

Firebrand 451

Chapter 451: One Man's Gift

One Man's Gift

After a decent night's sleep, though not as long as he could have wanted, Martel followed Regnar's advice. He stayed at the Lyceum, attending classes and improving his skills. In particular, he felt motivated to work on enchantment, being something he did for himself rather than because a teacher told him to. When he returned to the workshops on Solday, he found the heating stone still practically glowing with warmth. A good sign, though also a reminder that he had to improve increasing heat without likewise increasing the emittance of light.

This was another step in learning control over his magic. By now, Martel felt that he had attained great precision when it came to his fire spells, generally speaking. He could decide exactly how much power to pour into an effect; he could make water freeze, boil, or feel neither hot nor cold to the touch.

But separating heat from light meant controlling the individual properties of his fire magic. He had never really needed to do so before, and it felt weird; like trying to grasp light with his fingers to pry it away. He could not tell if he actually accomplished any change until he was done enchanting, when he might measure the result; of course, by then it was too late, and he had another burning hot lightstone in his hand.

To speed his progress along by having more materials available, Martel went to the workshops with ten silvers in hand. "Master Jerome, you mentioned I could buy lightstones from you? Not yet enchanted, of course."

"Certainly. I have a few waiting for Master Alastair, you can get one of those." The artificer disappeared and swiftly returned. "There we go, lad. Enchanting going well for you?"

Martel accepted the stone, handing over the coins. "Well enough."

At third bell, he met up with William in the Circle of Fire. It felt a little strange to change role from student to teacher, and he had been apprehensive about how it would go with another fire acolyte, given how strained things tended to be between them. But William greeted him with a nod and relaxed expression. "I've been practising most days," he declared. "Just up here or in my room though, not against someone. Which makes it hard to tell if I'm strong enough to make it work."

"Well, given that air is not so different from fire, I'm sure you'll get there eventually. You've got the basic idea – just need to keep honing your skill," Martel considered.

"I guess if you can learn it, anyone can. Just joking," William quickly added.

"I didn't take offence," Martel replied with a chuckle; he could handle a good-natured jest.

"You're different than I thought you'd be."

"How so?"

"Well, we all heard about fire-touched. How easily you can wield flames and all that. But I never really thought much about it. Didn't think there'd be one at school, in class."

Martel remained silent, unsure where he was going.

"Then you show up, and you get placed with us, who's already been acolytes for a year. And still, you're better. Faster at learning. Not only that, you're better with a staff too, and empowerment."

By necessity, Martel thought; he remembered back to fighting in Tibert's public house, or running with the Night Knives.

"I saw when you fought that arrogant prick, Cheval. You didn't even use fire against him, just water magic." William looked away, as if suddenly bashful. "Just feels like you've been given all the gifts. I'm surprised you'd bother with helping me. It's not like I can do anything in return."

Martel stood a little dumbstruck. He could see how it might look this way to William. He did not know the gruelling hours that Martel had spent learning how to manipulate water, or how to summon a shield worth anything. All the fights he had been through, sometimes risking life or limb.

Creating a flame came easy to Martel; that was a gift, certainly. Anything else, he would argue that he had earned. But he did not know how to explain all of this succinctly, nor did he really feel the need. While they might have reached some kind of cordial understanding, William was not his friend as such; he could have whatever opinion he wanted of Martel.

"Well, I don't expect anything in return from you either. But we're all going to war. If I can make you a little more prepared, I should." Just like others did for Martel.

After letting William blast him with air, and eating dinner, Martel went for his bell in Mistress Rana's laboratory. "This cure is for the last of the great plagues that at times may trouble us," she explained. "It is called typhus in your language, from Archean, I believe."

Martel mumbled the word for himself, trying to guess how it was spelled.

"It can be hard to distinguish this illness from the others. Victims suffer from strong fever, but that is usually the case. It's easier to tell by the rash they develop, starting around the stomach or torso and eventually spreading to the limbs. It does not turn into boils like other diseases."

Martel dutifully added this to his notes. "Mistress, what happens if you administer the wrong cure? If you get the disease wrong."

"That depends on the potion and the victim. A Sindhian elixir is not just a dose of magic," she said, and he raised his eyes to give her his full attention. "More than that, it reacts with the dormant magic in the person drinking it. If they are sick and drink the right cure, it will give them the strength to fight off the disease, in simple terms. But if the cure is not what they need, it causes a reaction without any positive effect, leaving the patient weaker than before."

"Enough that they might die?"

"In the direst of situations, yes. And if they survive, they might not have the strength to take another potion. Thus, inadvertently, the wrong cure might still kill them." She gave him a stern look.

"Which is why you must not rush to judgement. Ideally, someone more experienced than you will determine the illness. Even if they don't know alchemy, the advice of regular physicians may be worthwhile in this regard."

Martel nodded to himself; he could not imagine how guilty he would feel, should he try to cure someone and end up killing them.

"That's all. Get to it."

Putting his notes away, Martel began preparing the ingredients.

Chapter 452: Red-blooded

Red-blooded

It lasted four days before Martel received a reason to leave the Lyceum. As he had guessed, it came in the shape of Ruby's handwriting, still with the red blot below as a signature.

Can we meet tonight?

After last bell.

I'll find you

outside your place.

No details as to what she needed, but Martel assumed similar to last. Which surprised him a little, as he figured Ruby would have given up on that trail. The people she pursued knew about her; enough to set a trap that almost worked. She could not expect to act safely anywhere outside the bridge district; it would just end in a repeat of the other night.

But perhaps she had no choice; Lady Pearl seemed under pressure from several rivals. Or perhaps this was about something else entirely. He would find out tonight.

Unsure of Ruby's intentions, Martel dressed warmly before he left the Lyceum. Beside protecting against the chill, his scarf also hid most of his face. Along with his hood up, it gave him a rudimentary disguise of his identity. Just in case.

Stepping outside the gates, Martel let his gaze sweep over the square. From the shadows between two buildings, he saw a shape appear and gesture for his attention. He crossed over to join Ruby, who retreated into the alley as he approached, shielding them from unfriendly eyes.

"Thanks for meeting me."

He gave a brief nod. "What is it?"

"There's been a development. Do you know Vitus? Master of the harbour district."

Martel thought back on an unpleasant episode when Kerra had used him as bait to capture Tibert, handing him over to an ambitious lieutenant, eager to seize his master's place. "I have seen him once."

"Those were his men the other night. In the alley."

"Makes sense, considering we were on his territory. So he's the one behind this latest round of schemes? He set us up in the Khivan quarter?"

