

## Firebrand 461

### Chapter 461: Advanced Magic

#### Advanced Magic

Martel waited. Not so much for Flora to dispatch her first spell, but for the traitorous move he knew she was planning. Casting his own spell might leave him vulnerable, so he remained passive.

"It seems a shame to destroy someone so talented. You could have been a great asset to the Night Knives," Flora mused.

"I don't care." As he spoke, he kept his eyes on her, but his magic sense remained active, searching the surroundings.

There! Inside a building, almost entirely hidden from his ability to sense heat. But he felt the cold pocket – the tip of gold upon an arrow slowly appearing in the window. Flora's last henchman, pulling back the bowstring now that Martel had revealed himself.

He waited during what felt like an excruciating moment. His two enemies struck at the same time. A ray of frost from Flora; almost immediately after, the remaining mercenary stood up and released his bow.

Martel fell to the side, releasing a fire bolt at the archer in retaliation. He dodged the arrow, but not the frost spell; he felt cold pain spread across his legs. Ignoring this, he launched another fire bolt at the hidden Night Knife, ensuring he was dealt with.

A corner of Flora's mouth curled upwards as she saw Martel on the ground, already wounded. Magic assembled around her hand as she released another spell. Her henchman was out of the fight, but he had served well enough, distracting Martel.

Feeling the magic about to attack him, Martel reacted. His elemental counterspell ignited a shield of flames in front of him, neutralising the frost ray. It gave him time to get on his feet, and as the fire dissipated, he stared at Flora with disdain. "You're done."

She sneered. From the paved road, large rocks rose into the air, infused by her magic. They flew against him in a barrage. Martel tried his counterspell again. However, while his fire burned stronger than her ice could freeze, the same did not hold true when her earth magic was pitted against his power with air.

One rock withstood his howling gale and struck him in the chest. He stumbled backwards, his breath knocked out of him.

"Pathetic child. I've practised magic for over a decade. You've done so for a year." She raised rocks from the ground again.

Rather than a direct confrontation, Martel chose a wiler strategy. He summoned a flame as bright as possible, right in front of her. It bought him a moment as she shielded her eyes, delaying her spellcasting. After swatting his magelight away with a floating rock, she looked down the road to see him gone.

"Already running away? Your bravado didn't last long. But you forget one thing, boy." She released her spell, sending the flying stones forward and down the alley where Martel hid. "I can sense every step you make!"

The rocks from her spell smashed into the buildings around Martel, and debris struck him in the head. Not as dangerous as a direct hit, but enough to make him hurt.

He had already used a considerable amount of spellpower dealing with her minions; but she had raised the earthen wall and cast some powerful spells herself, so they seemed even in that regard. If they kept flinging magic at each other, it was an open question who fell first. Simple fire bolts did not seem sufficient to guarantee victory; he needed something stronger.

Stepping out into the open again, he unleashed a ray of fire, pouring power into the spell. He kept it focused on Flora, feeling his magic fuse together with his hatred of her.

It did not matter. Before his magic could burn into her body, a layer of earth sprung up from the ground to cover her like living armour. Martel's spell met hers, offence against defence. Flora's held. As his fire ray ended, he saw her earthen protection still intact after his spell.

"You were the first mage I duelled in real combat, Martel. Before you, I only used magic to fight bandits or repair roads. You inspired me to learn new spells." She wore a cruel smile as she stepped forward. "I'm glad you made it worthwhile." Around her, rocks rose into the air.

This time, she was faster than Martel. Before he could distract her like last time, her spell had finished. The barrage of rocks struck him and knocked him to the ground. He felt blood in his mouth and realised he had bitten his own tongue.

"I'll even be entitled to ask for double pay when I explain that I had to kill a battlemage on this task." Once again, she raised stones from the road, ready to deal a final blow.

Her spells were strong, but still basic elemental magic. Lying on the ground, his breath ragged and tinged with the taste of blood, Martel could only think of one spell superior to hers. He raised one hand towards her. Between his fingertips, sparks began to crackle.

