

Firebrand 441

Chapter 441: An Ache

An Ache

Despite his weariness, Martel slept uneasily, and pain woke him early. Glancing to his left, he examined his wound. The blood salve had done its work to prevent further bleeding, and at least it was better than his right shoulder being injured, giving him trouble with his dominant hand.

Today was Malday, meaning combat practice. Those would not be pleasant hours to get through, wielding a staff with every movement causing a pang of agony; perhaps he could rely more on spells or otherwise take it easy. Combat class did give him an excuse for when he went to the infirmary; just in case the inquisitors came looking for anyone with an injured shoulder. This meant he would have to wait until late afternoon, but that seemed wisest anyway; no point getting his wound sewn if he immediately ruined the stitches by moving around excessively in the gymnasium.

His first lesson proved a pain, literally. It was only Martel and the other fire acolytes, purely practising staff fighting; no magic was involved besides empowerment. This meant Martel had to use the weapon, even if he swallowed his pride and allowed the others to land blows against him. Harriet noticed his sudden vulnerability and diminished ability to fight, taunting him more than once; Martel chose to ignore it, favouring the wound on his shoulder over any wounds to his pride. When the bell finally rang, it was sweet music to his ears.

After dinner, Martel examined his cloak and shirt, which had been ripped by the spear last night. The rift in his leather armour was beyond his skills to repair; the jerkin already had damage from last year in the Undercroft when Tibert had stabbed him in the stomach. Both tears were small in size, however, and the armour would continue to serve him well; not that Martel hoped he would have need of it again.

As for his items made of fabric, Martel dug out a needle and thread to sew the holes shut. Easily and swiftly done; if only human flesh could be so easily mended. Martel had never done this during his month helping out in the infirmary, though, nor did he have the right kind of thread for it. The infirmary did; he just had to get through his second combat lesson first.

Alain swung his sword, and Martel summoned his shield rather than parry with his staff that would require awkward movement. The fire acolyte retaliated with a blast of wind, but the mageknight had grown wise to his tricks, planting his feet firmly in the ground to remain standing. Another sword blow came, striking Martel's injured shoulder, and he grimaced; thankfully, the chain shirt took the worst of it.

"Enough," he admitted, taking a step back. It was silly to force himself to fight when unnecessary; his shoulder needed rest and healing, not further damage. "Sorry. You'll have to take an easy victory today."

Alain grinned before a furrow came across his brow. "It's been a long time since I could beat you. Are you holding back on me?"

"Just some trouble with my shoulder. Had an accident yesterday," Martel explained, trying to provide sufficient information to deter questions rather than invite them. "Nothing too bad, but trying not to exert it too much."

"You should have said so," the mageknight chastised him. "That happens to everyone. We all understand the need to take it easy."

"I guess it's commonplace for you guys, practising every day."

Alain nodded. "Even with all our defensive magic, people get hurt. You have to let your body heal when it happens."

Martel thought about his month in the infirmary and all the mageknights he had seen, appearing with bruises or cuts that needed attention. "You're right. I'll excuse myself for once."

He walked over and sat down on the stands, watching Maximilian and Eleanor spar against each other. Martel realised that one day, he would miss this. When lying sleepless in a tent, or marching through rain, he would think back on the simple pleasure of watching his friends with no problem worse than an ache in his shoulder.

Eleanor looked in his direction and caught his eyes, sending a smile his way. Martel returned the expression, and the ache in his heart seemed worse than any hurt in his shoulder. Maximilian seemed entirely unaware, swinging his hammer with exaggerated movements that made her laugh. Swallowing the lump in his throat, Martel left the arena even before the bell had rung; nobody would mind his early departure from class.

"What happened?"

"Trouble at practice." Martel sat on a stool in the infirmary, his robe and shirt removed.

The nurse gave him a chastising look. "Aren't you supposed to use blunt weapons? And wear armour."

Martel shrugged; a movement he immediately regretted. "You know how mageknights are. They get too eager sometimes."

She sighed, preparing a needle with silk thread. "This will hurt," she warned him.

He nodded, steeling himself, and looked away. It was easier when he did not have to watch the needle pierce his skin. It hurt all the same, but he gritted his teeth and balled his hands into fists.

Painful, but quickly done; the wound was small, after all. "There you are. Keep it rested and avoid big movements," the sister cautioned him. "I won't sew it again if you rip the stitches."

"Understood." Martel stood up and looked at his robe and shirt. Exhaling, he began a slow, cautious dance of getting dressed without actually moving his left arm.

"Message for you." The clerk – an airmage unknown to Martel – stuck a scrap of parchment into his hand. The fire acolyte looked around the entrance hall to see if anyone watched him. He had spent the day occasionally looking over his shoulder, but so far, no inquisitors had come for him.

We have to meet tonight.

Same place as last.

From Ruby, he guessed. It did not matter. Someone had told the inquisitors about last night and helped them set a trap; Martel was not going to attend a meeting with those same people, allowing anybody watching to confirm his involvement.

Besides, he had fulfilled his obligation. He had done his part as the Friar wanted; Martel could not be blamed at the failed outcome. Nor did he care about the betrayal. This reeked of the usual conflicts common between the Nine Lords, never-ending. One of them had betrayed the others; let them fight it out. With a quick burst of magic, Martel burned the parchment between his fingers and raised a brief gust of wind to blow the smoke away.

Chapter 442: Shifting Alliances

Shifting Alliances

For the next three days, the city and its inhabitants left Martel in peace, until Solday arrived. He had been on his final outing with Mistress Rana beyond the walls to the marshlands, gathering herbs and plants. As they approached the Lyceum, she spoke for the first time in hours.

"That should be enough for now. My stores are full – at least of any plant we can collect within walking distance. Next Solday, we'll resume your training in the laboratory. There's still a handful of simple recipes you should learn, especially concerning diseases."

"Very well, mistress." The days were getting cold, and autumn rains could be expected; as much as Martel had enjoyed leaving the city, he did not regret this change. Next month, trudging around the wetlands would not be amusing.

"You've shown adequate knowledge of herblore, at least for someone with only basic skill in alchemy," she continued, and Martel tried to determine if it was a compliment. "If you were a member of the alchemist's guild, I might recommend you as a journeyman. Someone skilled enough to be trusted with making potions without a master's supervision."

That was undoubtedly a compliment; Martel smiled. "Thank you, mistress."

"Your work has made it so. Now return the animal to its stable while I get our bounty inside." While she gathered the saddlebags with their contents, Martel grabbed the reins of the donkey and led it away. He had not gotten far before he noticed that the city was no longer content to leave him alone; leaning against the corner of a house, Ruby waited for him.

"I've done my part," Martel said as soon as she sidled up next to him. "I went as the Friar demanded. The failure of the other night, and any consequences thereof, have nothing to do with me." So far, the inquisitors did not seem to suspect him; he had no desire to draw their attention by continuing his association with these people.

"Will you at least allow me to talk before you dismiss me?"

He avoided looking at her, knowing that her face only distracted him and softened his resolve. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Martel!" She grabbed his arm, and the concern in her voice seemed real. "Please. Just give me a few moments."

He looked up from her hand to her worried expression and sighed. "Alright. I'll listen."

His errand handled, Martel followed Ruby to a nearby tavern, buying a cup of the local swill for a copper. "What is it?" he asked, sounding perhaps more brusque than intended.

"I think the Pact is falling apart, and the Nine Lords will wage war against each other."

An ominous declaration, but if criminals wanted to fight other criminals, Martel would not get in the way.

"Someone betrayed us," Ruby continued when Martel did not speak. "Another Ninth Lord would be my guess, eager to see us fail."

"It could just be Duke Cheval with a spy in your midst. He is rather crafty," Martel admitted; he had experienced that first-hand.

"It's more than that," she argued. "So few knew the details of our plan. He would not just need a spy, but intimate knowledge of our respective organisations – who could be turned, and who it would be worth turning. For all his power, I doubt the duke would gather such extensive intelligence. No, this smells of another Ninth Lord meddling."

It did make sense, Martel admitted. It would let the duke keep his hands clean, working with a crime lord – or lady. "I'm guessing you want to find out?"

"Yes. I doubt it's anyone from the bridge district, as I'm the only one who knew. Of course, there could still be spies, which is why I'm here. You're the only person familiar with the situation I can trust."

A desperate admission, given Martel had no reason nor inclination to help her.

"I suspect this particular traitor is either Kerra's ilk or Khivan, but they won't be keen on letting me search around. They'll probably do their own investigation, but I doubt they'll share their findings. Admitting that one of your own turned spy is admitting weakness."

"Does it matter? If they plug the leak, shouldn't you be satisfied? Focus on scrutinising your own people?"

"Finding the spy will reveal who paid them," Ruby argued. "I meant what I said at first. I think the Pact will be broken. My mistress needs to know who stands against her."

That explained why so many of these Nine Lords had banded together to help the Khivans. It was a test or early sign of an alliance, Martel figured. With rather poor results. "Aren't you tired of this? The constant fear and suspicion. Always on the brink of disaster."

She took a deep breath and drank from her cup for the first time. "Lady Pearl gave me a home, skills, and safety. The other girls there, they're my sisters," she finally said. "I'll protect them as long as it's necessary, no matter how tiresome."

That, at least, was a sentiment that Martel understood. But he had no such obligations. "In that case, I wish you well. But I want no part of this."

She looked him straight in the eye. "I saved you the other night. Does that count for nothing when I need your help?"

"Is that why you did it? Because you figured I'd be worth something in your pocket?"

"No." She shook her head. "Alliances may shift quickly in my world, but that night, we were on the same side. I helped you because I expected you'd do the same."

Despite his misgivings, Martel believed her. Still, he had no desire to feel indebted to Ruby when he had only taken part to clear his debt to the Friar. "I would. But to build on what you said, we might have been allies that night, which doesn't mean we are now. Last time I got involved with your world, I was used as bait. By somebody serving your mistress, no less. And I got stabbed on the street." .com

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I didn't know what Flora intended to do."

"You used me as a distraction. Perhaps not with deadly intent, but you understand why I'm hesitant to trust your good intentions."

Ruby chewed on her red lips, which distracted him more than it should. "I did. I've met a few wizards before you. Acting superior to others, us ordinary folk. I thought you were the same – that I better use you before you used me. I didn't know you were different."

It seemed to be a day for half-hearted compliments.

"I'm afraid, Martel. Lady Pearl is under pressure. If she falls, I don't think there'll be any safe place for me anywhere in the city."

Martel had never heard Ruby speak so earnestly before. She meant it.

"I understand how you feel about Flora, but if she had died the other night, we'd be deprived of an ally we badly need. The old weathermage wasn't so lucky," the young woman revealed. "Inquisitors cut him down on the street."

Although Martel had no relation to him, he felt sorry for any victim of the mage hunters; if only it had been Flora, it would not have bothered him.

"I don't expect you to run around town investigating turncoats with me," she continued. "Just that if I need help from someone I can trust, that you'll consider it."

She stared at him with wide eyes, and Martel found it hard to deny her honest plea. This was a far cry from the self-assured rogue that she normally appeared to be. "I'll consider it," he finally assented.

"Thanks. I should get going. I have people to stalk, suspects to question. I'll be in touch." She gave him a smile that seemed more genuine than any she had previously graced him with.

Aware that he could never trust her, yet still considering that he might give her another chance, Martel simply nodded in farewell.

Family Additions

A fiveday after his injury, Martel's shoulder remained sore and stiff, but by some miracle, he had not torn any of his stitches, and the wound was healing nicely. He still had to exhibit caution during lessons, especially as they had resumed their duels during fire magic. As everyone had mastered how to use gems to strengthen their spellwork, the four acolytes now fought each other using the ruby-tipped staves as both weapon and implement for channelling magic.

Normally, Martel would be the first to take advantage of fighting both with fire spells and empowerment, switching back and forth as expedient, but his injury made him rely solely on his spellcraft. He did not even use his staff to parry when William, the only other acolyte comfortable enough with the staff to use it as a weapon, did just that; instead, Martel avoided William's blows by retreating or using his magical shield.

Perhaps sensing a weakness, William pressed his advantage as any good battlemage should. A flurry of attacks forced Martel back until he was nearly out of space for further retreats, and the other acolyte skilfully used his staff to intercept Martel's fire bolts, lessening the impact even if they hit, as they struck the weapon before the student. Martel had few options left, but he was not interested in conceding; he knew that Moira would punish him for giving up so easily.

Forgoing fire and empowerment, Martel chose something else. The next time William stepped forward to strike, Martel unleashed a blast of air instead.

It caught his adversary off guard and off-balance, who fell to the ground. William had clearly kept his attention on Martel's staff with its gem, expecting another fire spell, making him blind to Martel's left hand releasing the air magic instead.

Getting back on his feet with a grumble, William looked towards Moira. "Are we allowed to use any kind of magic?"

The teacher did not bother looking in his direction when she answered. "Do you intend to ask the Khivans for permission on what spells you may use against them?"

William picked up his staff from the ground with angry motions. "Must be nice to always have something up the sleeve," he mumbled.

Martel kept his face blank and his mouth shut, seeing no reason to add salt to injury. The acolytes might be free to use whatever magic they saw fit, but Martel was the only one who had been trained extensively in all the elemental arts, both before and after becoming an acolyte. He knew that as soon as the other students had shown an aptitude for fire, they would have been educated in such magic to the near exclusion of all others. Free reins to use any magic they wanted was an advantage for Martel only.

"Let's go again," William muttered, returning to his starting position.

Martel had begun to feel apprehensive whenever one of the clerks in the entrance hall told him of a message waiting for him. By now, it usually signalled trouble of some kind. Yet as the envelope was stuck into his hand, Martel relaxed. He recognised Father Julius' handwriting. A letter from home, hopefully with no ill news. Returning to his room, Martel made himself comfortable on his bed and began reading.

My dear boy,

You will not believe what has happened of late. In fact, this is why I waited to write to you, to be sure that I could tell you the whole story. Keith, your brother, dour and never saying two words in one breath, has found himself a lass from the southern village. This must have been going on for a while, as she is already several months with child. And all this time, he never told me. Me, his mother!

You can imagine what a whirlwind it has sent through the house. Your siblings have been in various states of uproar, though I believe your sisters look forward to her moving in. None of us know the girl particularly in advance, though I may have seen her now and then on market days. Keith brought her home last fiveday, so at least I have met her properly, but it is strange to think that soon, she will live in our house. Even stranger that she will give birth to my first grandchild. Her name is Clara, if you wish to know. She laughed a lot during her visit, especially when your sisters talked with her. Quite the opposite of your brother. Only the Stars know how the two of them ever found each other.

In any case, the wedding will be this harvest. Weddings in winter are an ill affair, and the baby will be here before spring, so it has to be before the snow falls. We will delay as long as possible to give you an opportunity to make the journey and attend, though Father Julius claims it is doubtful you will be given leave to do so. But at the very least you should be given the chance. This is the first wedding in the family in decades, not to mention you will be an uncle soon for the first time. I do so hope you will be able to come home. If not for the wedding, then to meet your nephew or niece in spring.

While on the subject, how about you? You would not be so cruel as to be courting a girl without telling your mother any hint of this? I shall be most disappointed if you treat me the way Keith has done. A mother's heart can only take so much before it breaks.

Love,

Your mother

Martel stared at the letter with a wry expression, unsure what to think. No mention of their latest exchange, where Martel admitted he was to be a battlemage. Probably for the best; nothing won by ploughing that old field a second time. Much better to rejoice in these tidings. A child on the way, and festivities in the town.

It was wonderful to contemplate; the only thorn would be that Martel knew he could not attend. It would take him two months to reach Engby and return; he could not imagine the Lyceum would agree to that. Just as being a battlemage afforded him leeway in certain regards, it also shackled him in other ways; the school would never let him waste two months when he only had about three left before graduating.

And once that happened, he would be sent to the legions. It occurred to Martel that if things went poorly, he might never meet his nephew or niece. He wondered if his family would tell the small child tales of the uncle who possessed magic and was sent to war, dying for the glory of the Empire. Or maybe he would become a secret, never spoken of, as the very mention of her lost son would make his mother upset.

Mentally shaking his head, Martel pushed such thoughts away. No point letting this thinking consume him. Today, he had received good news; his fears could wait until another day. Tomorrow was Malday when he had class with his friends; he could check if they were available afterwards. This seemed a good reason to celebrate, and Martel intended to do just that.

Chapter 444: Masks

Masks

A fiveday after his stitches had gone in, Martel returned to the infirmary to have them removed. While a bit early, the wound had been small, if deep, and it had healed well enough. With some salve for good measure, Martel felt mostly back to form. His shoulder remained a little stiff, which should wear off soon enough.

Yesterday's ambivalent feelings about the news from home had lessened as well, and Martel had gained enough clarity to simply feel happy about it. Even if he could not be back to celebrate with his family, he could still take joy from the occasion and share the news with his friends. During the second lesson of the day, when he had combat training with the mageknights, Martel waited until one of the inevitable lulls between sparring and approached the others.

"I got a letter from home," he began to say.

Both Maximilian and Eleanor looked at him. "Not ill news, I hope?" asked the latter.

"On the contrary. My brother is to be a father, and I'll be an uncle for the first time."

The viscount of Marche slapped a hand down on his shoulder. "Felicitations! A birth in the family is always a joyous occasion, and doubly so when it is a new generation."

"I agree." Eleanor gave him a smile. "Congratulations to you and your family."

"Thanks! It was quite a surprise. I didn't even know my brother had a woman. He's not the sort who talks much, you see."

She frowned. "You didn't know your brother was married?"

"He isn't," Martel helpfully explained. "He's marrying the child's mother this harvest."

"Well, they do say that wedding nights have such power, it only takes a few months for the first child to be born afterwards!" Maximilian roared with laughter.

Eleanor sent him a chastising look. "I suppose they can afford to stand less on ceremony in smaller towns," she remarked.

Martel was a little confused by their reaction; he could not see how the exact timing of all this mattered. A marriage was for life, after all, as were children. "I guess," he said, not seeing any point in discussing this particular matter. "I'm just sorry I won't be there. I could enchant some nice presents that would be helpful." He doubted that the Imperial post would accept a letter containing a heating stone weighing twenty or thirty pounds.

"You are learning enchanting?" Eleanor asked, looking curious. "I did not think they allowed battlemages to do so. I have not heard of others going through this."

"Fontaine, you are focusing on entirely the wrong thing," Maximilian chided her. "Our good friend will miss not only his brother's wedding, but the birth of his nephew!"

"Or niece," Martel mumbled, unless his friend had some kind of foresight, which seemed dubious given his poor luck in gambling.

"Obviously, it falls to us to remedy this as best we can. We must celebrate!"

"I knew that would be your conclusion." Eleanor rolled her eyes, but she laughed at the same time.

It did not require foresight either to guess Maximilian's intention, but Martel agreed regardless. If he could not participate in the festivities at home, he deserved to experience a taste of it here. "The yellow bird?" he suggested. No doubt, Regnar and the actors would be happy to join in.

The two mageknights both voiced their assent to the proposal.

Even if he figured that he knew the answer to any requests for taking leave, Martel nonetheless thought it prudent to ask. He knocked on the door to the overseer's chamber and waited only briefly before being admitted.

Mistress Juliana looked at him with the stern expression that seemed her constant companion.

"Yes?"

"Would it be possible for me to journey home? Soon, allowing me time to be back before year's end."

Sitting behind her desk, the overseer gave him a scrutinising look. When he first arrived, it would have intimidated Martel; now, he simply held her gaze. "No. Too long a distance. The Lyceum may allow a few days of departure, but not enough to reach Nordmark and return."

"I figured as much. Just wanted to ask before I tell my mother."

"No ill news, I hope, that would necessitate your return."

He shook his head. "The contrary. My brother's wedding."

"A pity you will miss it, but such is duty. Convey my best wishes to your family if convenient."

"Certainly."

Once their performance for the evening had ended, the troupe at The Golden Goose joined Martel and his friends for their celebration. Wine rather than ale was brought from the stores of the tavern, only reasonably diluted before being served. The actors with musical skill played their instruments, and other patrons of the establishment joined in when they knew the song.

Martel sat at the edge of the table, watching the others with a smile. Normally, he would have been an eager participant, but his mood was clouded by the knowledge that these evenings would soon be at an end. He preferred taking a step back and letting the mood fill him slowly, like the warmth of a hot drink.

"How's that child you mentioned last we spoke?" Regnar appeared by his side, likewise staring at the revelries taking place. Theo, the storyteller, had hauled Eleanor to the stage, but before he could twirl her around in a merry dance, she used her strength to do the same to him, causing unbridled laughter.

"She's fine. For now, anyway. If not, she'll come knocking on your door."

The old hedgemage nodded to himself, pulling out his pipe. "Understood." He glanced at Martel with a glint in his eyes. "Your friends have no idea of what you get up to in the city, do they?"

"They've been along on more than one occasion," Martel replied, watching Maximilian throw a mug far into the air before piercing it with a throw of his knife.

"Ah, but you're sworn to the Pact. I can't imagine they're familiar with anybody in that neighbourhood."

Martel gave Regnar a quick look before he could hide his surprise.

The hedgemage laughed. "I keep my ear to the ground. I've rarely heard of others receiving such an accolade. Certainly not a wizard, or someone that young. I heard a garbled tale that you righted a wrong involving several of the vaunted lords that rule the streets of our fair city?"

"Something like that." Martel sipped from his wine. "I'm not quite sure how I end up involved in all that. One thing just leads to another."

"Well, my ear to the ground has heard rumblings. I've even been asked for some magical aid," Regnar related. "Wards to warn of intruders, or using my meagre skills in enchantment. I'd advise you to stay out of it all."

"Who's been buying your services?" Could be useful to know who was preparing for conflict.

"Part of the deal is discretion," the hedgemage replied with a wry smile. "For their sake and mine. Not all of my spellwork is sanctioned by the Inquisition. Well, none of it is, but they let me get away with creating fire-breathing dragons on a stage."

"That's fair."

"Besides, asking such questions is the exact opposite of staying out of it," Regnar added with a pointed look.

Martel thought about Ruby and the one evening he had spent with her in a similar fashion as this night. She had been working him, he figured, but he had enjoyed the feast all the same. Wearing a mask had made him feel free to be himself, in a way; instead of Martel the mage, whose gift gave him powers but also shackled him, he had simply been Martel.

He doubted that he would ever experience that again. The physical mask from the celebration could not hide all the other masks he had to wear in Morcaster. With his closest friends, he was the good student, excelling in his studies. With Ruby or the Friar, he was a mercenary trading his services for favours. With Sparrow, he was not only a teacher, but a protector, hiding his fears to keep her safe from the mage hunters. With the Night Knives and most of the Nine Lords, he was a dangerous entity best left alone. To the city guard and commoners on the street, he was simply a wizard, to be shown deference.

"Nordmark, this is your celebration, and you sit in the corner? Inconceivable!" Maximilian appeared out of nowhere, grabbed him by the wrist, and dragged him up to stand. Placing a smile on his face, Martel let his friend pull him into the merriment.

Chapter 445: Hot Air

Hot Air

With his shoulder returned to normal, more or less, Martel no longer held back during training in the Circle of Fire. He used his staff to its full potential, whether as an amplifier for his magic or as a blunt weapon. He handily beat both Edward and Harriet; while reasonably skilled with spellwork, neither of them had ever really felt comfortable with a staff in their hands, and they used it solely to channel magic while fighting, leaving themselves vulnerable to physical attacks.

William, although perhaps less gifted as a spellcaster than Harriet, better understood the advantage of flexibility; when up against Martel, it was even a necessity. He could hold his own in terms of physical combat and find openings to release a fire bolt against Martel with varying success. Combined with Moira occasionally shooting off her own spells to make their fights unpredictable, Martel was sometimes hard pressed.

Finding himself in such a situation, Martel resorted to the same move as earlier this fiveday, now that he knew Moira would not punish him for it. A blast of air caught William in a bad position, and Martel followed up with a swift strike of his staff to send the other acolyte tumbling to the ground.

William got back on his feet with angry movements, picking up his staff. "You're always going to do that when in a tight spot, aren't you?"

"Probably," Martel admitted. He had no reason to refrain.

"Some people got all the luck," the other acolyte mumbled.

For a moment, Martel felt insulted. He had worked hard to develop his skills, and not just for combat. Hours spent every morning doing alchemy, and entire bells dedicated to learning enchantment.

Of course, Martel only had such time to spare because he was fire-touched, learning these spells much faster than the others. And Master Alastair had helped him in two ways. First by teaching Martel the other elemental arts, allowing him to develop those skills rather than focusing entirely on fire; next, he had continued to teach Martel powerful and complex spells that the other acolytes would not learn.

Martel did not feel lucky, given his circumstances, but he might admit that others had even worse luck than him. "Would you like to learn?" he blurted out.

William turned his head sharply. "Learn what?"

"Air magic. How to make a blast that'll push someone to the ground."

"What, you're offering lessons?"

It could only be easier than his attempts at teaching Sparrow. "We can meet one bell a fiveday."

The other acolyte regarded him with narrow eyes. "Alright," he finally said. "When?"

"You don't have anything on Soldays, do you?"

"Just my chores in the workshops. Fifth bell."

"How about third bell? We meet here. The Circle should be empty."

William continued to look at him with an expression that was hard to read. "Sure. Third bell."

Sitting at his desk, Martel picked up a quill and began writing.

Dear mum,

That's wonderful news about Keith. It is strange to imagine him both a husband and a father, though I suppose it was going to happen sooner or later. Being married to a smith is not a bad prospect, after all. Not many metalworkers that young who already have their own forge too. Even if Engby is a small town, it's still a promise of constant work. Plenty to keep a single smith busy, at any rate.

I will not be able to make it home for the festivities. Even if my studies are going well, I still have to be diligent. My graduation is in about four months or so, and I need to finish learning everything before then. I am not sure when I will be able to visit afterwards. I have talked a bit with my friend Eleanor about life in the legions, and she has assured me that legionaries, even mages, are allowed leave from time to time. Usually in winter when little happens anyway, and they'll want less mouths to feed in camp.

Of course, those newly arrived don't get leave straight away, so it will probably be a year or two before I'm allowed to go. Which means that my nephew or niece will be walking around by then. You could even teach him or her to say my name before they meet me for the first time! In fact, the more I think about it, the better this seems to me. Babies are not interesting the first few months. All they do is sleep and eat, after all.

I will enclose a silver letter with this, with as much money as I have to spare. It'll be my wedding gift to Keith and this Clara. I leave it to you to tell them and present the gift the best way. I'm sure they will have something useful to spend the coin on. It might be wise to save some of it, since once I leave Morcaster, I might not be able to send more easily. It will take a lot longer time for letters to reach me and return, so if you end up needing money urgently, it's best you have some saved up.

Otherwise, things are great here. The harvest games next month should be fun. I don't know if my friends will compete, but since they did last year, I assume so.

And I know you'll be thinking it, but I'm not ignoring your question. No, I have made no liaisons with anyone here in the same manner as Keith has. I'm far too busy with my studies to even contemplate that, and since I'm leaving Morcaster in some months, it would be pointless anyway.

Martel

He finished the letter and chuckled at the thought of Father Julius explaining to his mother what 'liaison' meant. Normally, he would not intentionally write in more complex language than he spoke, or which he knew would make his mother scratch her head, but if she was going to ask such questions of him, she deserved a little cheek.

He looked over the words again. Since his mother had studiously avoided any mention of his future as a battlemage, Martel wondered if she would be upset by him referring to it. But it could not be avoided; it was impossible to explain his situation or plan for the future without admitting what that future contained. She would just have to get used to the thought the same way he had.

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Chapter 446: Permanence

Permanence

Entering the workshops, Martel was greeted by a welcome sight. Last Manday, he had enchanted a lightstone as usual, infusing a glowing spark into the otherwise dull sphere that Master Jerome had given him. As he stepped inside the small laboratory, the stone met him with a sparkling light, as strong as when he had left it.

This was the first time that his light enchantment had held a full fiveday; not only that, the spell seemed to have plenty of life left before it would fade, though such was difficult to measure. It was still not long enough to be of much practical value; no point giving away a lightstone that after ten days just became an expensive rock. He was not done yet practising this skill, but the constant signs of improvement were encouraging.

Martel wondered if it was possible to weave an enchantment so strong, the effect became permanent. He assumed so, at least for other schools of magic. Sindhian potions did not lose their potency over time, from what Mistress Rana had told him; the Archean wards still protected the Lyceum centuries after being inscribed. Did Asterian wizards possess the same power in terms of enchantment? He would have to ask Master Jerome or maybe Master Alastair.

For now, it was time to practise his own skill. He was presented with a small issue; if he renewed the enchantment on the lightstone, he would not know how long it could currently last. This made it harder to keep track of his progress. But the laboratory still had the big rock he had first practised on, turning it into a heating stone. It lay cold, as he had not made use of it in a long time. Martel could simply switch between the two kinds of enchantment. Satisfied with this, he moved his stool over to the prospective heating stone and began weaving a spell into it.

His question still fresh in his mind, Martel did not waste time once he reached the Hall of Elements for his only class of the day. "Master Alastair, is it possible for an Asterian mage to enchant something permanently?"

The Master of Elements scratched his stubbles. "The short answer is yes, at least as far as we can measure. None of us live forever, after all, but we do have enchantments that seem as strong now as when they were cast a century ago. If that's what you're aiming for, however, you may want to lower your ambitions."

"But it can be done?"

"Yes, by master enchanters who have dedicated their lives to the craft. Even though I have years of experience, I can't do it," Master Alastair admitted. "Most wizards can probably learn some basic enchanting that'll be good for a few fivedays or months. But something that'll outlast you, that requires daily practice with a focus on little else."

"Alright. I was just curious. Wondering how long I can make mine last."

"How often do you practise?"

"Right now, just once a fiveday. Every Manday morning, in fact."

"I see. Well, if you continue that until you graduate, my guess would be a few months. You can keep practising, of course, but I doubt you'll have the time to dedicate yourself once at your posting."

"Of course. I'm not really thinking of making this my future." In general, Martel did not think about his future beyond the remainder of the year. "I was just hoping to make a few good enchantments to give as presents before I leave."

Master Alastair nodded, smiling with closed lips. "That's thoughtful of you. While you're in my class, though, let's focus on what you're here to learn."

"Yes, master." Martel extended his hands and summoned the elements. In the air between his fingers, sparks crackled as fire turned to lightning.

After class, Martel returned to his room and counted out his wealth. As he no longer paid for Julia's room, nor spent money on alchemical supplies, it had steadily accumulated thanks to his salary from Mistress Rana. He had intended to spend some of it on buying spheres from Master Jerome to turn them into lightstones, but that would have to wait.

He needed more time to get better at enchanting regardless, and it also made more sense to delay making such gifts until winter. If his enchantments only lasted a few months, the lightstones would be most useful during the darkest days of the year.

Martel also wanted to make a heating stone for the children in the copper lanes, to help them get through the cold of the winter, but that could likewise wait; no sense doing that this early either. Hopefully, Master Jerome could help with that as well, as Martel had no idea what kind of rocks were suitable to enchant for heating.

Keeping a handful of coins for himself, Martel counted out forty-four silver pieces. That should be enough to buy just about anything his family might need. Fabric to make clothes or blankets, salt to cure food, tools or metal for his brother to work with; this would cover it all and more.

Not that Martel assumed they needed it; presumably, his brother's work as a smith earned them enough. But his siblings were growing up, and they might need a handful of coins to help them get settled elsewhere, like if John had to leave home to take up apprenticeship as a scribe elsewhere; Engby's meagre demands for writing were generally satisfied by Father Julius.

Martel felt himself getting lost in thoughts of home; it was already late in the day, and the office of the Imperial post would not stay open much longer. Best to get this all sent, rather than his family delaying the wedding day after day in the vain hope that Martel was making his way towards them to participate. Best they knew sooner rather than later to forget about him.

Once he had gathered everything he needed, Martel set out from his room; for some reason, this simple task of mailing a letter felt heavy to do, reflected in his steps.

Chapter 447: A Resurgent Need

A Resurgent Need

When third bell rang, Martel went to the Circle of Fire. It was strange to enter this place voluntarily, given that he usually felt ill at ease within these walls; normally, he could not wait until he was allowed to leave. But more than his negative experiences, it was the company that made the place unnerving for him; absent Moira, Martel found himself less troubled by it.

William arrived soon after. He gave the other acolyte an apprehensive look, perhaps not knowing what to expect. Martel felt the same way; this was more intimidating than teaching Sparrow, who knew nothing about magic and was starting from the bottom. It was a lot easier to make a fool of himself in front of another student, but then again, Martel had nothing at stake; if William did not appreciate his help, he would just leave.

"So. Air. Since you are already trained in fire, that should be an easy element for you to learn. You just need practice."

"I'm not entirely useless," William declared. He raised the wind behind him to make their hair blow about. "It's just not strong enough to do what you do. Actually be useful in a fight."

That made things easier; Martel was not sure how to proceed if William had no skill with the element at all. Instead, this just seemed like he needed some encouragement; he had to actually start practising. Since he had seen Martel use it to great effect in a fight already, he should be convinced of its efficacy. In fact, perhaps suggesting it the other day was all that Martel really needed to do.

"Well, I guess you're halfway there. You just need to train until you can command the wind sufficiently to knock someone down."

"That easy, eh." William laughed a bit. He was not quite as tall as Martel, but he had a good physique that helped him during sparring. His brown hair suggested Aquilan ancestry.

"That easy," Martel confirmed. After all, when he himself did it, it was not even a real spell or anything complex like that. It was just a quick and simple effect of the kind that almost any mage ought to be able to learn. "Give it a try. Use your magic to push me back. Put your spellpower into the effect if you can."

The wind appeared once again from William, pushing straight against Martel. It was a brisk breeze, and he could feel the strands of power from the other acolyte, but still not enough to actually push him backwards.

After a handful of moments, William ceased. "That's the best I do, I think. If I tried to use more power, it's like there's a bottleneck keeping it back. I guess because I'm not used to working with the element."

"Probably. And I think we learn differently, so maybe this won't be useful to you, but for me, improving my elemental skills usually happened because I had a need for it to happen."

William frowned. "How do you mean? What need?"

"Usually, some kind of trouble, or just that it would solve a problem. I know here at the Lyceum, we're basically taught control and constant practice is the key to learning, but I think it helps when we actually care about it. I mean, when we feel the need for the magic to happen."

"Well, I guess I don't really feel that. It's not like pushing you back two steps with air would somehow solve my problems."

"No, but maybe it can help motivate you. Think about me beating you during class. If you were better with air magic, that wouldn't happen."

William narrowed his eyes, and his breathing increased. Finally, he released a burst of air; still not enough to force Martel back, but better than before. The scowl on his face was replaced by a smile. "You might be onto something."

"Try it again."

After practising with William for half an hour, they agreed that he could continue training on his own and meet again next five days. Martel spent the remaining bell working on his own lightning spell until dinner, after which he had alchemy. With their journeys outside the city to gather herbs at an end, he resumed learning recipes; this time, the disease to conquer was red pox.

"This is among the worst diseases," Mistress Rana cautioned him. "Keep your distance and wear scented cloth to avoid breathing the pestilent air. It is highly infectious and kills every third person it infects."

Martel nodded to himself, writing it down.

"Besides the usual fever and aches, you will recognise it on the rash that turns into a multitude of blisters, which fill with fluid. You will not be in doubt when you face a victim of this particular pox."

Martel's quill scribbled furiously.

"All the more reason you should know the particular cure. Unfortunately, one ingredient would be the ground up fangs of a cobra, which is not exactly easy to come by in these northern lands. I have considered possible substitutions, but whether my attempts are successful is not exactly easy to test."

"I guess you'd need victims of this pox first."

"Yes. Fortunately, cows can be infected with this disease, allowing us to use them rather than human victims, risking their lives. Unfortunately, the Imperial administration has refused my requests for pox-ridden cows to be taken into the city."

Martel could not fathom why.

"Well. You have the recipe and the ingredients. You know what to do."

He did indeed. One bell later, he had created an antidote for red pox.

Martel's belief that this would be an ordinary day of learning and practising magic came to an end after supper. A message waited for him.

Martel,

Can we meet tomorrow?

I'll be outside your school

At last bell.

Instead of a signature, the note was signed by a red blot. A little strange, but Martel caught the meaning; this was from Ruby. Strange that she had felt the need to identify herself, while at the same time, she did not want to make it obvious by using her name. He wondered what that suggested.

He wavered for a moment, considering her request. Part of him knew that he would regret getting involved. Assassins or inquisitors, he always ended up with someone going after him.

But he did not hate Ruby the way that he despised Kerra or Flora. She seemed much like him; caught between greater powers forcing their will upon her, and wearing her own masks. She struck a confident figure, but Martel had glimpsed behind it. She had her own fears.

Ruby had played him for a fool one time, perhaps, but she had not placed him in any real danger. And she had done him no wrong since, on the contrary. Burning the note, Martel made his decision.

Chapter 448: Hunter and Hunted

Hunter and Hunted

For his first lesson in the Circle of Fire, Martel was once again paired up against William. Their duel progressed as they often did, exchanging blows and fire spells, until William felt confident enough to attempt his new strategy. Seeing Martel extend himself, he released a blast of air, trying to make the tall acolyte fall.

As it turned out, he lacked enough force to accomplish his goal; staying on his feet, Martel immediately retaliated on instinct, using the same skill. Taken by surprise, William fell flat on his back.

He looked up at Martel with a scowl before laughing, accepting a hand from Martel to get back on his feet. "I need more practice, I guess."

Martel laughed as well, finding it almost strange to enjoy a moment together with his fellow student.

"You can laugh when you're dead!" Moira barked. "Which is exactly what you'll be if you don't train! It'll be too late once you're at the front."

The two acolytes shared a look, rolling their eyes before resuming their practice.

The rest of Martel's day progressed without incident; when last bell rang, he left the school. Outside, the sun was setting, casting the square into long shadows. As promised, Ruby waited for him. Rather than stop, she gestured for Martel to continue walking; as he did, she fell into place next to him. "Thanks for coming."

"What is this about?"

She set a course directly south, with Martel following alongside her. "Been spying on a fellow for the last fiveday or so. Think he might be our guy."

"Who is he?"

"You remember that weathermage, who Vernon from the copper lanes brought along?"

"The one who died. I remember."

"This fellow, he's the one who brought messages between Vernon and the wizard. Put him in a position to have known the details of our little adventure – and pass them on to someone else."

"I see. And you want to question him?"

She smiled in his direction. "You read my mind."

"Alright. But what do you need me for?"

"Well, I'll be operating on somebody else's territory. That always carries some risk. Also, you wizards are a frightening lot, especially battlemages. One bit of fire magic from you, and I expect he'll spill his guts. He carries messages and runs errands – not exactly the toughest fellow."

"Going into the copper lanes to grab one of their own people, even just briefly," Martel considered with doubt in his voice, "that's asking for trouble."

"I wouldn't do that either. I've been watching him for a while. He spends most evenings gambling in the harbour district."

"Curious. The copper lanes have plenty of places where he can play dice or cards." Martel had been to quite a few of them. "It makes you wonder why he feels the need to go all the way to the harbour. Perhaps he doesn't want his employers to know how much he gambles."

"Or how big his debts might be." She shot him a sly look. "Debts that you might try to clear by selling information."

"Right. But the gambling houses in the harbour are controlled by the guild, if I recall. They won't let me in," Martel warned her.

"Oh, too public a place anyway. We'll corner him somewhere quiet when he's on his way home."

Meaning they would have to wait until he was done. "Great. One of those nights."

They found a spot outside a tavern that allowed them to keep watch of the gambling house without drawing attention, buying the occasional cup of ale from the watering hole. Ruby kept up idle conversation, presumably because two people sitting in silence would look odd; Martel gave the occasional reply and otherwise watched the street. Not to look for their prey, as he had no idea how the man looked, but simply to pass the time.

The place lay near the docks, meaning plenty of sailors walked by. Their numbers would dwindle over the next month or two, with the arrival of winter, when only ships carrying seamages would leave the harbour. But for now, Martel could enjoy watching people from all over the Empire mixing with Sindhians, and on occasion even islanders or the rare Tyrian.

"There he is." Ruby emptied her cup and set it aside, but stayed seated.

Martel followed her gaze to see a small fellow scurrying down the street. "That soon? It's barely midnight, I reckon." Perhaps that meant he might get home in bed at a reasonable hour.

"Guessing he lost his money sooner rather than later tonight. Come on, before we lose him." As the man moved down a side alley, thus unable to spot them, Ruby swiftly got up and broke into pursuit, Martel a few steps behind. "I'll get ahead of him, and you keep him from escaping the way he came," she told Martel and hurried forward.

His instructions easy enough, Martel followed the path of the gambling man. Once in the alleys between the tall buildings and insulae of the district, the lack of light made it hard for him to see his

quarry; neither light from the moon nor streetlamps reached him. Fortunately, his magic told him of the heat source ahead, and Martel followed that signal at an almost leisurely pace.

Suddenly, the warm trace of another person appeared by the first; Ruby had made her move. Allowing his magical sense to rest, freeing himself from the constant strain, Martel quickly caught up to find his female acquaintance with her dagger out. "What do you reckon will hurt the most? Getting sliced or getting burned?"

"I – I don't know! Look, I don't have any money on me! See, my purse's empty!"

"She wasn't asking you," Martel said, making the cornered man flinch as his head whipped around. "As for your question, I'd say the latter." He was about to summon his flame when he noticed an odd look on Ruby's face. She was looking past him at something. *freewebnovel.com*

Immediately letting his magic sense flare out, Martel felt it. Several people at the end of the alley behind him. It was harder to get a feel for the other side, as both Ruby and the guy stood in front of Martel, but he would bet the result was the same. They were surrounded.

Chapter 449: Dead Ends

Dead Ends

"Who are they?" Ruby almost growled the question, aiming her blade at the man they had cornered.

"I'm sorry! They told me to go this way!" He practically bawled the reply; clearly, he had served as bait, which seemed the extent of his usefulness.

"Kill him if you want," came a cold voice from the darkness. Several people appeared, barely visible; what little could be found was reflected in the steel of their daggers. "He's served his purpose."

"Please don't," he begged.

"Sod off," Ruby told him, turning around to have her back against Martel's. "What do we do?" she asked quietly, aimed at the wizard.

Despite the situation, Martel's head remained cool. This was a trap for Ruby; his sense of magic had not indicated any golden weapons. They did not realise he was a mage, most likely; they certainly had not come prepared for it. The question was not whether he could win the fight. This handful of thugs were no match for a battlemage, and the constraints of the area might even work in Martel's favour; they stood no chance of evading his spells.

The issue was that whatever Martel did to them, it would be an escalation. If they served a Ninth Lord, and he had to assume so, it would endanger the protection he enjoyed as a Pact-sworn. And who knew what else might happen as a result.

Of course, he could invoke that protection, and they might honour it and simply stand aside. Especially if they realised he was a mage; they ought to know they stood little chance against him. But the Pact did not protect Ruby, on the contrary; she was on enemy territory.

"We run in my direction. Get ready," Martel told her in a whisper.

From either side, they closed in. "Drop your blade, girly, and both of you, on your knees," came the menacing voice from before.

It was difficult to cast a spell behind him, using memory rather than his eyes to determine how and where, but still possible. A wall of flames roared up from the ground, separating the alley. "Go!" Martel broke into a sprint. In the eerie light of his own spell, he saw the confused expressions of the thugs standing in their way, though they quickly recovered, brandishing their weapons.

Without delay, as soon as he could cast another spell, Martel released an intense ray of fire. It struck his nearest enemy and continued to the next. Meanwhile, Ruby raced past him to attack a third. Dodging under the man's blade, she slashed him across the chest with her own. As for the fourth, he turned tails and ran as well, escaping the alley faster than anyone else.

Without slowing down, though Ruby remained faster and ahead of him, Martel continued past the other brigands, all three of them unable to keep fighting; their screams of agony still could be heard as the pair reached the nearest street and ran off.

Martel followed Ruby in a mad dash until she finally dove into a small nook between two houses. She leaned against the wall, catching her breath, while Martel crouched down. "Who were they?" he finally asked.

"No idea. I doubt it's Kerra's men, watching over one of their own. They wouldn't engage outside their own territory." Ruby's replies came in between gulps of air.

"They used him as bait. They knew his significance." Martel likewise gasped for breath after each sentence. "They work for whoever set us up at the construction yard."

"Yes. And they knew I was watching him."

"They wanted to catch you. Why?"

"I don't know." Her breathing finally came at a more normal pace. "He'll be dead now, I'm sure. Kerra's errand boy. He's of no further use, and too much of a risk to leave alive."

"At least it seems confirmed he was the traitor," Martel considered.

"But not who hired him."

"It might not be Kerra herself, but it could be her lieutenant. That Vernon fellow."

"Perhaps. That would explain why none of this happened in the copper lanes." Ruby peered around the corner in either direction of the street. "Looks like we made a clean escape, thanks to you."

Thanks to Martel's magic, specifically, which was also why this felt like borrowed time. He had used complex fire spells. Ordinary people might not understand the significance, but some would recognise that meant he was a battlemage. If so, it would not be hard to guess Martel's identity, given the few options. "Yeah. What happens now? You can't really continue investigating."

"No. This is a dead end. Thanks for your help, Martel. Looks like I won't need it again."

For the best, given that Martel suspected his status as Pact-sworn had just become endangered. But he accepted the trade if it meant Ruby was safe rather than what those thugs had in store for her.

"Alright. We should probably split up and get out of here."

"Agreed." She gave him a look and a resigned smile.

He preferred that to the smirking kind she usually gave him, though he wished that he might once see a genuine smile from her. "Goodbye, Ruby."

"Take care, wizard."

Martel walked home on quick feet, eager to get back to the Lyceum. As expected, nothing good had come of his involvement with the underworld of Morcaster, just like every time before. But he had known this when he made the trade with the Friar, buying Sparrow's freedom.

At least, it was nothing like when he first encountered this part of the city; training and experience had burned away his hesitation, weakness, and cowardice. He had survived numerous fights and ambushes by now, generally for the same reason; people did not understand magic, and despite their fear of his power, they still underestimated it. Or they simply did not know how to counter it, other than putting their trust in gold.

Granted, a couple of times, Martel had needed help; he would have been in trouble against the inquisitor the other night if Ruby had not lent him a hand. That seemed the remaining weakness in his arsenal of spells; he had no good defence against someone wearing gold from top to bottom. Something to consider.

As for Ruby, Martel hoped tonight was the end of it; that things would grow quiet, and she would have no further need of him. At the same time, that seemed foolish to believe. She lived in a world of constant scheming, and in the end, she was not a player, but a pawn. If it came to it, Martel suspected that Lady Pearl would gladly sacrifice Ruby if it meant some decisive advantage in the feuds between the Nine Lords.

Trying not to feel weighed down by it, Martel prepared himself for the inevitability that Ruby would most likely need him again in the future, to protect her. And though he tried to ignore it, some small part of him was not entirely displeased at this notion.

Chapter 450: Hornets

Hornets

As always, it felt jarring to go from brawls and devastating spells in the night to attending classes in the morning; though at this point, Martel had switched between these masks so often, he could do it seamlessly. Malday also made it easy for him, as the morning lesson never provided him with much of a challenge; none of the other fire acolytes stood a chance against him when fighting purely with staves and empowerment. This allowed Martel to put in a token effort while his mind was elsewhere.

While the Lyceum provided him a safe refuge from any troubles in the city, it also isolated him. If matters escalated because of what had transpired last night, he might not discover how until someone stabbed him on the street for it.

At best, he might receive a warning from one of his acquaintances, should he be in danger, but Martel could not rely on that. These people would only do something for him if they stood to gain from it themselves; Ruby might be an exception, but he could not even be certain of that. They had been on the same side recently, but her loyalty lay with her mistress, not Martel.

There was only one person connected to the city and its underworld that he might consider a friend. Once his lessons were done, Martel would head to The Golden Goose.

Martel arrived late to the tavern, since Regnar would not be available until the evening performance was done. This also meant a late return to the Lyceum, and he was already low on sleep, but he would have to muddle through tomorrow morning's lessons as best he could. At least in the legions, he would not have early classes anymore, though they probably had some other horrors scheduled for those hours.

He politely applauded as the play ended; one of their comedies that Martel had never really found that funny. He waited a while until the commotion had ended with patrons resuming their drinking and chatter. The actors cleared up the stage and disappeared into their lodgings.

Martel followed after, exchanging greetings as he came across them in the corridors. Reaching Regnar's door, he gave a knock.

From inside the chamber, a voice spoke. "Theo, you can't expect an old man to lift anything! Just climbing on top of the stage kills my back!"

"It's me. Martel."

The door was opened. "Well, my point stands." The hedge mage nodded for him to enter. "What's amiss to bring you here?"

Martel waited until the door was closed. "This will take a bit of explanation. Did you hear about trouble in the Khivan quarter? At the construction yard, where they're building an insula."

"Some rumblings, I suppose. I didn't pay attention. Why?"

"It was an attempt by a rather loose alliance of the underworld's finest, trying to halt the construction," Martel explained. "It failed, as someone revealed their plan beforehand. One of my – associates from the bridge district tried to chase down the leak, only to find herself ambushed last night. Down by the docks."

Regnar raised an eyebrow. "And you're telling me this...?"

"You're right on the edge between the harbour and the market. I wondered if you'd heard about it."

"Not that either."

"I suppose it was unlikely," Martel admitted. "But would you keep an ear to the ground for me?"

"Sure. But for what exactly?"

"Well, my friend escaped, but mostly thanks to me. I was there as well, and it took a few spells to get us out."

"Ah. Now you get to the point of it." The hedge mage stroked his chin. "Spells that people would notice?"

"A wall of flames ten feet tall, in the middle of the night."

"Right. That'll definitely spread. Nothing gets rumours going faster than when magic's involved. But if you know the events, why do you want me to listen to gossip?"

"To find out if or when they figure out it was me. Also, I have no idea who they were. We fled rather than hang around."

"So you'd like to know if they're coming after you, and if so, who they actually are." fre(e)webnovel

"Yes. I don't think they're some minor street gang, hired for this task. It required a touch of finesse, not just brute force. It would probably be someone already involved with what went down in the Khivan quarter – they probably work directly for whoever interfered that night."

"That's all you can give me?"

"They also used a man from the copper lanes, both for information and as bait. Low rank, just a messenger. I don't know if it means Kerra herself is behind it, or her lieutenant, Vernon. The fellow might have had gambling debts – that's why he was at the harbour."

"Curious he'd leave his own district for that particular vice."

Martel nodded. "Agreed. This feels bigger than the usual games played by the Nine Lords. There's a lot of them involved, and they're quick with resorting to bloodshed. Not much subtlety in this."

"As if they're less worried about discovery, as long as they get results," Regnar considered. "This feels like a nest of hornets, my boy."

"It is. But my hand's already stuck down there. If they're going to sting me, I'd like to know in advance."

"I'll ask around," the hedge mage promised. "You should stay inside your castle for the time being."

"Probably. Thanks, Regnar. You're really the only person I could ask."

"Of course. A drink before you leave?"

Martel shook his head. "Already had a late night yestereve. I should get back. Classes and whatnot in the morning."

"I wouldn't know," Regnar replied with a wry grin. "No such thing in the life of a hedge mage."

"Lucky you." If not for the fact that payment for his tuition would be exacted from his family, Martel would seriously have considered becoming a hedge mage himself in this moment. Instead, he just patted the old man on the arm in farewell and left.