"So it appears, and he's made his next move. Unfortunately, thanks to me."

Martel frowned, looking at Ruby under her hood. She did not wear her usual cosmetics, and in the darkness, he could barely make out her face. "How so?"

"I killed one of his men when we fled. He's accused me of breaking the Pact. The Nine Lords must gather to cast verdict upon his allegations." She raised her head to look him straight in the eyes.

It took Martel a moment to understand what she meant. Another meeting in the Undercroft, like he had once attended; that fearful place where he nearly died, ambushed by Tibert and the Night Knives. "That seems risky. How can he prove it was you that night? Not unless he reveals the reason you investigated his men, thereby admitting his own guilt."

She nodded. "Indeed. Which is why I don't think this will be a peaceful meeting. I think they intend to gather the Nine Lords in one place to strike."

"But surely that's beyond him? He'd have to bring a small army without anybody noticing, or they'll escape and band together to destroy him."

"Unless half the other Nine Lords agree with him and have joined together. Each of them can double their territory."

Martel thought back on the attempt to halt the construction of the insula in the Khivan quarter. Kerra, the Fire Eater, Lady Pearl, the Friar – an attempt of a loose alliance to work together and prevent the erosion of the balance of power between the Nine Lords. It had not gone well; the question was whether this meant the other five stood arraigned together against these four.

However, this did not affect Martel directly. While a war in the underworld of Morcaster would undoubtedly involve innocents, if these crime lords were bent on making it happen, he could not stop them. It seemed like it was already too late, in fact. "What is it you want from me?"

"The Nine Lords meet in a fiveday. There's a risk of an ambush, but if not, and we failed to appear, this Vitus may turn the others against us, isolating us. We have to show up. There is also the possibility that it is a distraction, and while we are deep underground, Vitus and his allies attack our territory, maiming us."

"And?"

"For that reason, the Night Knives will stay above ground, protecting our places of business while we attend the meeting. Leaving us vulnerable." Ruby had been glancing up and down the narrow street, but she turned to look at him again. "We could use the power of a battlemage, in case the meeting's a trap."

Martel exhaled. He had guessed something like this – that she would need him to keep her safe, just like on their last outing. But this was a lot more than expected. This was not a handful of thugs, easily dispatched with a spell or two. If her suspicions were right, this promised to be a major brawl between some of the most powerful people in the city. And they would come prepared, bringing lots of people to the fight, no doubt, and probably also mages. If such a fight broke out, Martel doubted that he could necessarily change the outcome; but he might be able to get Ruby out. "Lady Pearl's agreed to this? She and I are on bad terms."

"She was not happy about it, but I persuaded her in the end. Her resources are stretched thin. If she wants a wizard to accompany her to the meeting while having another defend her territory, you're the only one left."

Martel wondered if this meant the other mercenary mages had been hired already for the same purpose; he knew Kerra had lost one, the weathermage killed during the botched sabotage in the Khivan quarter. None of this bode well. "I have a better idea. Stay away. Don't go with her."

"That's not possible. She has to attend, or they'll use her absence to turn the others against her. And I must be by her side, especially if there'll be a fight." Ruby kept his gaze locked. "I owe her that much."

It felt like everyone involved was making the wrong choice, but in a strange way, Martel admired her for it. Even those who dwelt in the underworld could have loyalty and honour. "Alright. I'll do it."

A little to his surprise, Ruby threw her arms around him in a tight squeeze. "Thank you. I know promises aren't worth much, but I won't forget this. You've treated me better than I could have expected. You're a good man."

Was he? Martel found that hard to judge, but his heart beat a little faster, and he did not regret offering to help. He did not care about Lady Pearl – if she died, it would not bother him – but placing his arms around Ruby's lithe form, he knew that he would not allow any harm to come to her.

Chapter 453: Services Required

Services Required

While absentmindedly fending off Edward's feeble attacks with his staff, Martel thought about the journey to the Undercroft. It disturbed him for several reasons. His previous experience in that dark place did not make him wish to return. Getting wounded, fighting another wizard – even if he was much stronger now as a mage, the memories were unpleasant.

This time seemed almost certain to be a repetition, one way or another. And if all the Nine Lords gathered and began fighting, it would be mayhem. He had no intention of risking himself for the sake of Lady Pearl, but he would see Ruby safe.

Lastly, every time Martel thought back on the dark, empty streets of that eerie, abandoned city, he felt a sense of dread. It reminded him of the catacombs, even absent the old bones. Like trespassing in a place not meant for the living. Perhaps he was letting his feelings get away from him, but it felt certain that something ominous had to happen in that sinister place.

But if Martel could not prevent that – if Ruby would not see reason and stay above ground – he could at least proceed with open eyes. Or rather, open ears. When time permitted it, he left the Lyceum to find out what Regnar had heard.

"Not much, honestly." The hedge mage looked at his visitor, sitting inside his small room at The Golden Goose. "I asked around, but nobody could tell me about any displays of magic the other night. Or if they could, they weren't so inclined."

"Probably the latter. A wall of flames doesn't go unnoticed. I expect that this Vitus, master of the harbour, suppressed any talk. He's already got what he wanted."

Regnar raised an eyebrow. "You come to me for knowledge, but it sounds like you're better informed than me."

"The Nine Lords have called for a council. If you're familiar with what that means?"

"I've heard of it. They gather in some unknown place to settle their disputes with words rather than swords. How does that pertain to your little adventure by the docks?"

"They tried to catch my companion, but failed. Probably to use her as an excuse for gathering the council. But because of the ensuing brawl, Vitus has his excuse anyway," Martel explained.

"Sounds like trouble. When powerful people collide, those of lesser stature tend to get squashed." The hedge mage gave his young friend a discerning look. "But perhaps you don't consider yourself in the second category?"

"Honestly, I'd prefer to stay out of it. But my aforementioned companion is caught deep inside all of this... it doesn't feel right to abandon her."

Regnar gave a knowing smile. "Say no more. While I doubt that I can be of much help, I did hear something that I now believe to be connected to your news."

"What is it?"

"I have been approached by a few different parties over the last five days, seeking my services in the arcane."

Martel frowned. "That's vague. What exactly did they want?"

"Oh, each of them had different reasons. You remember I did work for House Thierry? Examining some of their artefacts."

Martel remembered; it had made the acting troupe seem aligned with the nobles, causing Lady Pearl to run them out of the bridge district. The main reason he would not lift a finger to protect her, should it come to that.

"They asked if I was available. I turned them down, of course. But some other old customers also reached out, asking me to create some enchantments."

"Who? What kind?"

"Just a merchant in the harbour, wanted a handful of lightstones. I'm quite good with such effects, after all. The silver was good, and I didn't see the harm – certainly didn't expect it had anything to do with you."

Martel scratched his cheek; that did sound harmless. "What else? Or who else?"

"Well, you're familiar with Ironside, who runs the market?"

"He tried to have me killed, if that counts."

"Right." Regnar cleared his throat. "Well, the Goose lies inside his territory. He warned me that if my little troupe was to be allowed to remain here, I was not to take up work outside the district."

"Like accompanying someone to the Undercroft for a fight," Martel considered.

"Is that what it's called?" The hedge mage looked at him with discerning eyes. "Well, he was right to do so, because a day later, I was asked to provide protection for an – unnamed party."

"Who?"

"I just said, unnamed. Obviously one of the Nine Lords, but they gave me no hint of their identity. I would have refused even if Ironside didn't tell me to," Regnar declared. "Not getting involved with these people. Not for all the gold in Morcaster."

"That's wise."

"Nor would you, I imagine. But it's blood rather than gold that drives you, eh, boy?"

Martel cleared his throat. He saw no reason to discuss that.

Regnar cackled. "We've all been young once, I suppose. But if you'll forgive me, I'll keep to myself over the coming days. Asking questions when everyone's on edge like this – I've already been warned to lie low. And if I misbehave, it's my little flock that pays the price."

"I understand." Martel did not imagine there was much more the hedge mage might learn anyway, listening to rumours in a tavern. "Thanks for your help."

"Of course, my boy. Listen, be careful, you hear? Don't let your good intentions get you killed. For all the power that magic gives you, it also makes you the first target in any fight." Regnar stared at him, his expression suddenly grave. "Always know your way out. And don't sacrifice yourself for others who'd be happy to let a mage die in their place."

Slightly sinister, but Martel could not claim the warning to be unfounded; he expected that once he laid eyes on that square in the Undercroft, with all the Nine Lords in attendance, something violent was bound to happen. "I'll keep that in mind."

"You do that." Regnar gave him a quick hug. "You're a good lad, Martel. The world's a better place with you in it."

Martel felt a strange echo of the sentiment expressed by Ruby, and he hoped the hedge mage was right. "Thanks. I'd say the same, but where you're concerned, I'd argue it's an even split."

Regnar laughed, digging out his pipe. "Probably!"

Chapter 454: Under the Hood

Under the Hood

The next day brought another surprise, shaped as a scrap of parchment.

Master Martel,

I request a meeting.

Tonight if so convenient.

Same tavern as our

previous get-togethers.

Your Keeper of secrets

A rather short and to-the-point message for someone so wont to waste words as the Keeper; the coy signature line was the only part that actually sounded like him. Perhaps, like Ruby's message the other day, it betrayed a concerned mind.

Martel had more or less forgotten about the painted jester, as they had parted ways after recovering the relic together for the Friar. He was not even sure if he had any reliable means of contacting the man anymore. But he had no need either, as it turned out, and it seemed obvious that the Keeper wished to meet because of the upcoming Council. The question was whether he knew that Martel would be present or had been involved in the events leading to the summoning of the Nine Lords; Martel supposed he would find out tonight.

As Martel entered the tavern, he made sure to use his magical sense to check for gold. Not that he believed the Keeper would lure him into a trap; he if anyone respected the Pact. But there was always the chance that someone had impersonated him, luring Martel to the location under false pretences. That would explain why the note seemed to have diverged from his usual style.

However, the establishment had no patrons other than tired workmen and day-labourers – though one of them wore it as a disguise, grinning as he saw Martel. Preparing himself for the excesses of the rogue's personality, the wizard strode over to join him at his table.

"Master Martel, I am grateful at your swift response and willingness to meet. Time is a little sensitive, otherwise I would not have insisted."

"What do you want?"

"Straight to the heart of the matter, I see. Not even the most cursory of pleasantries. Very well."

Martel could not tell if the Keeper was actually a little insulted as his words implied, or if he just made use of the first available excuse to chatter on.

"You may have heard that the Nine Lords are gathering. In three days' time, hence why I thought it best we speak tonight."

"Why? It's got nothing to do with me." Not exactly true, but Martel saw no reason to tell his companion anything.

"There's been some rumblings. It might help heads to keep cool if an impartial force was present during the council, suppressing any tendencies towards violence."

Martel frowned as he digested the intention. "You want to hire me as muscle?"

"A strange proposition on the surface, perhaps. But you have already been present once. No secrets will be revealed to you by your involvement, and you are respected – or feared – by several of those present. More than any other mage in town, few as they are. As you are Pact-sworn, you will be seen as impartial, like me."

The wizard stared at the rogue. "I'm not a mercenary." Not the only reason for his refusal, of course; he had already promised his aid to Ruby. But this seemed a better reason to give.

"Not for gold, perhaps. You showed a keen interest in the artefact that we recovered, and you were allowed to inspect it as thanks for your services. The Faith has many others like it, which the Friar has access to. Very few mages have been allowed near any of them over the years."

Martel had to admit, it was well-placed bait. He almost felt tempted. But even if he had been available, putting himself in between a bunch of angry crime lords brandishing weapons and magic at each other seem the height of folly. At the first sign of danger, he would grab Ruby and run; that would be the extent of his involvement. "No thanks." He got up, turned around, and made for the door. For once, no clever remarks followed him; the Keeper simply watched him leave with a discerning look in his eyes.

As the night was still reasonably young, Martel did not return to the Lyceum; instead, he made for the bridge district. Whether due to instinct or unfounded fear, Martel felt watched. Or perhaps it was simply tension hanging in the air, like pressure building before a storm. Choosing to exercise a little more caution than usual, he kept his hood up and did not enter The River Pearl directly; instead, he gestured for a street urchin to approach. From his pocket, he dug out what proved to be three pennies. "These are for you," he told the child, "if you go in there, find Ruby, and tell her to come find me. Just describe how I look, and she'll know who I am."

The boy looked him over. "What, tall and ugly?"

Martel gave him a stare. "And wearing a red robe."

"Money first."

"You get one beforehand. The other two when you bring her out." Martel flicked the coin to hit the child on his small chest; rips could be seen underneath the skin, itself visible through the holes in his rags. Grabbing the penny with both hands, the boy turned around and ran across the street to enter the Pearl.

A few minutes passed before Martel saw the child again, emerging from the establishment. A few paces behind him came Ruby. "I got her for you," the boy declared excitedly, holding out his hand.

Martel dumped the remaining two coins into the urchin's palm. "There. Get going."

As the child ran off, Ruby reached him. "This is a subtle approach for a proud wizard. Normally, you stride in as if you own the place." Her smile, almost genuine, blunted any sting in her words.

"It didn't seem wise to announce myself, should anybody be watching and guess that I'm going with you to the gathering. It feels like everyone is getting ready for something to happen," Martel considered. "No point warning them to expect me as well."

"You can be clever when you want to. There's more than just school learning behind those blue eyes." Her smile changed to match the cheek in her words.

"Well, here's another clever idea. Tell your mistress to bring the Night Knives with her to the meeting. She'll have Flora and experienced warriors to protect her. I'll stay above ground with you, looking after the Pearl."

Ruby shook her head, her expression turning grave. "I'm not letting her go to that council alone. Martel, she took me in from the streets. She's like a mother to me and the other girls. We won't leave her side."

Martel sighed. He could not fault her for this, considering his own reason for going along was likewise based on emotion. "But what if it's not enough? What if my help is not enough?"

"Look, we're not new to this. We'll be well-equipped for a fight. We got eyes on the other mages in the city who've done work previously for any Ninth Lord – so far, nobody's been engaged. We're watching the gates and port, should any mercenaries arrive. If there's real danger, we'll know," she claimed.

"I still think you should stay up here and let the Night Knives go with her."

She shrugged. "If there is a fight, I have a lot more faith in you than Flora."

"I guess that's nice. But with everything I hear - it feels certain that something's going to happen. It just seems an unwise risk to take."

"Of course something will happen. But is it an attack during the council? On the Pearl while we're away? Or maybe it's all a ruse to scare Lady Pearl away, in which case, her absence confirms her weakness. How much longer do you think she'll be allowed to run the bridge district? And if she is removed, me and my sisters will be hunted down rather than risk us taking revenge."

Martel swallowed. It sounded so harsh, yet he did not doubt her. "Alright. I'll see you Pelday evening."

Her red lips turned upwards before she kissed his cheek. "Good. I'll head back before anybody wonders what handsome face lurks underneath that hood." With a wink, she pulled away and crossed the street, returning to The River Pearl.

Chapter 455: Light Friendship

Light Friendship

Although the journey to the Undercroft weighed on Martel's mind, he had accepted that it could not be avoided. He would have to trust that his magic, along with his vigilance, would be enough. Ruby and her compatriots were gathering information, he was given to understand, and perhaps they might learn what they could expect to face once below ground; this left Martel with little to do but wait.

He did have something he wanted to deal with beforehand, just in case. Taking out the dormant lightstone that he had bought from Master Jerome, Martel began to weave an enchantment. His skill was still limited, and it would not last terribly long. It would have to do; he did not wish to delay, as he already had an intended use for it.

After a morning spent enchanting, Martel had his usual class with Master Alastair in the afternoon.

"How's the spell treating you?" asked his teacher.

"Getting better." Martel held out his hands; energy sizzled, and sparks jumped from the fingers on one hand to the other. "Don't think the last exercise you showed me will help anymore."

"Seems about right. Its purpose was to get you this far. You got the basics of the lightning in your hands, literally." Master Alastair gave a wry smile. "But that's useless without control, direction."

Martel ceased summoning the effect. Even at this small stage, it strained him to cast advanced magic. "So, what's next?"

"Well, much like you just did. Keep creating the lightning between your hands. However, try to channel the magic into one specific fingertip. Control where it appears. If you can do that, the next step is to control where it jumps to."

In demonstration, Master Alastair held out his hands in front of him. A spark of lightning appeared on his right index finger, only to leap across empty air and land on his left thumb.

"Think of lightning as alive," he continued. "It wants to move. Do not try to keep it still or suppress it. Just guide it." He created another spark, this time moving up and down every fingertip of his right hand. "And with enough practice, you can guide it exactly where you want."

"Sounds easy." Martel cleared his throat. "Of course, it always sounds easy when you explain it."

"The joys of being a teacher and no longer the student." Master Alastair smiled. "Now, when you cast a spell like a fire bolt, you use your hand to direct the actual magic without giving it much further thought, I presume."

"I can't argue against that."

The teacher nodded. "Lightning is much more – precise, if that makes sense. Fire simply burns and consumes. To throw a lightning bolt, you need precision. You must know exactly how the magic flows through your body to reach the tip of your finger. Summon a spark now, and try to be mindful of this."

"Very well." Martel closed his eyes, just to reduce the information coming from his senses. He called on air and fire to gather in his hand. He felt it – from his heart, rushing through his chest and arm to reach his hand, magic flowed. Between his fingertips, a blue spark appeared.

As the lesson ended, Martel considered the experience. He had not previously thought about how magic existed in his body. It was simply inside him, waiting for when he called upon it, much like breathing without thinking consciously of it. Except he knew exactly where his breath entered and left his body.

Magic seemed much more intangible. He used hand movements to help direct the effects and spells that he cast, making it easier for him, but it was not strictly needed. The night in the alley with Ruby, he had not even required vision to cast the spell, but simply raised the wall of flames behind him.

Although the experience was much further back, it also reminded him of an early experience in Morcaster, when a band of brigands had jumped him and tied gold around his neck. It had severed his connection to magic, if only temporarily. Did magic reside in his chest, waiting for commands from his head? Weird to imagine, but magic played by its own rules, it seemed.

While pondering these thoughts, Martel went to the library for his regular study session with Eleanor. He arrived a short while after the bell rang, knowing he would be there first anyway; she needed time to get cleaned up after weapons training, as usual.

Digging out the latest books they were going through, he also placed a small object on the table, wrapped in several layers of cloth. And then he waited.

Ten minutes or so after his arrival, Eleanor appeared. "Hey there." She glanced over the table and frowned. "What is that?"

Martel handed her the bundle. "Open up and see."

She unwrapped the fabric – several of Martel's shirts – and a glow began to be visible. Once she had removed all the layers, a shining lightstone showed itself in the palm of her hand. "Oh, it is beautiful."

"I'm glad you think so. It's for you."

She looked up at him. "Really?"

"I figured you could use it. Getting darker earlier and earlier, after all. But you may want to put it away at night if you want to get any sleep," he laughed.

"That's so thoughtful!" She gave him a quick hug before stepping back, looking at her present again. "You enchanted this? That is impressive."

"Thanks," he mumbled, almost feeling shy at being praised. "I don't know if it'll last through winter, honestly. But if it grows dim, I can renew the enchantment. Just bring it to me." Assuming Martel would be back from the Undercroft.

"This is so nice! No more bother with candles or lamps. Alchemy, enchantment – any skill you cannot master?"

"I'll never beat Maximilian at playing Legionary's Round," Martel admitted. He was lousy at cards. Her laughter rang through the library, thankfully empty with none to complain about the noise.

Chapter 456: Enchanting from the Ground up

Enchanting from the Ground up

The lightstone was not Martel's only affair that he wanted to bring in order before the journey to the Undercroft. Next morning, he went to the workshops and sought out Master Jerome. "Do you have a moment?"

"Certainly. What is it, boy?"

"I was wondering if you could tell me about useful earth enchantments. Simple things, similar to how fire makes heat and light."

The artificer scratched the back of his head. "I wouldn't have thought you'd be able to do that already."

"I'm not. Just interested in the possibilities."

"Well, it's mostly used for shaping stonework. That little orb you put light into, that's been made by an earthmage. Otherwise, they're primarily used for walls. Binding the slabs of stone together to strengthen the construction. I've heard of a few making sculptures, even." Master Jerome smiled to himself. "But in general, earthmages are used less for enchanting. An ordinary craftsman can hew stones, make bricks, or shape clay well enough for our purposes. Their real value lies in ensuring the soil on our fields will grow good crops."

That was outside what Martel looked for, but the artificer had given him an idea nonetheless.

"Thanks. I appreciate the answer."

"Anytime, my boy. How's your own enchanting going?"

"The process has been enlightening."

"Hah!"

Half a bell passed with William in the Circle of Fire, helping the acolyte improve his air magic. It was close to the point where it might be useful for him in a fight, but that was only the first step. For those only trained to fight with a staff or fire spells, it required new thinking to spot the opportunities when a burst of air would do more to win the fight than a fire bolt.

In the afternoon, Martel had alchemy with Mistress Rana, but he found a moment beforehand to seek out Maximilian. "Hey, do you have plans tonight?"

"Not yet."

"Want to meet up somewhere in town? Nothing big, just play some cards."

The mageknight gave him a scrutinising look. "Very well, but when I beat you, remember it was your idea to engage in a game of wits."

"I'll live. How about Pork and Pepper? We can get that Aquilan wine."

"Nordmark, you are being strangely agreeable. Well, far be it from me to inspect gifted horses! Seventh bell? We may as well dine at the establishment."

"Works for me. I'll see you tonight."

Once finished with alchemy, Martel left the Lyceum. He went a familiar path, though he had not gone this way in a long while; his steps led him to the copper lanes and the home of Weasel's gang. As usual, the children saw his approach and clustered around him, asking eager questions and wanting to see magic.

Smiling, Martel acceded to their demands. He created sparkles of light in the air that they could chase around with ensuing laughter.

Weasel appeared soon after. "What do you want?"

"Just some advice for Sparrow. Is she here?"

"What do you want to say?"

"I'll tell her." Martel looked down at the boy. "It's got nothing to do with you. And given what it cost me to see her freed from the Inquisition, I've earned the right to speak with her."

Anger or annoyance crossed Weasel's face, but he turned around and entered the house. Eventually, Sparrow appeared.

Martel looked around at the other children. "Let me speak with Sparrow alone." He figured they knew she had magic, considering they had used her gift for their thieving in the harbour. Still, he preferred that she should hear this on her own.

Disappointed, but none of them defiant, the children ran inside again. Weasel remained in the doorway. Demonstrably, Martel turned his back towards him as he crouched down to look Sparrow in the eyes. "You alright, child?"

"I suppose. Are the evil men coming for me again?"

"No, no. I've not heard or seen sight of them." Martel had kept an eye out crossing the copper lanes, and the inquisitors seemed gone. "As long as you remain careful, avoid using magic where others might see, you'll be safe."

"Alright."

"But I have a suggestion for you. Rather than practise spells, you might do well learning enchantment."

"What's that?"

"Well, so far, you've used magic to create effects and spells. Something that happens at once, but only while you keep it active. Enchanting is when you add magic to something, to create a long-lasting effect."

She frowned. "Like the streetlamps where rich people live?"

"For instance."

"You want me to make streetlamps?"

"Not exactly. It's best to work with your strongest element."

Sparrow looked down on the ground. "What can you enchant earth to do?"

"Well, you can use it to strengthen items made of earth. Like pots and jars made of clay."

The girl frowned. "What for?"

"I think people would pay good silver for a pot that never breaks, no matter how hard you drop it, or how old it gets."

"Really? But I don't have any pots. And I don't know who wants to buy them."

"I admit, there's a few steps involved. But it's a good start. Weasel can help with the details if you want." Martel shot a look at the boy in the doorway. In the end, he wanted it to be Sparrow's decision, not the small chief forcing her to operate some kind of magical pottery shop. "And once you get good at enchanting this, you can learn to do other things. You'll earn more silver than you ever could stealing, I promise you that."

"I suppose it's better than risk being taken by the guards." She wrinkled her nose. "But how's it done?"

"It's like casting a spell, but instead of doing it swiftly, you do so slowly." Martel picked up a pebble from the ground and began his spellwork. "You think of the effect you want the item to have. You let your magic connect to it, as slowly as you can. Like water seeping into it. The slower you can do this, the longer you can keep it going, the better your enchantment." He let the pebble drop in front of her, and she caught it with her own hand.

"Oh, it's warm."

He nodded with half a smile. "Not for long. But that's the idea of it. It's up to you what you do with your magic, Sparrow, but enchantment is one thing that won't get you into trouble, at least."

"Alright. Thanks." She looked up at him with a happy expression. "Will you be back to see how well I'm doing?"

He exhaled. "If I can, yes. For now, I should be off. Take good care of yourself, Sparrow."

"You too." She skipped inside the house; Weasel gave him a final glare before closing the door.

As for Martel, he turned around and set out for the tavern where his friend awaited him.

Chapter 457: Six Gems and a Pearl

Six Gems and a Pearl

The knot appeared in Martel's stomach as soon as he woke. Not that he feared going into combat, even against odds or with unfavourable terms. He had training and experience to counter most situations, and should the worst happen, he stood a better chance than most of making an escape. Instead, the anxiety came at the thought of the Undercroft itself.

Martel would not describe himself as pious; he followed the Faith as others did, but thought little of it on most days. Yet entering the Undercroft felt like sacrilege of sorts. Even if it was not like the catacombs where the dead themselves would rise up to punish trespassers, he felt that something like that could happen.

And while it might be easy to dismiss this eerie feeling as simply nerves, he knew by now that magic was more complicated than Asterian wizardry seemed to acknowledge. The relic he had chased, the Hand of Saint Laurentius, it had possessed power he could not quite describe or fathom; yet it affected him and his emotions, his state of mind.

The Undercroft struck him as similar, just on a different scale. Less powerful than the relic, but more pervasive, spread out across an entire city. Something had happened to make all of its inhabitants leave; it did not feel like something mortals should tangle with, not even wizards. Perhaps especially not wizards.

Yet that was exactly what Martel would do tonight. It seemed telling of his situation that facing an ambush by brigands and steel seemed the lesser of possible evils.

Martel went through his day without paying much attention to others. He only concerned himself with preparations for tonight. Ideally, he would take a chain shirt from the school's armoury, but different groups of mageknights exercised through the day, making it hard to get hold of one outside his own class, let alone leave the school grounds while wearing it. He would have to trust in his leather armour.

He had his fire pots in his belt, though things would truly be dire if he exhausted his spellpower to the point of resorting to those. Unfortunately, he had no potions that seemed useful; he knew how to heal a variety of diseases, but nothing that helped in combat. A good staff might serve him well, though; the school had plenty of those, at least, and borrowing one should not be an issue. Perhaps,

he should buy his own; they would not be costly. Something to consider if – when he returned from this subterranean sojourn.

Other than that, it seemed best to eat and drink plenty beforehand. As he recalled, it was a long walk, all in all.

As the sun set, Martel made his way to the bridge district. He kept his hood up, walking with a staff in hand; a cloak covered him, making his red robe less obvious. As he approached The River Pearl, he went around the back to enter its yard.

A servant appeared, emptying a bucket of food scraps into a small pen, where a single pig eagerly dug in. "You'll want to go around, good master. This here's the back entrance to the kitchens."

"I'm not here as a customer. I'm waiting for Ruby to accompany her."

"Oh, yeah, she and the other ladies are all getting ready to leave. I'll let her know you're here, if you wish?"

Martel gave a quick nod. "Certainly."

He waited a while, idly glancing around until Ruby appeared. She wore sensible clothing for travelling, including a leather jerkin. A long dagger and several throwing knives were stuck into her belt. The only frivolous part of her appearance would be the thin cloth tied as a fashionable scarf around her neck, and her lips painted red. "You're here. Good."

"Against my better judgement, I am. How many are going?"

"Six of us will accompany Lady Pearl. And you."

He glanced over her attire. While it might serve in a brawl, she still seemed vulnerable. Although Martel also only wore leather, he had his magic to protect him as well. "Will that be enough? If someone is planning trouble, I doubt they'll only bring half a dozen."

"Given where we are going, more is not necessarily better. My sisters are swift and quiet. They can scout ahead to search out any hint of betrayal, and we can make a quick retreat with barely a noise. Stealth rather than brute force will get us to our destination and back."

"That's the problem. Once we're all gathered, we can't really hide if someone decides to start a fight."

"We are not entirely unarmed in that case either," she retorted. She tapped her fingers against her own leather armour. "Enchanted to be strong as steel. This will stop any arrow or blade."

With a frown, Martel placed a fingertip against her jerkin. He felt it, skilfully woven into the material. A strong enchantment that did as Ruby had claimed. "That's something, at least."

She talked on the fabric tied around her neck. "This has a shield spell on it as well." Martel moved up his hand without thinking, though he arrested the movement before actually grabbing on to her scarf. She gave him a mischievous smile. "You can touch."

He did so, feeling the enchantment as described. "Alright, that'll stop steel. It won't help much against spells."

"We've kept eyes on all mages in the city that could possibly become involved. None of them have made any move. You're likely to be the only wizard at the gathering," she told him.

"Alright. Just be ready to leave if all Nether breaks loose."

"Of course. That's why we are bringing you along, with those useful walls of giant flames you conjure up." She winked at him.

"An earthmage would be better, given the terrain down there. Another reason it should be Flora and her Knives going, not you."

"She has her task tonight. Her and all her little daggers are patrolling the district, keeping an eye on everything." Ruby's expression grew serious. "Just keep your mind on yours, and we'll be back here soon enough. I know you're not doing this for coin, but I'll find a way to thank you for your help."

Martel blew out his breath. Nothing further he could do but keep his eyes open and stay alert.

"Alright."

She reached out and squeezed his hand; at the same time, the doors to the Pearl opened. The eponymous proprietress appeared, as ostentatiously dressed as she was bald, accompanied by five other women, all clad like Ruby. Martel awakened his sense of magic and felt the flashes of power from them; each wore magical protection of one or the other kind. That included their mistress; her dress underneath her furs had a faint shimmer to it, offering some kind of protection.

Lady Pearl looked from her attendants to Martel with a smirk. "Let's be on our way."

Chapter 458: Return Below

Return Below

The small group left The River Pearl, walking through some of the back alleys deeper into the bridge district. Martel was not familiar with these particular streets, and he brought up the rear, letting the others lead the way.

They eventually reached an unassuming, small building, wedged in between two larger houses. It had no windows, just a door; it looked like a root cellar or similar, meant to store food. The woman in front of the column opened the door, and they all marched inside.

A guard sat on a stool with a small lamp burning beside him, though he got up as they entered; as Martel's eyes adjusted to the dark interior, he recognised the insignia of the Night Knives on him. The women picked up torches lying on the ground and ignited them in the flame of the lamp.

"Any trouble?" Lady Pearl asked.

"None, mistress. It's been quiet." The mercenary took a few steps and bent down to open a hatch in the floor. Their descent awaited.

They entered a basement first; either this place really served as a root cellar, or it was part of the disguise. Making a path through various barrels, the woman in front – named Opal, from what Martel could tell – pushed a few crates aside to reveal a door half the size of a man. She opened it

and disappeared into the darkness beyond. One after the other, the members of the group stooped low and passed the threshold.

They found themselves inside a tunnel. While several carried torches, Martel ignited a magelight to rest at the top of his staff. It did not change much in terms of illumination, and the ground was even and easy to walk upon, but he felt a little better having his own light.

They walked for a long while in silence. Walking behind each other, one by one, did not encourage conversation; nor did their dark and cold surroundings make anyone talkative. Furthermore, the women walked without making a sound, not even Lady Pearl. If Martel kept his staff raised rather than plant it against the ground for support when he took a step, it left everything eerily quiet.

It also allowed him to notice the sound of running water. It struck him as strange at first until he realised they would be walking near the sewers. Judging by the slope of their descent, they were passing below the waterways, even. Which meant that if the roof broke, the tunnel would be flooded. Not a pleasant prospect.

At length, the tunnel widened. The flickering light of the torches were no longer trapped between narrow walls, but extended into the vast expanse of the surrounding darkness. Even if he could not see, Martel knew they had reached the great cavern that lay underneath south-west of Morcaster. They had arrived at the Undercroft.

Soon, they entered the edge of the subterranean city. They followed what appeared to be some manner of main road that crossed the area in a straight line, rather than snaking its way like many of the streets above did. In orderly fashion, the stone houses hewn directly from the rock lay at intervals on each side. Here and there, Martel caught the impression of larger buildings further away, but the darkness prevented him from any scrutiny. He had no desire to leave their path either and investigate; it seemed all too easy to become lost in the various side alleys of this city, swallowed by darkness.

With each step, Martel felt uncomfortable. Not only because of the oppressive mood that filled this enormous cave, but also from his memories. While he had been in fights before, the ambush down here had been especially terrifying. So much effort to lay a trap solely to kill him.

He glanced at the houses on either side, remembering how he had jumped inside one to seek refuge, only to get attacked there as well. They stood like shells, with no doors, windows, or shutters, just gaping holes that led into the interior of each building. He imagined how brigands might jump out at any moment and tried to calm himself. If Ruby was right, none of the Nine Lords had retained a wizard's services for tonight. While enchanted items could make a difference, it could not compare with the power he brought to a fight. They could be outnumbered, of course, but it would be easy to slip into the darkness of this city and evade any attackers. Assuming they could find their way back. Hopefully, Ruby had a better sense of direction than him.

At some point during their march, Ruby fell back a few paces to walk alongside Martel. She did not have a torch like some of the others; instead, she kept one hand on a throwing knife in her belt. The other reached out to squeeze Martel's. "You look worried."

"You should be watching our surroundings instead of me."

"I can do both," she claimed.

"Assuming this council isn't just for show, what'll happen once we get there?"

"Lady Pearl will have to answer the accusation that she sent her people to make an attack on the harbour," Ruby explained. "They'll argue and bicker. And we'll see who of the Nine Lords are with us or against us."

"You think that's the purpose of tonight?" Martel asked. "Measuring alliances?"

"It's one possibility, yes. And based on that..."

Something caught Martel's attention, and he did not hear the rest of Ruby's words. Something looked odd about the building up ahead, on the right side of the road. He increased his light as he approached and realised why; instead of an empty doorway, it was filled with dirt. Like a quick and cheap way of walling it up.

He frowned – he had not noticed this in any other house earlier. Even stranger, the small space between this house and the next was likewise walled up.

He realised the truth a moment before he felt the magic. A spell was released, raising a large wall of earth across the road. On either side, the houses and alleys had been blocked off. They were trapped inside this newly created dead end, with walls and buildings on all sides except the way they came.

Arrows flew, aimed by the light of the torches. Two struck Lady Pearl, piercing her clothing with ease, and she fell to the ground. Swiftly, more arrows followed, whistling through the air.

Chapter 459: Fading Red Light

Fading Red Light

The women threw away the torches, and Martel extinguished the light on his staff. Still, the arrows continued, showering the small area they were trapped inside. One by one, the women of the Pearl died. Martel grabbed Ruby, still by his side, and pulled her with him towards the nearest building.

He raised his staff and used it as a club with empowered strength. It broke through the earthen wall, collapsing part of it; enough that he could squeeze through. Ruby followed.

Inside, it was pitch-black, but Martel risked a small flame. Sufficient light to see the opening that led from this room to another. Grabbing Ruby by the hand, he went through. Ahead was another empty doorway, leading to the back alley and the empty city beyond. They could escape into the darkness and find their way back later.

A lightstone was thrown, illuminating the back street. With their escape route now bathed in light, Martel sank down on the floor, trying to think while hiding himself inside the building.

"How could this happen?" The words burst from Ruby. "All my sisters dead! Lady Pearl!"

"Those arrows went through their enchanted clothing," Martel considered. He pulled Ruby down next to him. "They must have been tipped with gold." Which also meant his own magical shield was useless.

"They knew our route, they planned this trap – how could we have been so blind?"

Martel gave her a look. "Only a skilled earthmage could raise that wall." He had seen it a few times before; the first time down here in the Undercroft, though she had refined the trap since then, also blocking off the buildings and adjacent paths. "The Night Knives. They betrayed you."

"Flora," Ruby hissed. "I'll kill that bitch!"

"I agree, but first we need to get out. We're trapped in here. There'll be archers with arrows ready, either side we go."

Ruby took a few deep breaths. "Anything you can do? Make it dark again?"

Martel reached out with his magic, trying to grab the lightstone lying in the alley and remove it, but it resisted. Already magical in itself, it did not allow him to take hold of it. "I can't kill the light outside. But I can still hit them, even if I can't see them," he realised. Although they hid in the dark, their heat would let him know where to aim. "How many do you think she's got with her?"

"She can't have brought them all, we would have noticed. She has some twenty Knives under her command, but I know some are still topside. A handful of them guard the Pearl even now. There's maybe ten at most with her."

In itself, not a daunting task for Martel to fight except for the addition of another mage. Even if not trained for combat like him, Flora had plenty of experience. But if they stuck to the shadows, his sense of heat might give him the deciding advantage. "Alright. I can sense where they are, even in the dark. I'll run out and attack. You follow, run past the light, get into the dark and fight them."

"Bad idea. They got their eyes trained on this place. They'll shoot you before you get them." Ruby exhaled. "I'll go first as bait." Martel opened his mouth to protest, but she placed a finger against his lips. "No. I can't fight them under these circumstances. Only you can. It has to be this way."

He wanted to object, but he knew she was right. And they had to act now, before all the Night Knives converged on their position. It was a terrible feeling, but he nodded in agreement. They both got on their feet. Martel shifted his staff to his left hand, leaving his right hand empty. "Go."

Ruby broke into a sprint, running through the empty doorway to enter the illuminated back alley. Hearing the whistling of arrows, Martel followed outside. He immediately closed his eyes and reached out with his magic. Four sources of heat met him on the rooftops some twenty or thirty yards down.

A ray of flames sprung from his hand, striking one archer, and another afterwards. Both their surcoats caught on fire, and they jumped or fell down while screaming. A third mercenary appeared between the houses further down, having apparently moved from another position. Martel released a fire bolt that made him regret this decision. With his clothing also engulfed in flames, he ran back the way he came.

"Ruby?" Martel ran over to where the lightstone lay on the ground, picking it up only to fling it far away. "Ruby?"

The area plunged back into darkness, Martel used his magic to find her on the ground, flickering heat amidst the cold buildings. Dropping his staff, he ran over to her and knelt down. She lay on her side, and he gently raised her head towards him. He could faintly see her red lips, but they did not move or speak; no breath passed between them.

"Ruby," he spoke with rising dread. His fingers touched her neck, but felt no pulse. His other hand searched down her back and found the shafts of two arrows, deeply embedded into her.

He pressed a kiss against her forehead; he felt the residual warmth of her skin, but it would not last much longer. The Undercroft would be her tomb, just as he had feared. He had tried to warn her, but she thought she knew better. Trusted in her information about the dangers. Trusted the mage and mercenaries hired by her mistress.

Gently placing Ruby back on the ground, Martel turned his head to look over his shoulder. He could barely make out faint light from the torches on the main road and elsewhere, partly blocked by the surrounding buildings to create strange shadows and shapes; it made the eerie city seem less solid, like the background of a stage play. Not a real place, but simply the frame for the story about to unfold.

Rising to his feet, Martel knew exactly what manner of tale this would be as fire and fury flared inside of him. A tale of revenge.

Chapter 460: Cat and Mice

Cat and Mice

Another Night Knife appeared between the buildings. He looked in the direction of the lightstone that Martel had thrown away, unable to see anyone.

But Martel saw him, thanks to his sense of heat. A fire bolt hurled through the air to strike him. He fell to the ground, throwing his chest against the dirt to extinguish the flames in his clothes. It was a short reprieve, as Martel's next fire bolt also hit, igniting the back of his garments. Screaming, he tried to tear his surcoat apart while writhing on the ground. Martel walked past him.

The remaining Night Knives tried to spread out different sources of light, whether enchanted or from torches. The latter did not help much; Martel reached out with his magic and extinguished the flames. And as darkness swallowed another spot, he moved freely, unseen by the mercenaries except when another streak of fire left his hand. One by one, they fell to his magic.

"Martel," a voice called out. Flora. "What strange twist of fate that we should find ourselves down here again. I should have known you'd be the fox inside my chicken coop."

He tried to determine her location, but the screams of dying men made it hard to focus on her voice alone. He guessed that she was hiding inside a building, as she probably knew he could see her even in the dark.

But she could also sense him through his movements, touching the earth, if he came close. He could not risk entering any house, giving her the chance to strike first. For now, he would deal with the mercenaries, blind both in terms of sight and magic.

"Look, we've done what we came for. Lady Pearl is dead. How about we call this even? We withdraw in peace and go topside. You follow at your own pace. We'll be clearing out of the bridge district, so you don't have to worry about us sticking around, waiting for you."

Perhaps this was a genuine offer, perhaps a ruse. Either way, Martel had no interest in letting her escape. Someone peeked out from inside a building, and Martel blasted them with fire.

Evidently, it was not Flora, as she spoke again. "Martel, Martel. Always getting in my way. If only Lady Pearl had told me you'd be coming along, I could have prepared a special surprise just for you. Can you believe she didn't trust me with such information?" Laughter rang out.

Martel ignored her, waiting for any flash of heat suddenly appearing before his inner eye. There – someone stepping out between two buildings. A fire bolt made them regret this.

"How do you like my lightstones? You'll appreciate this. They're enchanted by your friend, the hedge mage! Isn't that amusing? He didn't know I was the buyer, of course."

Martel dared to cross the main road. Nobody seemed to notice him, and he continued between two houses to look for more enemies on this side.

"Shoddy work, I admit. But the best I could get on short notice. I was never much of an enchanter myself. Hey, maybe I'll go talk to the old codger after this. Demand repayment – in blood."

She was trying to rile him up. It was unnecessary; Martel was already bursting with anger. But he would not let it cause him to make mistakes. He continued down the back alley, prowling like a predator. Faint tracings of heat from a rooftop. Two more archers, sticking out their heads over the edge. A ray of fire shot out to deal with them both.

"Why are you here, Martel? I know you were at the construction yard because you owed the Friar a favour. But I thought you despised Lady Pearl. Did someone else lure you in? Did you fall for a pair of pretty eyes? Or maybe pretty lips, in this case." Taunting laughter echoed through the space.

With a wild yell, a warrior came running straight at Martel. His last spell had given his position away.

The wizard blasted air at his enemy, who fell to the ground. Before he could get up, a fire bolt struck him in the back. He rolled around in the dirt, trying to extinguish the flames. As before, Martel simply added a second bolt to hit the fallen mercenary on the other side, letting him burn alive.

"I did hear talk at the tavern of a strange liaison between you and Ruby. You seemed like enemies, and yet you kept meeting up. Was it all pretence? Almost a story worthy of the stage, if so."

Martel continued his search, up and down the back streets on either side of the main road. He found nobody. Flora had to be in one of the houses inside the small area.

"No doubt losing someone seems a great tragedy when you are young. But it's also an important lesson."

"Your men are dead." Martel spoke for the first time, tired of her poor attempts at drawing him out. "Now it's your turn."

"Very well, if that's what it's to be. But allow me to make a proposal. You can sense heat, I can sense tremors – instead of all this cat and mouse, why not meet on the road?" A lightstone flew out to land on the main street. Martel thought he saw where it came from, but he could not aim any spells inside the building, and to approach, he would have to cross the light.

"Sure. Come on out."

"You agree? A wizard's duel, the two of us. No hiding in the shadows."

It could be a ploy, but if it got her out in the open, Martel accepted the risk. "I agree. I'll show myself once I see you."

"You expect me to be the first?"

"You're the one in the middle of an active betrayal." And who is preparing to betray me even now, he added in his thoughts. But he expected that he could turn that back on her.

"Fine. You seem a boy of his word." From one of the buildings down the road, he saw the heat of a shape appear. Moments later, Flora stepped into the edge of the light circle caused by the glowing stone on the ground.

Martel could strike now, but it would take more than a single spell to deal with Flora; she would retreat, and they would be back at a stalemate. Besides, he did not need underhanded tactics. He was a battlemage, trained to be a force of destruction on the field. It was time Flora understood this.

One slow step at a time, Martel walked onto the main road until he likewise stood at the edge of the light. Twenty paces separated the two wizards, about to engage in a duel to the death.