Doubt filled her eyes, only to be replaced by fear. The rocks around her fell as she renewed her living armour instead of pressing her attack.

From Martel's hand, a bolt of lightning surged to pierce the air. It struck Flora, tearing her earthen protection apart. Her entire body seized up as magical energy ravaged her, and she fell to the ground.

Martel got up and walked forward until he could tower over her. She raised a hand feebly, and he felt the tinge of water magic as she prepared a frost ray. He did not allow her to finish the spell. A ray of fire came first, striking her chest to ignite her clothes and burn through her skin.

She screamed for a moment before she finally fell silent. Magic had torn through her body, killing her fast. A mercy, probably. Martel imagined that during his previous fights, others struck by his fire spells might have died eventually as infection struck the burned areas, leading to a slow death. He knew that probably, his magic had caused the death of others before.

But this was the first time he saw it happen unequivocally right in front of his eyes. There was no room for doubt, no chance that the victim of his spell might have limped away and had their wounds treated. Flora's empty eyes stared into the air.

Martel was not sure how he was supposed to feel. He did not like the thought of killing another person; even less the idea of using his gift of magic for such purpose. But as he looked at Flora, all

he could see was Ruby's dead face, and he felt no remorse. Only anger. It did not burn hot anymore, but it continued to smoulder. It still demanded to be fed.

## Chapter 462: Seeking Refuge

### Seeking Refuge

Marching through the Undercroft, Martel felt exhausted. In the physical sense, but also in terms of his magic. Casting the lightning bolt had been beyond his remaining capabilities, being a spell he had yet to finish training. The fire ray after that drained what was left of his spellpower.

He could not even summon the weakest of magelight; he had picked up a lightstone and used that to illuminate his path. It burned so hot in his palm, he had to carry it with his sleeve down to protect his hand; Regnar was an interesting mage, but enchanting was not his main skill.

Each step felt heavier than the last. Martel wanted to lie down and sleep, but it felt dangerous to remain in the Undercroft a moment longer than necessary. He had to keep going; he had to get out.

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At length, the light from the stone in his hand met resistance. The road ahead all but disappeared as it narrowed in between the cave walls. As he reached the tunnel, Martel cast a final look back at the Undercroft. Nearly all of the vast cavern lay hid in the dark; that included Ruby. He felt guilty for leaving her; she deserved far better for her final rest. But he barely had the strength to get himself back; trying to drag her body had not been feasible. Doing his best to ignore how wrong it seemed that she would lie here in slow decay, Martel continued forward.

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The next difficulty lay in the guard. If he saw Martel emerge and none of his fellow Night Knives, he could probably guess what had happened. He had the lightstone, which he might throw into the mercenary's face for a distraction. He also had the fire pots in his belt; hopefully his aim would be true.

Once Martel appeared in the cellar, he walked over to the stairs to the upper room and waited. As hard as it was to remain simply standing, he forced himself to do so quietly while he listened.

Moment after moment passed with no sound. Nobody could sit entirely still; either the guard was gone or asleep. Regardless, Martel had to risk it. He pushed the hatch open, keeping the lightstone ready to throw it.

As he stuck his head up, he found the room empty. For one reason or another, the guard had left.

Not about to question his luck, Martel hurried up the stairs as fast as he could, which was not an impressive speed. He threw the lightstone away; it would only attract attention.

He walked outside and found the streets empty and quiet. In the distance, twilight preceding sunrise could be seen. His first lesson would begin in a couple of hours, but the idea of attending class seemed risible. In fact, Martel could not stomach the thought of returning to the Lyceum. Even if it was a sanctuary, he could not handle the idea of being surrounded by people with no knowledge of what had just happened, nor could he imagine explaining it to them. They would talk to him of insignificant matters or make trivial comments, and he had no patience for this.

Instead, he walked south-west towards the market district for the only other safe refuge available to him; with weary steps, he walked towards The Golden Goose.

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Martel had a splitting headache by the time he arrived. Around him, the city was waking up; first bell had just rung. He walked around the back of the tavern to enter through the less conspicuous entrance, only to find the door locked. Placing his hand on the handle, he tried to summon his magic to unlock it. It was like striking flint in vain; he felt sparks of magic in him, but nothing ignited. His exhaustion left him on the verge of vomiting just for the attempt.

Instead, he knocked heavily and repeatedly. Finally, the shutters of a nearby window opened, and the face of a small boy appeared. "Martel!"

"Ian, let me in."

The boy disappeared from view; moments later, the door unlocked. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to see Regnar. I can't talk." He stepped inside.

"Alright. He's probably still asleep, though."

Martel simply grunted and continued deeper into the building, navigating the hallways until he reached Regnar's room. Once again, a locked door.

It took insistent knocking before the hedge mage finally opened, looking at Martel with red eyes. "You look terrible. What happened?"

Martel entered, closing the door behind him. "We got ambushed on our way to the council. Everyone else but me is dead. Including my friend." He sat down on the bed, finding it difficult to stand any longer.

Regnar sat down next to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry to hear that, lad."

"I warned her," Martel continued, and he found it difficult to control his voice. "And I wasn't strong enough. I killed them, but it was too late."

The old mage squeezed his shoulder. "There's great power in magic, but it has its limits. And it doesn't make it easier to lose someone."

Martel swallowed. He did not know what else to say. No words could untangle the knot of pain in his chest. But he would not let this go. These Nine Lords had treated him like a fool and a pawn ever since he came to Morcaster, and now they had killed someone under his protection.

But he was not invincible. He had to consider how to proceed, or a gold-tipped arrow or blade might find him as well. Most of all, he needed to replenish his powers. "I need to sleep."

Regnar nodded. "Take my bed. I'll let the others know to keep quiet about your presence here. And if anyone comes looking for you, we'll give you warning."

Martel mumbled his gratitude, wasting only a brief moment to unclasp his cloak and remove it before he sank into the bed. He had barely closed his eyes before he fell into a deep slumber.

## A Day Off

Opening his eyes, Martel felt a variety of emotions and sensations. Mostly confusion at where he found himself, in a bed he did not recognise. His mouth was dry, his body aching and stiff, in part due to sleeping in his leather armour. After a moment, the events of last night returned to him, and he was struck by sorrow.

He could not even explain why it hurt him to this extent that Ruby was dead. They had not been close friends; at times, they had even been on opposite sides. But he had liked her; she was unlike anybody else he knew. He had decided to keep her safe, and he had failed. It demanded a response.

Sitting up, he felt weak in a strange way. He had no visible wounds, yet he felt injured. Being struck by magic was different than being attacked by steel; it weakened him without necessarily leaving marks. It would probably take a few days or longer before he felt at full strength again.

He located a pitcher of water on a drawer and drank greedily from it. Still feeling half-asleep, he rubbed his eyes and got up to leave the room. In the distance, he heard the noise of the tavern being open for business. Loud talks accompanied by drinking, no doubt. He wondered at the time and if the actors were performing their regular play; he needed to speak to Regnar before he left.

Theo came down the corridor against him, revealing that whatever the hour, the actors were not currently on stage. "Martel! Regnar mentioned you were here, in need of some quiet. Everything alright?"

"Yeah. Where is he? I should like a word."

"He's in the common room with the others." The storyteller looked at Martel. "Want me to fetch him? He mentioned it was best nobody knew you were here."

"I'd appreciate that."

While Theo turned around and left, Martel went back to the hedge mage's room. He did not have to wait long before the occupant of the chamber returned.

"Got some good sleep?"

"Got enough. Listen, can you ask around? Get a sense of the weather. People will figure out Lady Pearl is dead soon enough. Not sure if anybody knows I was present, but I'd like a warning if it becomes common knowledge." Someone might consider Martel a loose end if so, though he hoped his status as a ward of the Lyceum protected him. He doubted that Ruby had told others of Martel's involvement, but there was the guard who had seen him enter the tunnel. The question was whether he had recognised Martel or not.

"Of course, I'm happy to keep my ears open."

"Also, I'd like you to find out what you can about Vitus, the master of the harbour district. What's his main place of business, and what else he's got his fingers in."

"I can ask a bit, but enquiring into the affairs of a Ninth Lord is not without risk. There's only so much I do before it draws attention to me," Regnar explained.

"Alright. Just do what you can. And keep an eye out for Night Knives – I suspect they might show up in the harbour district soon."

The old man hesitated before he spoke again. "Was he behind it, then? The ambush against that bald harpy."

"He was definitely involved. Whether the only one, I can't say."

"Lots who will benefit from her death. Besides Vitus, there's three other Nine Lords who might have an opportunity to expand their territory now that the bridge district is leaderless."

"I suppose. What's your point?"

"It's not the style of the hedge mage to tell others what they can or cannot do." A wry smile appeared briefly on Regnar's face. "But be careful, whatever you decide to actually do. If you make too many enemies, I'm not sure anyone or anything can keep you safe."

Martel found it difficult to be concerned for his personal safety at this point. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

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As Martel stepped outside, he noticed that it was already evening with a slowly darkening sky. He must have slept twelve hours or so; he guessed it to be between seventh and last bell. It was probably time to return to the Lyceum in case his absence had been noted, but he had an errand to run first. So rather than straight north, he moved northeast in a return to the bridge district.

As he approached his destination, he found the area to be as expected. Ordinary people were about, winding down the business for the day. No particular sign of the shift in power that had just taken place, except perhaps at The River Pearl. They must have guessed what the absence of Lady Pearl and her closest attendants meant. It was probably chaos over there.

Martel had no reason to go there either. Instead, he steered down another path until he reached the building that had housed the Night Knives. The door to the front yard stood open. While it might be a trap of some sort, it did not appear so. Glancing through the doorway, Martel saw nothing. His magic did not detect any living creatures either.

Still cautious, he continued and entered the house itself. Still nothing. The building had been cleaned out. The remaining mercenaries, those who had not partaken in the ill-fated mission in the Undercroft, had packed everything up and moved elsewhere. Probably set up new headquarters in the territory of their new master; whoever had paid for the ambush against Lady Pearl, whether it be Vitus or somebody else.

Martel felt disappointed. All the way over here, he had been undecided about what to do; how exactly he would punish the mercenaries. He could still burn down this building, of course, just for the sheer destruction, but it seemed a futile gesture. The tantrum of a child, achieving nothing.

Resigned to patience, Martel left the empty building and set a course towards the Lyceum.

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Last bell had just rung when Martel reached his school. He felt terribly hungry, but the evening meal had been served. Not in the mood for company, he went straight to his room. He knew it would be difficult to fall asleep, given he only woke some hours ago; he could try to pass the time by practising enchanting or such, but he could not muster the willpower. Instead, he sat down on his bed while his memory constantly repeated the events in the Undercroft.

A knock. Unsure why anybody would seek him out at this hour, Martel rose and opened the door. Outside stood Henry, the air acolyte who worked in the school's administration and also lived on the same floor.

"Oh, you're back. Good. You weren't in class, so I was asked to check." He seemed a little nervous or apprehensive, and when Martel did not reply, he spoke again. "If you were still gone, we'd have to start looking for you." He cleared his throat. "If you need to be absent from class another time, you can always ask to be excused. In advance."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah, sure. Well, unless your teacher decides to reprimand you for missing lessons. Maybe Mistress Juliana will want to see you."

It could be that Reynard seized the opportunity to cause trouble for Martel; it might also be that he did not care enough to make the effort. Either way, it meant little to Martel. "Fine." He closed the door again and bolted it.

Remembering his situation, just to be safe, Martel placed his hand over the handle and cast the rune of warning upon it. This done, he returned to his bed and settled in for a long night.

#### Chapter 464: Elemental Philosophy

##### Elemental Philosophy

With his sleep pattern out of joint, Martel only fell asleep several hours past midnight, and the morning bell woke him not long after. He did not feel particularly refreshed, but his magic seemed restored. He also felt a powerful hunger; although it seemed almost callous to fill his face with food at breakfast while Ruby's body decomposed in the darkness below his feet, he needed to keep up his strength.

Not that he intended to storm out and engage anyone in a fight. He would spend a day or two playing the dutiful student, avoid further absences and any scrutiny this might bring, and give Regnar time to get the lay of the land. Mostly to learn if Martel needed to watch out for anyone coming after him, and where it would be most obvious for him to strike.

He realised that he should have asked Regnar to find out more about who hired the hedge mage to enchant the lightstones; in his frazzled state of mind, he had simply forgot. It would have to wait until he next time he saw Regnar; it seemed unwise to keep returning to The Golden Goose, given that it lay so near the harbour district.

Martel would be patient. Today, he would attend his duties.

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"What happened yesterday?" Nora asked. "You never showed."

"Sorry," Martel mumbled. It felt almost silly to be cleaning roots and drying them out, but he began his work without letting any emotions show. "I wasn't feeling well at all. Had to spend the day in bed."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Hope you're feeling better now?"

"Yes, I'm back to normal. It was probably something I ate."

"That's good. I didn't tell Mistress Rana either. I wanted to ask you about it first." She sent him a quick smile.

"I appreciate that."

"Though, for all her stern talk, she's not that harsh. I think she mostly acts that way to scare off those who don't take alchemy seriously," Nora considered. "She'd not hold it against you if you got sick and needed a day off."

"Good to know."

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If the other acolytes wondered why Martel had missed combat lessons yesterday, they did not ask. And once Moira entered the Circle of Fire, there was no opportunity for idle talking anyway.

Martel had yet to receive any summons to the overseer's chamber, so he assumed there would be no repercussions for his absence yesterday. Fortunate that it was Malday he had missed; Reynard paid little to no attention to the fire acolytes during class. In the mornings, he might even leave them alone altogether, rather than bother spending his time instructing them. If Martel had missed Moira's classes, no doubt she would already have cooked up various forms of punishment. And unlike other teachers, she was not above using force or even pain to administer her teachings.

They were still practising duels with the addition of the gem-tipped staves. It felt strange, almost childish to Martel. He could not take it seriously. Even if any of the other acolytes were strong enough to defeat him, Martel knew he would not be seriously injured. He might take a few spells that hurt for a day, but that would be the worst of it.

In comparison, Martel thought about his fight against Flora. She had used spells and mastered elements that Martel knew little of, leaving him scrambling to defend himself. The elemental counterspell had been useful, and Martel blessed Master Alastair for teaching it to him, but ultimately not enough. Neither his nor Flora's defensive spells had been enough to win the fight.

Martel could easily have lost. He would have died without the ability to summon lightning; another blessing to send Master Alastair's way. And even then, it had been close. Flora had been on the verge of dealing a killing blow, her final spell already prepared; but her fear of the lightning bolt had made her try to defend herself in vain.

In a way, it summed up each of them as a wizard. Flora had been an earthmage. The ambush had been exactly her style. Careful consideration of eventualities, slow and patient, attacking from a strong, defensive position.

Martel was born of fire. In a fight, he acted swiftly and decisively, favouring offence over defence. He had used himself as bait to lure out the last of Flora's henchmen, confident in his ability to defeat them both.

If Flora had been more offensive, perhaps she would have shown Martel to be wrong. But she had hesitated, her fear for her own life proving stronger than her desire to destroy her enemy.

As Martel swung his staff against Harriet's shin, making her fall to the ground, he understood why fire acolytes became battlemages. If you needed your enemies destroyed, no element did this better than fire.



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"Martel," Eleanor said in greeting as she sat down opposite him for the evening meal.

He nodded at her, a little surprised. She usually sat with her friends.

"You were gone from class yesterday. Not that I think Master Reynard noticed. But is something amiss?"

The same fabrication he had told Nora lay on the tip of his tongue, but Martel could not make himself say it. While he could not reveal all the details, he did not wish to lie directly to Eleanor's face. And perhaps if one person at the Lyceum knew the truth, it would make these days a little easier to get through. "There was a fight in the city. Someone I know – one of my friends – got hurt. Died." It was strange to say, even if he had already told someone before. He was glad that nobody else sat at the table.

"Martel, I am so sorry!" She placed her hand on top of his. "What happened? Are you injured?"

He shook his head. "I'm fine. It wasn't about me. I just happened to be present. Afterwards – I couldn't make myself go back to the Lyceum and attend class like nothing had happened."

"Of course." Her voice turned soothing. "And the guards? Have those responsible been dealt with?"

"They've been punished. Or they will be, at any rate."

"Anything I can do?"

"Not really." Anything that needed doing, Martel would handle himself. Though something else did come to mind. "Actually, would it be alright if I don't show up tomorrow at the library? I don't think I feel up for studying old books."

"Certainly. Let us call the whole thing off until further notice. You have already spent so much time trying to help me, I feel guilty. It was always a fool's hope," she declared with a sad smile. "It was just the only thing I could think of to help my sister."

"Don't feel guilty. It was the right thing to do." In fact, Martel felt a little bad himself for cancelling, but he knew he would not be able to focus on this with everything else hanging over his head.

"Again, I am really sorry for your loss, Martel. Losing someone you care about is hard."

He looked into Eleanor's eyes and saw the sympathy she felt for him. She was right, of course, even if Martel had tried worse. Losing his sister or his father - those had been deep wounds that still hurt from time to time. In comparison, Ruby had not meant nearly as much to him.

But another key difference was that Tora had died from hunger and cold, his father from sickness. Martel had been powerless to save them, and even now with his magic, he could not punish winter or disease for what they had stolen from him. But he could punish Ruby's killers, and he would.

Chapter 465: Gaining Control

Gaining Control

When Martel woke the next morning, he felt like himself, physically speaking. Any lingering pain or unseen injury from Flora's spells was gone. His spellpower was fully restored.

Still, he decided to delay for another day, as much as he found it difficult to be patient. Today was Manday, which meant class with Master Alastair. He could make up excuses rather than attend, but it seemed an unnecessary risk, which might invite scrutiny. It also gave Regnar another day to gather useful information before he went to see him.

Lastly, given that Martel had been able to create lightning, it might be wise to confer with Master Alastair. Especially as casting the spell had drained Martel more than it should; he might depend on it again in the near future, so the faster he learned, the better. .com

However, all of that was for later in the day. First, he had some hours in the morning to pass. He usually did so on Mandays by practising enchanting, so he went to the workshops.

The small laboratory stood waiting for him, as did a faintly glowing lightstone. Martel picked it up, feeling only faint traces of warmth. Much better than Regnar's work, bursting with heat.

Holding the glowing orb brought Martel back to the underground city. Feeling trapped by the light, stuck inside that small house with archers and a hostile mage waiting for them.

He was not sure what angered him most, Ruby's death or the feeling of betrayal. In the moment, both cases had demanded the same outcome, killing Flora. Martel had done so, and it had felt right. It had even felt good; not simply because he got revenge, but because he proved himself the stronger mage. He had expected himself to be, he had even bet his life on the assertion, and he had shown it to be true.

At the same time, a whisper in his head told him this was not why he had come to Morcaster, why he wanted to learn magic. It was so easy to destroy, and Martel could not deny a sense of satisfaction in his superior ability to do so, when he needed it; but it seemed nobler, better, to use magic to build.

Perhaps Flora's death should serve as sufficient payment for what Martel had suffered, but it felt too early to stop. She had been a mercenary, a tool; at the very least, Martel had to burn the hand that had wielded her.

Placing his lightstone back on the table, Martel gave up on enchanting. It required focus and a disciplined mind, which he lacked this morning. Tomorrow, he would take action and hopefully dispel the disquiet that troubled him.

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"Good afternoon," his teacher greeted Martel as he entered the Hall of Elements.

"Good afternoon." Unlike enchantment, it was easier for Martel to focus on elemental magic; he imagined that he would need it soon enough, which gave him all the motivation he required.

"How's the spell coming along?"

"I was able to cast it, but it left me completely worn out," Martel explained. "I didn't think it would task me to such a degree." It reminded him of the first time he had done so, calling a lightning bolt down from the sky to impress the nephew of the emperor. It was also the first time he had experienced magical exhaustion to make him vomit. But that was nearly a year ago, and Martel had assumed it would not affect him as much anymore.

"You may be a victim of your success," Master Alastair considered. "You learned it too quickly before you got familiar with casting it, so it strains you much more than it should."

"What's the solution?" Martel asked, keen to improve.

"Same as always. You must practise your control rather than simply cast the spell without inhibition." His teacher began channelling magic, and sparks appeared around his fingertips. "Don't let the power continue to expand. Don't let it become a full lightning bolt with the power to kill."

Martel blinked, feeling a little unsettled at Master Alastair's choice of words. "Alright." He closed his eyes and called upon the magic in him. He felt it travel around his body until it reached the tips of his fingers, and even without seeing, he knew a spark had appeared.

It grew in power; he heard the crackling of energy intensify. If this continued, it would be like in the Undercroft, becoming a thunderbolt in his hand that could maim a person. Martel clenched his teeth and tried to block the passing of magic that fed into the spell. It was an eerie sensation, similar to placing his hand in a stream of water and feeling the water flow between his fingers. At the same time, holding the spell in place without releasing it was starting to hurt his head.

Finally, Martel called his magic back rather than finishing the spell. The spark of energy stung his fingertips before it faded, and a sense of discomfort pervaded his being from channelling so much magic without directing it anywhere.

"A decent first attempt, I suppose." Master Alastair's voice broke through to make Martel open his eyes and look at him. "You've already learned good control over your magic thanks to enchanting, but this is more challenging. You are drawing on two elements at the same time, both which demand energy. That is one reason why this spell is so much more powerful than basic elemental magic, but also why it's harder to control."

Martel nodded a little as he listened. It made sense, but it did not daunt him. Learning to cast the spell in the first place had been a far greater challenge, he felt. "I'll keep practising."

"Yes. Just be careful if you do this outside this hall. You are keeping a lot of magic restrained. If you lose control and release it, it could seriously injure anybody caught in the path. Make sure you're alone," Master Alastair instructed him. "Ideally, in front of a window on an upper floor. At worst, you'll hit a bird."

Martel gave a half-hearted smile. "Understood."

"Good. Give it another try. Let's see how far you can come before our lesson is over."

## Chapter 466: Fury from the Sky

### Fury from the Sky

Once finished with alchemy, Martel went to The Golden Goose. Like last time, he entered through the back and had one of the actors fetch Regnar for him. Soon after, they sat inside his chamber.

"I've not really learned much," the hedge mage admitted. "Vitus uses The Broken Crown as his domain, like Tibert did before him. He's not been seen in a few days, though."

Keeping his head down, waiting for things to play out with Lady Pearl's death, presumably.

"Alright. Anything else?"

"Not really. Trying to figure out more about his activities didn't get me far. They're a suspicious lot, for good reason, and I can't really risk the attention."

"I understand. Do you think you could learn more about who bought the lightstones from you? They ended up in the hands of the Night Knives, which makes me wonder who acted as middlemen."

"I can ask, but if they didn't want me to know in the first place, there's probably not much I can find out," Regnar considered.

"Right. