined his head. "Please, let us speak in the other room, or my children will never finish their lesson."

He followed his host out of the common room to enter a second; glancing over his shoulder, he noticed the boy and girl still watching him.

Navid gestured for him to sit down on a pillow in the corner of the room; once Martel had done so, he took a seat as well. "Thank you for accepting my invitation."

"Sure."

"Not what you expected, I imagine."

"You're the first Ninth Lord I've met who conducts his business from home," Martel replied. He noticed that the Khivan spoke Asterian like a local with no trace of foreign roots.

"I am not much like them. I did not take this mantle to amass wealth or power. My sole interest is protecting my people. I am content with living like them."

With a few more luxuries than Martel imagined the average Khivan could afford. Besides the furnishings and the improved size of the house, he had noticed the children read by candlelight, but there was no odour of tallow in the air, meaning it was made from beeswax, probably.

He became aware that Navid scrutinised him. "To us, you are perplexing, Master Martel. The old country teaches us to hate magic, which is rooted in the hearts of many, even those who have never set foot in Khiva."

Martel saw no reason to interrupt his host just yet; let the man talk and reveal as much as he wanted.

"Ah, thank you." Navid interrupted himself as a woman appeared through a door in the back and placed two cups on the table between them. With a smile, she poured tea for them both; she did not seem servile, making Martel suspect her to be Navid's wife. She disappeared again, back the way she came. "I hope you like tea."

Not really, but it felt early in the conversation to be impolite, so Martel took his cup and inhaled the scent. It smelled about as he had expected.

"To your health, Master Martel." Navid took a sip from his cup; after watching this, Martel did the same. "Where was I? Ah yes. Our apprehension about magic. Especially fire wizards, as our faith considers this to be the primordial element. To see it manipulated by magic is sacrilegious to many. And yet you did so, saving the lives of my brethren, and our homes."

And it cost Martel more than the Khivan knew, he suspected, but he kept this thought to himself.

"Simply put, many of my people don't know what to think of you. However, I am not one of them. I came to Morcaster when I was two. I have no memory of any home before that, and the Asterian language comes swifter to my tongue than Khivan. If you will be our friend, master wizard, I am only happy to embrace you."

Martel sensed they had begun to broach the actual subject. His host wanted something that only a mage could provide. He took a sip of his tea, letting the man continue.

"On your way here, you passed the new building under construction, I take it? On the ashes of what burned that fateful night when you tamed the fire. Do you know who owns it?"

"Duke Cheval, I assume."

Navid gave a nod. "Correct. From what I gather, the fire was started on his orders." Seeing no reaction from Martel, he spoke again. "But you already knew this."

"What about it?" Martel's patience was reaching its end.

"Once it is finished, that insula may provide homes for hundreds of people. Asterians, no doubt, who can pay higher rent than us Khivans. In this way, they push us out of the only district where we may settle."

"I'm sorry. Nobody should lose their home."

"Your sympathy is well noted, master wizard. Not many feel as you do. My people have tried to disrupt the construction, but it is heavily guarded. Any form of confrontation is dangerous for us – the law provides little to no protection nor restitution for Khivans, should any of these hired thugs attack us."

"Something I don't agree with."

"Neither do I, yet it is the reality of the situation. If we are to prevent this construction..." Navid took a deep breath before he continued. "We need stronger powers on our side than what gold or steel can provide."

There it was. Martel emptied his cup of tea, buying him a few moments to think. He really only needed one moment, though, to know that he had to refuse. This was not his fight, no matter how much he sympathised with the Khivans; as much as his status as a battlemage shielded him from certain consequences, there had to be a limit, and Martel was not keen on finding it.

Antagonising Duke Cheval further also seemed the wrong move; even if the nobleman already hated Martel, it just seemed a poor idea to give the duke another reason to seek revenge.

"I'm sorry," Martel finally said. "Fire can do little against stone. I'm not the right kind of wizard that you need."

"You may be the only one we have," Navid argued.

"I'm sorry to say, you don't even have that." Not in the mood to be guilted, Martel got up from his pillow. "Forgive me, but it's late. I should return home."

"Of course. I'm the one asking for your forgiveness, keeping you so late. You were most kind to visit me." The Khivan hid his disappointment well, remaining unfailingly polite.

"Thank you for the tea." Martel stepped over the table and made his way towards the door.

"Goodbye, Master Martel. May the Flame illuminate your path."

With the eyes of the children on him, Martel nodded in farewell and left the house.

Chapter 433: Watchful Eyes

Watchful Eyes

Malday morning, Moira appeared in the gymnasium alongside her students. This was a new development; previously, she had only been present during afternoons when the fire acolytes practised together with the mageknights.

She brought four staves with her, all of them adorned by a ruby, and Martel understood the reason for her appearance. Usually, they practised ordinary staff fighting during this lesson, using no magic other than empowerment. Now, it was time to combine it with using the magical staves for channelling their spells.

Curiously, Reynard was not present at all. It seemed he was happy to leave Moira in charge for this lesson. Martel was unsure if he preferred this; as much as he loathed the Master of War, at least he left the acolytes alone as long as they put up a token effort during the bell.

"Pair up. Edward, you're with Harriet." Moira distributed the weapons and Martel took position opposite William. "Closer. Couple of paces apart," their teacher instructed them. All of the students took a step forward, approaching their respective opponent. "Alright. You're within striking distance of each other. Up to you whether you use the staff for physical attacks or spellcasting. What matters is that you continue until your opponent is on the ground and disarmed. First one to lose gets detention tomorrow night."

A few groans could be heard, even if the threat was expected. Martel did not feel worried; he outclassed his fellow students whether in fire magic or empowerment. In an even fight, one against

one, he should win, as long as he kept his wits about him. Even if William was a decent hand with empowerment magic; he might have made a good mageknight had circumstances been different.

"What are you waiting for? Fight!"

The students obeyed the command. It seemed that William figured he stood a better chance against Martel when pitting physical magic rather than fire; he quickly lashed out, using his staff as a blunt weapon.

Fortunately, the fighting pit of The Broken Crown had prepared Martel better than the Lyceum trained its fire acolytes. He did not even need his shield to block any attacks, using simple parries instead. He could look for an opening to strike back, but he wanted to seize the opportunity to try something new.

Magic rushed from his hands through the silver lines laid into the haft, reaching the ruby. A blast of fire shot out from the top of the staff. At this close range, Martel could not miss, and his fire bolt struck William in the chest.

The acolyte stumbled backwards, swinging his staff as a desperate defence to hold Martel at bay. It might have worked if he intended a physical attack, but instead, he channelled another spell. With enough force, it might end the duel.

A blast of fire struck Martel on the shoulder. It came from the side, and he glanced over to assess the threat. The other students were locked in their own struggle, but Moira smiled at him sardonically. "Battle is not a duel, neatly divided with clear lines of engagement," she called out, shooting another fire bolt, this time at Harriet. "In a skirmish like this, watch your back!"

Her reproach felt unfair, considering it had been a duel right until the moment she changed the rules and turned it into a skirmish. Worse, William had been given time to recover while Martel was distracted. The fight continued with both staff and spell, magic whistling through the air.

They continued practising with magical staves during the second lesson; instead of fighting each other, the fire acolytes paired up against a mageknight each. This time, Moira was mercifully absent, and Martel did not have to worry about a fire bolt striking between his shoulder blades. He looked almost with pity on Edward, who had held his own against Harriet until attacked from behind, making him the first to fall.

"I do not like this, Nordmark!" Maximilian exclaimed as Martel released a fire bolt at him. "You keep retreating and flinging your little spells! Stand and face me like a man!"

"If your enemy has a sword and you have a bow, why would you fight in close quarters?" Martel retorted, taking another step back while casting a new spell.

"For honour, Nordmark! Is it truly victory if you must win by such unreasonable means?" The mageknight raised his physical shield to intercept another fire bolt.

Martel waited until Maximilian had weathered the spell and stepped forward to strike the fire acolyte; deflecting the attack with his magical shield, Martel retaliated with a strong gust of wind. The mageknight, all his weight on one leg as he struck, fell to the ground.

Looking down at his vanquished foe, Martel smiled. "A victory's a victory."

"A pox on you," Maximilian grumbled, getting to his feet.

"I'll make it up to you. The golden bird tonight? I'll pay first round, and the second, if your bruised pride demands it." No longer paying for Julia's rent, Martel had plenty of coin.

"The first will do."

The Golden Goose was busy every evening; the arrival of the acting troupe had made this a certainty. It was impossible to find a table near the stage unless you arrived well in advance of any performance. Martel and his friends had seen tonight's play, however, and they accepted seats further away, content with drink and discussions of today's class.

"I still feel it is unfair for you to use air magic," Maximilian complained. "You are a fire acolyte! Nobody told me to expect such underhanded methods."

"The issue was not Martel's hand, but your leg," Eleanor reminded him with a serene smile.

"How would you know? You were not present," the other mageknight growled.

"Once I saw the two of you pair up, I made sure to watch," she replied. "I suspected it would be worth my attention."

Martel raised his tankard and pushed it against hers in acknowledgement of the remark. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he felt somebody watching him; as he turned his head, he did not see anything, however.

Suspicion welled up in him, though he stayed calm. They had a good table against the wall, leaving Martel's back protected. And he sat in the company of two other wizards; it would be an act of madness to try anything.

"Martel? Something amiss?"

He turned his attention back to his friends to find Eleanor's brown eyes looking at him. "Not at all. Just wondering when they'll put on a new performance." He nodded towards the stage in the other end of the big common room.

"Next fiveday. I already asked," she told him with a smile. "I had a feeling you would be keen to know."

Martel reciprocated her expression, pushing away thoughts of spying eyes in the crowd. Plenty of people who had an interest in him, half the Nine Lords among them. Let them watch if they wanted; he would not let it spoil his evening. He raised his mug again. "Cheers to that."

Chapter 434: It's Got Pockets

It's Got Pockets

Manday morning, Martel went to the workshops to practise his enchantment. Besides the usual tools and equipment, the small laboratory had the stones that Martel used to train enchanting heat or light; however, as he arrived, he noticed that several clay jars stood on a table along with the oil substance used for making fire pots.

As the bell rang, Master Jerome appeared. "Good, you're here. I have a task for you. I need you to make three fire pots for me." He pointed at the jars on the table, matching that number. He wore a

broad smile as he spoke; while usually a man of cheerful mood, he seemed almost exuberant this morning.

"Certainly, master." By now, Martel had no difficulties with such a task. It would take him the full bell, but he had no class afterwards, so he could stay longer and work on enchanting the lightstone when he was done with this.

"Good lad." The artificer gave him a quick pat on the shoulder and left.

About three hours later, Martel had finished the fire pots and also done his best to create a lightstone. The round rock shone with a faint light, feeling slightly warm to the touch; a decent attempt, but there was room for much improvement. Especially in terms of longevity; Martel guessed that the light would probably only last a few days before fading. Leaving the laboratory, he went in search of the artificer and found him busy going through records and piles of parchment.

"Master Jerome, I finished the fire pots as you asked. I left them in the laboratory."

"Excellent. Would you mind going back and waiting for me? I'll be right along."

Although a little unsure why, Martel had no reason to refuse, so he returned to the small chamber, still empty apart from various tools and the fruits of his labour.

A few moments later, the artificer appeared with a belt in hand; Martel recognised it as the one given to him long ago, which Master Jerome had requested to borrow.

"I had a few changes made." The craftsman held up the belt, allowing Martel to notice that six pockets had been added, three on either side of the buckle. Each of them bulged out, though those on one side were bigger than their counterparts on the other. "These three will fit a fire pot inside. They're by your dominant hand, so you can quickly pull them out and throw them." He gestured at those on the right side before his hand moved towards those on the left. "And these will fit a potion vial like those we use here at the Lyceum." He undid the button to pull back the leather flap and show the interior of one of the pockets. "Lined with wool and enchanted by my apprentice. You could smash your fist against them, and nothing inside would break." Master Jerome held out his work. "Go on, put it back on."

His face nearly bursting from smiling, Martel unclasped his borrowed belt, removing his knife from it as well, and replaced it with the gift. It had already been a well-crafted item; with this enchantment, it had to be the most valuable thing he now owned, especially when including sentimental reasons.

"Now try the fire pots. They're for you, of course, in case you hadn't guessed."

Martel undid three buttons and placed the clay jars inside. They fit just as they should.

"There you are. There's room for a pouch on the far right side of your waist, but I haven't made it yet. I thought you should have this now, so you get used to it when training combat and such."

The acolyte felt a surge of emotions. In some ways, this was a simple act of kindness and consideration that reminded him of the home he left behind. Martel threw his arms around the artificer, who laughed and patted him in the back. "Thanks," he mumbled before pulling back.

"There's a good lad. And it works! Or you'd have three broken jars just now from where my belly met your belt." The artificer roared with laughter resounding through the workshop.

Martel arrived for his lesson in the Hall of Elements, still in good spirits. Apparently, it was evident, as Master Alastair smiled upon seeing him. "Things going well?"

"Oh, not so much when it comes to learning the spell," Martel admitted. He had not made any particular progress over the last five days or two. "But Master Jerome made me this. He added these pockets to my belt." He opened one to show the jar inside.

"Looks like fine work. You've done well with enchanting too, I notice."

"Working on lightstones now, though I also still try to get better with the heating stone. It's the same process and yet opposite – it's nice to switch back and forth between them rather than do the same kind of spellwork repeatedly."

"Well, if that works for you. You got time to learn as much enchantment as you want," Master Alastair considered. "No other courses waiting for you besides alchemy, which you're already considered to have passed thanks to your work with Mistress Rana. At least I believe that's what Mistress Juliana told me once."

A reminder that Martel approached the end of his school years. He figured that he could not learn much more in terms of combat capabilities anyway; neither Moira nor Reynard had much left to teach him, it seemed. Learning the lightning spell and honing his enchantment skills seemed the best use of his remaining time.

"If we had been at peace, you might have made a good enchanter. Not many go that route who are gifted with fire, especially not in these times. A pity you won't have that choice, but maybe once you're done with the legions, you have a career ahead of you as a skilled enchanter," his teacher speculated.

Martel would have preferred work that did more to help others, such as his original thought to be a weathermage, though no doubt his mother would appreciate a heating stone in the cottage during cold winter nights. And a lightstone when darkness fell early; no bitter smell of tallow in the air as candles burned.

"Anyway, time for elemental magic. Let me see how you're doing."

Martel nodded and stretched out his hands, preparing to summon air and fire in equal measure. Yet he caught himself and stopped. Something Master Jerome had casually remarked upon made the acolyte think. He always gathered fire in his right hand, air in his left. He had never thought about why; it just seemed natural. When slinging bolts or summoning rays of fire, he always gestured with his right hand too, using its movements to shape the magic.

An idea coming to mind, Martel began summoning the elements. Yet this time, he brought fire to his left hand and air to his right. With the same precision and control that enchantment required, he fed either element with magic in equal measure.

As the moments passed without interruption from his teacher, Martel smiled. Finally, his focus cracked, and he could tell that he had lost control even without Master Alastair saying anything. Dismissing the magical effects entirely, Martel looked up. "That was better, right?"

"It was. Good progress, boy. You've been practising a lot?"

"I have," Martel responded, as he did want acknowledgement for his work, "but I don't think that's the sole reason. I switched hands. Fire to the left, air to the right."

"I noticed – you usually do opposite. What made you change? You think it helped?"

The acolyte nodded. "Fire is my dominant element, and my right hand is the dominant one. It's just natural for me to feed magic in that direction, just as it's natural for me to keep strengthening the flames I summon. Putting the stronger element with the weaker hand and reverse helped me keep them equal," Martel explained. "At least, that's the idea."

His teacher stroked his chin. "I never considered that. In my defence, I rarely teach this spell to anyone. I'll have to discuss this with Master Fenrick. He'll find it curious too."

Martel grinned; he could feel himself having taken another step towards mastery of this particular bit of spellcraft.

"Try it again, boy. I'll count breaths, and we'll see how long you can go."

Chapter 435: Red Whispers

Red Whispers

Solday meant another excursion to the marshlands northeast of Morcaster. Initially, Martel had felt ambivalent about these trips. He understood the importance of learning how to find and gather herbs, of course; especially those that required to be turned magical before harvesting, which could not simply be bought from any old herbalist. On the other hand, it irked him a little to spend a full day doing this when he could be practising his elemental exercises or enchantment.

But after the first trip, Martel had discovered something. Being in the wetlands ameliorated his longing for the green. Martel had grown up in a village surrounded by fields and forest. Until he came to Morcaster, a city of stone, he had never imagined that one might go days without seeing a living tree. The western courtyard of the Lyceum had grass and bushes, but still surrounded by stone walls.

Even if the marsh did not have the same idyll of his northern forests, it helped to feel the lush vegetation around him. It took away some of the restless energy that sometimes troubled him, making it harder for him to focus or collect his thoughts. The quiet work, feeling a little touch of satisfaction every time he found another herb, helped as well. Martel had come to find that after every sojourn on Solday, he returned to Morcaster feeling more at ease than when he had left.

Coming back from the day's trip, the walls of Morcaster made Martel renew his considerations on the effect that the city had on him. Mistress Rana was quiet, giving no disturbance to his thoughts. Martel contemplated how he had changed since his arrival and how he actually felt about Morcaster.

He had learned so much – knowledge and abilities he could scarcely have imagined beforehand. He felt powerful, and more than that, comfortable with his own power. He had met kind people that he appreciated greatly, such as Masters Alastair and Jerome, among others.

And he had met friends that he cared about as much as family. Even if one had left, Martel would not be without that experience.

But Morcaster had also taught him of misery and cruelty that he had never encountered before. He had done things he felt unsure about, perhaps even regretted. And people with their own power, different from his, had made him a pawn in their games. Perhaps worst of all, they had twisted his magic to become a weapon.

As they approached the gate, Martel thought about how he would leave the city in some months' time. Should the opportunity arise, he could not say if he wanted to return.

Once at the infirmary gate of the Lyceum, Mistress Rana took the saddlebags off the donkey, leaving Martel to drag the beast back to the stable where she had hired it. He had not come far before a shape sidled up beside him.

"Leave me alone," Martel remarked without looking.

"How did you know? Do wizards have eyes in the back of their heads?" Ruby asked.

"Your perfume. I work in an apothecary. Again, leave me be. I have no interest in whatever you're peddling."

"You won't even do me the courtesy of hearing me out? Just for old times' sake."

He finally gave her a brief glance, lasting no longer than his patience. "Which old times would that be? When you used me as a distraction, or when your mistress kidnapped a small child to force a troupe of innocent actors out of her district?"

"I was thinking of when I hid you in my bedroom," she told him, and even without looking, he could hear the lascivious smile on her face. "You know, protecting you from trouble."

"Only because you owed me for getting you out of trouble," he retorted.

"Well, last we met, you came to me seeking information. Which I gave you willingly, I might add. The least you can do is hear me out."

"You gave it to me to get rid of me." Martel was starting to be more annoyed with himself than her; every reply he gave only encouraged her to continue, playing her game. And yet he allowed himself another glance at her red lips, even as he knew they spoke lies with greater ease than any truths. It bothered him that no matter what he knew about her true nature, he could not make himself feel as cold towards her as he wanted to be.

"And it's this back and forth I appreciate. You want to get rid of me now? Just let me talk while we walk back to your school."

Martel reached the stable that had rented them the donkey, a stone's throw from the Lyceum. A stable boy accepted the animal, and the acolyte turned around to walk back; Ruby remained on him like a burr. "In that case, you better talk fast. It'll take me a minute to get home."

"A what?"

"Never mind. You're wasting the few moments you have left."

"Alright. The Khivans are in trouble. From what I heard, you're the one wizard in this city who gives a damn about them."

Martel almost halted in his tracks, and he looked awkward as he recovered, continuing his gait. "What's it to you? I can't imagine you care."

"It disturbs the delicate balance of power. Lady Pearl likes things to be the way they are," Ruby claimed.

Probably a lie with a face as bald as her mistress. Lady Pearl just disliked it when things changed in ways she did not control. Regardless, Martel did not care. He assumed Ruby referred to the building of the insula; the same topic that the Fire Eater had spoken to him about. "I already refused any involvement. You can say as much to that pebble you serve." Martel reached the doors that led to the infirmary. "No trespassers beyond this point, unless you want to tangle with the wards of the Lyceum."

It seemed that Ruby had no such desire; she remained outside while Martel entered, making sure to close the door behind him.

Chapter 436: The Word of a Wizard

The Word of a Wizard

Pelday passed without incident; yet the next day at noon, Martel was given a message with a handwriting he recognised.

Master Martel,

We have to meet.

Grey Brothers' shrine.

Tonight, last bell.

The choice of location served as good as a signature. And despite any mention of why they had to meet, Martel could guess. The Fire Eater, Ruby, and now the Friar. It could hardly be a coincidence. Martel was only confused about why. The issue of the insula being built in the Khivan enclave seemed like a problem only for the Khivans. Furthermore, given how the Nine Lords avoided each other's territories, at least overtly, it seemed strange that two of them would interfere with the matter concerning a third. At the same time, it did not concern Martel; his only interest was whether he could avoid getting entangled in the affairs of Morcaster's underworld. Given his previous experiences, it did not seem likely.

The question continued to occupy Martel's thoughts throughout the day. He knew that he could not deny the old monk a meeting; Martel owed him that much after what he did for Sparrow. But could he find a reason to deny whatever requests the Friar would make? No matter what it was, if related to the Khivan district or not, it would undoubtedly pull Martel back into the trouble that accompanied any venture involving the Nine Lords.

He looked over at Maximilian, getting back on his feet. Even distracted, Martel had no trouble winning his duels during their combat lessons. Fighting one on one, the mageknights simply lacked the tools or tactics to defeat him whilst equipped with his array of elemental magic.

"You are a wearisome opponent, Nordmark," Maximilian grumbled.

"You're the one who insists we duel at least once every class," Martel pointed out.

"Because every time, a fiveday has passed since last lesson, and I forget how devious you are. And what is this? More tricks?" The mageknight pointed with his hammer at Martel's belt with its pockets.

"Master Jerome made it for me." The fire acolyte unclasped one pocket to pull out a jar. "My enchantment at work," he said proudly. "Even you could set something on fire with this."

"Let me try!"

Martel pulled his hand back and returned the jar to its home. "Waste half an hour's work so you could have a moment of entertainment? Hardly."

"That seems a fair trade to me."

"That speaks more to your sense of economics than anything else," Eleanor chimed in, joining them on their break with her own duel won.

"Fontaine, why must you always side with our blue-eyed friend? It seems most unreasonable."

"Someone has to look out for him," she explained, glancing at Martel with a wink. "And you do the opposite."

"I should be envious," Maximilian considered, "if I had any need of such protection myself."

He had no need to be, the fire acolyte thought; he would have Eleanor by his side long after Martel was gone. And neither of them could help him with what lay ahead; whatever the Friar wanted, he would have to do it alone.

Martel reached the shrine, where the Friar already awaited him. As for the Grey Brothers, they quickly cleared the small temple.

"You may have guessed what this meeting is about."

Martel sat down on the bench next to the monk. "The Fire Eater. Lady Pearl's right hand woman. Now you."

The Friar nodded slowly. "Yes. I want you to aid them in their endeavour. As repayment for the service I provided you with the orphan girl."

"Why?"

The robed man turned his head to look at the wizard. "Does it matter? The task remains the same regardless of reasons."

"These matters have a habit of escalating. No less than three of the Nine Lords are involved in this. For all his power, Duke Cheval does not rule this city or its districts, yet you all band together against him. Something is afoot beyond a simple construction. If you want me to fight, risk my life, I deserve to know the full story."

"I doubt you'll be needed for fighting or that you will be in any sort of danger."

"Maybe not from lethal danger, but if my identity is discovered, it could cause me all manner of troubles. Even if you keep the inquisitors from coming after me, there's already bad blood between me and Duke Cheval. I'm not interested in making that worse."

"If that's the case, one would think you relished the opportunity to strike back at him. But very well. I shall tell you what you wish to know." The old monk coughed a few times, clearing his throat. "I do not believe the aforementioned duke is acting entirely on his own. I believe he is in league with one of the Nine Lords, providing him with eyes and ears on the ground, and probably handling other issues to make construction go faster."

Martel frowned. "But he has plenty of influence and henchmen at his command. Why would he need to make deals with criminals?"

"I would not use that word, but regardless, it allows him to have certain problems removed or other processes sped along without his direct involvement. Forcing builders to abandon other projects and work on his, ensuring his construction receives priority for shipments of stones, and simply being made aware of anybody plotting to disrupt his project. A prudent precaution, given the expected reprisal from the Khivans."

The duke seemed like the sort of pragmatic person to happily deal with leaders of the underworld, as long as it brought him closer to his goal. "Alright. That explains why the Nine Lords are involved. But not why you choose to be, and why you spend your influence to make me participate."

"The Pact is fragile," the Friar admitted. "It has served us well. But some of the Nine Lords, those who are not content with their position or power, chafe under it. It is obvious what Duke Cheval gains from an alliance with one of my brethren. The question you should ask, which I have asked myself, pertains to what one of them gains in return? They are antagonising the Fire Eater. Even if not overtly breaching the Pact, they are inviting more trouble than payments from the duke would be worth."

"Is it on purpose? Just like when someone stole the relic," Martel considered.

"I fear so. They are undermining the Pact and trying to weaken the Fire Eater. His power rests upon his people being Khivans. If they are forced out of the enclave, replaced by Asterians, it leaves the entire district vulnerable for the taking."

"Fine. I understand why you want to be involved."

"Good. The others wish to meet as soon as possible, to make plans and begin preparations. I believe they will gather already tomorrow. You shall receive a message with the pertinent instructions," the Friar told him.

"That presupposes that I'll do this. I haven't yet agreed. This is not my problem to solve, and I have no desire to be involved." Martel looked at the old man by his side, waiting to see what his response would be.

"I am used to giving commands and being obeyed. But I accept that the procedure may be different when dealing with a wizard. No resorting to threats," the Friar declared. "I could, of course. I could point out that I know where the orphan girl lives, and if the inquisitors were told, they'd take her into custody at once. But threatening the lives of children is a step too far, I will admit. So I will simply say this." He returned Martel's stare. "I have always taken you to be the sort who honours his commitments. I cannot imagine you would disappoint me by denying the favour that you owe me."

The mage held his breath. Regardless of claims to the opposite, it felt like the Friar had already made a veiled threat. Perhaps he meant his words in earnest – or maybe keeping Martel uncertain

about his intentions, how far he would actually go, was another way of manipulating the young wizard. Either way, the old man was right. He had saved Sparrow's life; Martel could not deny repayment. "Alright. I'll do it."

Chapter 437: Meeting of the Hands

Meeting of the Hands

Lessons in the Circle of Fire proceeded as could be expected. They had begun duelling each other regularly with the magical staves involved, now that the other acolytes had mastered channelling through the implement. Martel retained an edge, but he did not think this came from his innate affinity with fire; it seemed only to give him an advantage in terms of how quickly he grasped the spells and magic involved. The other acolytes learned slower, but once they had caught up, their spells had as much power as his did. .c(o)m

Rather, Martel came out victorious more often than not because he had seen combat a number of times now, while he doubted any of the other students had ever actually had to fend for their lives. They lacked a sense for the rhythm of battle; they left themselves exposed to retaliation, especially courtesy of Moira, who constantly circled around the combatants to attack them.

With enough time, Martel assumed that they would eventually learn; if not within the Lyceum, they would have to once they were sent to the legions. But for now, he enjoyed his advantage, sparing him the worst of Moira's tongue lashings and detentions, even if he had acquired it at great risk. And tonight, he would embark on another such opportunity for training, to put it in comforting terms. A message had arrived for him early in the morning, detailing the place and time for the meeting this eve.

Martel arrived at the location, unsure what to expect. He did not even know who exactly he was to meet; presumably, they knew to approach him. He was in the bridge district, which suggested that Ruby would attend. As for the chosen spot, it was a small tavern of the sort that populated most of Morcaster's districts, serving meals through the day and drinks in the early evening. As seventh bell had rung, it would probably not remain open much longer, assuming it operated as usual.

Stepping inside, Martel allowed his senses to gather what knowledge they could. His ears found the place quiet, despite a decent number of patrons present; nobody came to this place for casual conversation, it seemed. His eyes noticed a handful of people to his right; their short hair, shaved faces, and lean appearance made him suspect them to be former legionaries now in Lady Pearl's employ, or perhaps Night Knives out of uniform. To his left, he saw Ruby seated at a table with two others. Lastly, his magic told him that in addition to the odd coin of yellow metal, one of Ruby's companions had a golden knife somewhere on his person; near his waist, though inside his clothes rather than stuck into his belt.

Martel approached the trio, who all watched him cross the floor. The two men looked at him with expressionless faces; Ruby smiled. "Excellent. We are all here. Martel, meet Vernon and Jahan."

He realised that he had seen the former before, if only briefly; Vernon was a lieutenant of Kerra's, and also the one with the mage killer blade. Martel doubted he intended to use it, but best to keep an eye out for that. As for the other, if his appearance did not reveal it, his name showed him to be

Khivan. An envoy of the Fire Eater, perhaps also a lieutenant. Along with Ruby acting for Lady Pearl.

"That's a lot of Nine Lords represented here," Martel remarked.

"Lovely when people put their differences aside and work together," said the woman at the table.

"I had my doubts when you claimed the Friar would send us this mage," Jahan admitted.

"Especially since he refused my master."

"Hard to scrutinise why wizards do as they do, and the Copper Mage is no exception to that," Vernon remarked with a sly smile. Evidently, he remembered Martel better than the reverse.

"Regardless, we're all here," Ruby interjected.

"My master is grateful," Jahan declared. "He is ready to move when you are."

"So are we," Vernon added.

"Anyone care to fill me in on the plan?" Martel asked, annoyed that this step had been skipped.

"Of course." Ruby gave him a smile with her red lips. "Yours is easy. You'll start a fire to create a distraction. Your eminent skills in that regard will keep the guards busy while ensuring the fire doesn't spread to the rest of the district."

That was a hefty responsibility to place on him, but given he had done similarly when far less trained, he could not argue any lack of skill. "Alright. And while the guards are distracted?"

"We get a stonemage inside the premises, rupturing the foundation of the whole thing. It'll take time, so the longer your distraction works, the better," Ruby explained.

"We'll get the stonemage onto the site, and if there's a fight, we'll hold them back," Jahan added.

It sounded simple enough; Martel gave it odds of one to two that something went wrong. "When's the deed?"

"Couple of days. The aforementioned earthmage is occupied until then. You'll be notified, so stay alert," Ruby explained.

Martel glanced upwards where the ceiling blocked his view of the sky. "It's a bad time. Moon's nearly full, and only increasing. We should wait a couple of fivedays at least."

"There'll be a thick cover of clouds, don't you worry," Vernon reassured him. "That's our part. We got a weathermage coming."

Martel frowned, looking from one lieutenant to another. "That seems an unnecessary complication. Easier to just wait."

"We'll need a weathermage anyway to make sure it doesn't rain. That would kill your distraction and also make it harder for the stonemage to do the ritual, I'm told," Vernon retorted. "All that water mixing with earth. You'd know better than me, I'd assume."

It did make sense – rupturing the earth on such a scale was a monumental task, Martel figured. The presence of another element would make it harder.

Ruby watched him, and when he made no further arguments, she smiled again. "We're all agreed then. You'll know when it's time to strike."

"Wait." The others looked at Martel, who had just been struck by a suspicious thought. "Who's the stonemage coming along?"

Ruby's lips widened. "You know her all too well."

Of course. Flora, that treacherous piece of rotten weed. "Tell her to keep her distance. And if she gets into trouble, I won't lift a finger to help."

Jahan looked from Martel to Ruby. "What's the problem?"

"Just a little spat between wizards. It won't affect the task at hand. You'll be on opposite ends, each busy with your own task."

Martel exhaled, feeling more and more uncomfortable at the thought of this outing. "Just tell me when it's time." He got up and left as the first.

Chapter 438: Spare a Thought

Spare a Thought

The meeting in the small tavern did little to ease Martel's state of mind about the task ahead; on the contrary, the idea that three different factions would cooperate made him doubt the whole venture. Given the deep distrust that each of the Nine Lords and their minions showed each other, Martel had his misgivings concerning their ability to coordinate this act of sabotage, involving no less than three mages, all doing their own kind of magic.

Martel only felt good about one thing, namely his own part of the plan. Thankfully, he could control fire from a reasonable distance, and he would presumably not have to enter the construction yard itself to carry out his task. Should the others get into trouble, they would have to handle it on their own; he owed them nothing, and he would make use of his position for a swift retreat, if necessary.

Of course, his previous experiences with these people suggested that they might conceal the actual plan from him, and he would somehow end up being bait once again. But at the slightest sign of this, Martel would set them on fire and leave. And if the Friar made any noise over this, or threatened Sparrow, Martel stood ready to incinerate him as well. He would honour his commitment, but he would not be treated like a lamb for slaughter.

With this resolve in mind, Martel went to the workshops the next morning and focused on practising his enchantment, forgetting about Nine Lords, betrayal, and setting people on fire for the time being.

Martel arrived at the Hall of Elements in a good mood, despite last evening. His enchantment skills steadily improved; if this continued, he would be able to make long lasting stones for heating and light within a month or two. Maybe a bit sooner, maybe a bit later, but eventually. Likewise, he knew he had taken an important step towards learning the lightning bolt spell. He could command the involved elements equally; now he just needed to combine them, which was a technique he had previously learned when doing simpler spellwork.

"Always good to see a student in high spirits," Master Alistair remarked with a smile.

"It feels good to make progress, in several areas, even," Martel replied. "And in some ways, I think learning these different skills support each other. Enchantment helps me with the precision needed, and learning how to channel magic through a diamond has probably made me better at wielding air."

"Very likely. It's a pity your fellow students aren't as quick to learn as you are. No doubt they could benefit like you have, but unfortunately, the legions are not patient." His teacher's smile turned sad for a moment. As for Martel, it did not matter to him how the other acolytes fared. "At least it has done you good. I figured that making you practice with the staff of a stormmage would be useful for this spell as well."

Martel frowned. "It was your idea?"

"Oh yes. Mistress Moira initially wanted you to practice with a sapphire, since your first study at the school had been water magic. But I convinced her that air was a better choice, since you were focusing on it in my lessons as well."

Martel did not know how to respond. He had assumed that Moira taught them whatever he was meant to learn and otherwise did not care about her students. It was strange to consider that she not only put thought into what Martel should learn, but also consulted with Master Alastair.

"Regarding your fellow acolytes... I don't know how things are between you and them," Master Alastair continued. "In my time, we had some rather intense rivalries. Maybe that's needed, to make you all perform at your absolute best. Or maybe it's simply inevitable when a group of young wizards are together under such circumstances."

Those circumstances had a name, Martel thought, and a cruel tongue, but he kept his opinion to himself.

"Even so, I would encourage you to show them kindness. You may have arrived at the school much later than them, but your talent and superior skill would make you a natural leader."

As natural as a shepherd's dog herding cats.

"Furthermore, they must work twice as hard to learn the same spells as you, and it takes them twice as long. At the same time, they face the same future as you. Deployed to the legions with little knowledge of when they might see their homes again. Just something to bear in mind," Master Alastair told him.

"Alright. For now though, should we practise?"

"Stealing the words right out of my mouth! Time to combine the elements, boy."

Nodding, Martel held his hands in front of him, as if holding a bowl of water, and he summoned air and fire to mix together in a whirlwind of flames.

Once the bell rang, Martel left the Hall of Elements and went to his room. After slaking his thirst, he grabbed his notes on Tyrian runes and continued onwards to the library. Nobody else was present, not even the frostmage who always sat in a corner with her nose buried in some book. Fetching the relevant tomes for their current studies, Martel sat down and began reading.

Half an hour later, Eleanor arrived with her own notes under her arm. She greeted him with a quiet smile, looking refreshed despite her weapons practice the previous bell.

"You don't have to be quiet," Martel told her. "It's only us."

"Oh, I see." She looked through the titles of the books on the table that Martel had collected before she suddenly giggled.

"Something amusing?"

"I just recalled something Maximilian did during training. Not worth retelling."

"Right. Well, he's good fun. I'm glad you get along so well."

"Of course, why would we not? Ah, there it is." She picked up a volume and cracked it open. Martel looked at her for a long moment as she sat down to read before returning to his own book.

Chapter 439: Cold Pockets

Cold Pockets

Solday passed quietly with Martel accompanying Mistress Rana on another trip gathering herbs. But the next day, he received a message with an address in the Khivan quarter, telling him to show up after last bell. As the hour approached, Martel went through his drawers, deciding what to wear.

Showing up looking like a fire acolyte seemed a bad idea. Most of his other clothes were too expensive, however, and would make him stand out among the impoverished residents of the district. In the end, he simply chose a woollen shirt along with trousers; it would not provide much warmth against the night chill, but a cloak would help shield him from the cold and attention alike. A scarf helped with both as well.

Satisfied with his choice, Martel removed his robe and put on his other clothes, including his leather armour, just in case. He was not exactly inconspicuous, but as an Asterian, he would always stand out in the Khivan quarter anyway. At least nobody could tell by looking at him that he was a wizard. If he did his magic right, none would have reason to suspect that either. Trying to stay calm despite how uncomfortable he felt about tonight's endeavour, Martel left the Lyceum.

The house in the Khivan enclave looked entirely unassuming. When Martel knocked, the door was opened by Jahan, who quickly gestured for him to enter. Inside, he found several others. Vernon from the copper lanes stood together with an old man, who looked frazzled with white tufts of hair and wide eyes. The weathermage, presumably. He looked as if a particularly strong gust might topple him over, but physical appearance had little to do with magical strength, and Martel would not underestimate the old wizard simply because he looked frail.

Next to them stood Ruby and Flora. Martel did not spare the earthmage a second glance. As for the rogue, she gave Martel a sly smile that he was not inclined to reciprocate. "Is everyone here?" he simply asked, looking at Jahan.

The Khivan nodded. "I have people nearby ready to join, should a fight erupt. But for now, everyone involved is present."

"Where do you want your distraction?" Martel did not bother to hide the impatience in his voice. The sooner this was over, the better.

"Perhaps I should go through this one step at a time," Jahan suggested. "First, we will wait as our friend from the copper lanes builds a heavy cover of clouds." He nodded at the weathermage before looking at Martel again. "To the northwest, there is an abandoned house, where the second floor provides you with a good vantage point onto the construction yard. You and Ruby will be hiding there and make the distraction."

Martel turned his head sharply towards her. "Why? I don't need her help to start a fire. Shouldn't you stay with your pet?" He directed the last sentence at Ruby herself.

"Firemages and their temper," Flora sighed while shaking her head.

"Jahan will lead Flora onto the site, as he knows the area best. My presence would only make more noise for them. So I'll stick with you, master wizard, to watch your back while you cast your spells."

Martel had an inkling she would only watch his back to know where she might best plant her knife, but he accepted the explanation. If she tried anything, it would give him an excuse to retaliate.

"If I may continue," Jahan said and cleared his throat. "Once the fire is set and the guards distracted, I will sneak our friend from the bridge district onto the yard, where she might cast her spell and rend the earth asunder."

"Not an easy or quick task," Flora cautioned them. "The more time you can give me, the better. Channelling magic into the earth without it spreading everywhere is quite the challenge, and it'll take a lot of power to create a fracture big enough to cause real damage." She looked at Martel. "So you better keep those fires going and our enemies busy."

"I'll do my part, don't you worry." A bit to his surprise, Martel meant it. While he was still frustrated that he had been forced into this, he did feel sympathetic to the Khivans. If their labours tonight could prevent the building of the insula, also striking a blow against Cheval in the process, he would not complain.

"I'll begin weaving the wind," said the old weathermage with a voice that sounded as frail as he looked.

Martel glanced at Ruby, "I guess we might as well move into position."

"Darling, I thought you'd never ask."

The group split up, each going to their post. Martel let Ruby take the lead, preferring to have her in front rather than behind him. He also did a quick check with his magic; no dead pockets that suggested golden weapons on her. Not even jewellery or a single coin; she wore practical clothes that allowed her free movement. Even if her role was to simply act as a lookout, along with the daggers in her belt, she was dressed for a fight.

They reached the empty building meant to serve as their nest. It was clear why despite a lack of housing, nobody had taken up residence. The fire had torched the roof, and the whole structure seemed shaky. Martel once more let Ruby go first, walking up creaking stairs to the upper floor. Only part of the walls remained, but enough to keep them hidden while Martel did his magic.

He looked up at the night sky; at least they did not have to worry about rain even without a roof over their heads. Watching intently, Martel saw the clouds gather to blot out both moon and stars.

"No need to delay," Ruby told him. "We had the longest route. The others will be ready."

Martel nodded briefly and turned his attention on the construction yard across the street. Despite a fence surrounding it, he could peer over the obstacle. Inside lay many slabs of stone and logs of timber. As for tools and equipment, he assumed such would be kept inside the sheds that lay around the area.

He chose the nearest of these shelters as his target. Reaching out, he found it more difficult than expected. The planks of the shed had the same warmth as the surroundings, and the cold night did not help him grasp on to any heat.

Relaxing, Martel expanded his sense of magic. The small building was made of wood and stood surrounded by air. Unlike heat, it was easy to separate between those elements. The distance made it hard, but he finally caught hold of the shed, establishing a magical connection. With some effort, expending some of his strength, Martel made it burst into flames.

He gasped for breath; it had been harder than he imagined. The distance did not help either; it reminded him of the last time he did magic like this in the Khivan quarter, though he had been extinguishing rather than starting fires. Still, it had left him exhausted to the point that he fell unconscious. While this effort had not been nearly as challenging as taming a blaze spanning multiple wooden buildings, Martel had already spent some of his spellpower during class. He felt tired, cold, and ready to go home.

"It's working," Ruby remarked. Across the street, shouts could be heard. Martel sat down with his back against what remained of the wall. She glanced down at him. "Don't you need to look?"

"No. It's easier to keep track of what's happening this way." He closed his eyes for good measure, letting his magic inform him of what happened. The fire burned brightly before his inner sight; smaller sources of heat came running towards it.

"What does it feel like?"

The question, sounding so earnest, pulled Martel from his reverie. He looked up to see Ruby staring back at him, her expression reflecting the sentiment in her voice. "You mean magic?"

"Yes. Casting spells. Starting a fire with just your mind."

Martel exhaled slowly. "It feels like taking a deep breath of fresh air after you've been coughing."

"You're lucky."

"Maybe."

She crouched next to him, likewise hiding behind the remnants of the wall, but keeping her eyes peering over the top to watch the construction yard and the street. "What's there to be unsure about?"

"If it gets me killed, am I really better off than if I had been born without any gift?"

He could almost feel her shaking her head. "You're not dead yet. At least your gift gives you a chance to decide what happens to you. That's better than relying purely on the whims of fate."

"I'm not sure I'm free of those whims even with magic by my side. It feels more like it just gives me the illusion of control." Martel made another sensory investigation of the fire; it had lessened. He would need to feed it magic to keep them from extinguishing it too quickly.

"People on the street. Looking suspicious."

It took Martel a moment to catch on; the tone in her voice rather than her words alerted him that something was odd. He reached out with his magic; the fire was still burning, but those on the site were putting it out. He would have to feed it to keep it going, or the distraction would already be over. "Wait. There's people on the street?"

"Yeah. They're moving in our direction, but they're creeping along the walls."

Martel felt a bolt of dread shoot through him. "They're here for me. We have to run." He got on his feet but remained crouching low.

"How do you know?"

"Because I don't feel any people on the street, only pockets of cold. Like inquisitors, wearing gold."

Chapter 440: Help from Above

Help from Above

Of course it was a trap. But Martel could curse about that later; right now, he needed a way out. He made sure to drape his scarf to cover the lower half of his face and tied a tight knot.

"They're on both sides." Ruby came towards him, having looked at the street north of their house. "Can't see how many. Not sure we can fight them."

Given that most of his spells would be useless against inquisitors, Martel had his doubts as well. "We just have to run. What's our best route out of here?"

Ruby nodded towards the north. "Cross the street and down those alleys, hope to lose them."

As good a plan as any. "Let's go."

They exchanged looks; a moment passed before she leapt down the stairs with Martel running behind her. Ruby tore the door open and sprinted onto the street, followed by him.

"They're running!"

His head darting in either direction, Martel saw several inquisitors on either side. This was bad. He had escaped such a trap before, but only with a few mage hunters on his trail, and Flora had been there to raise a wall and prevent pursuit.

Ruby ran between two houses, Martel trying to keep up. Behind him, he heard more shouts.

He could try the same, but a wall of flames might not work; it would be purely magical, unable to hurt the inquisitors. Waste of his remaining spellpower. And reveal that they chased a mage skilled in fire.

They moved through deserted pathways; the Khivans knew to make themselves scarce. The same held true for Ruby. Each time she turned a corner, making him lose sight of her briefly, he found it hard to spot her once he caught up. Her dark clothes made her melt into the shadows of the unlit streets in the enclave.

"This way!" an inquisitor shouted.

The voice sounded close. And there were footsteps from more than one pair, though Martel could not tell the direction. He sent out a wave of magic to tell him of his pursuers, but cloaked by gold,

no useful information came back to him; he could not distinguish them from the cold of the night in his frantic state. He only knew that Ruby was still ahead somewhere, twenty or thirty paces.

"Spread out! Close them off!"

Martel could no longer see or hear Ruby. Only his magic told him where she was. More athletic than him, she simply ran faster, more adroitly through the natural obstacles of the alleys, even though he used empowerment.

He looked over his shoulder. No visible sign of the inquisitors, though he dearly wished his magic could confirm their location. Regardless, he had to keep running. His breath came at great pains, and his stomach hurt, but he could not stop.

A whistle through the air alerted Martel of danger to his left. On instinct, he summoned his shield. It did not help. A gold-tipped javelin punched through his magic to strike his shoulder. He screamed in pain and almost fell to his feet, barely managing to catch himself. The weight of the haft pulled the spear from his wound, and it landed on the ground. His leather armour and clothing had softened the blow, but he could feel it bleeding. Worse, the mage hunter who had thrown the javelin came running in full sprint.

Martel ducked into the nearest alley. He realised it was too late to run; the inquisitor would pick up the spear and hit him again. He turned around, waiting for the zealot to catch up and making sure his scarf still hid his face.

A moment later, his enemy appeared. Martel tried to suppress his feelings of panic. He could not attack with magic directly. He pulled his knife from his belt. The zealots wore leather armour under their blue surcoat; Martel had noticed this when fighting alongside them in the catacombs. He would have to strike at the arms or legs.

The inquisitor grinned, wielding the javelin as a short spear. "Over here!" he yelled. "I got one cornered!"

Stars, he would pay dearly for a staff right now! His short dagger could not contend with the reach of the spear.

"You're done for, abomination," the zealot hissed.

Martel caught hold of broken bricks with his magic, raising them into the air. Once over the inquisitor's head, he let go of the debris.

The mage hunter leapt to the side with a superior smile, avoiding the attack. "All your little tricks won't help. Your foul magic can't save you, maleficar."

Martel's eyes desperately looked for a vulnerability; a place where his spells might hit. His enemy wore gold around his neck and waist, on his hands, and even around his boots.

The young wizard retreated, goading the other man to follow. As he did, Martel raised the earth to make him trip.

Where the inquisitor's foot struck the ground, the magic seeped away, and the dirt fell back down. "Time to die." He raised the spear that no magic could protect against.

A shadow fell from the nearest rooftop. This time, the inquisitor did not evade in time, and he fell to the ground underneath Ruby. Knife in hand, she slashed his leg open before getting back on her feet. "Come on!" she shouted, pulling at him as she ran away. Pulling himself together, Martel followed her once again.

Hours later, Martel hid inside another alley, glancing across the street to the infirmary doors. Ruby appeared by his side, making him flinch. "No sign of anyone. Nobody's watching."

He nodded a little. It felt strange to trust Ruby, but she could have left him behind. "Thanks. I better get inside then."

"We'll need to talk about tonight," she cautioned him. "Later, that is. I'm getting myself home to bed."

"Alright." With his hood up and scarf safely around his face, Martel swiftly crossed the open area to enter the small gate to the infirmary. A nurse slept in the atrium, should any arrive at night requiring aid. Martel's shoulder needed it, but it would also earn him unwanted attention.

Instead, he went to the apothecary and undressed. A small but deep wound greeted his eyes after he cleaned up the dried blood. Martel did not know how to sew wounds, so he treated it with blood salve for now. Something to relieve the pain would be welcome, but Mistress Rana would notice if one of the small bottles were missing, and Martel could not replace it easily.

He would just have to grit his teeth and sleep through it; tomorrow, he could make up an excuse and get the wound sewn together. Exhausted, Martel walked up the stairs to reach his room and collapsed on his bed.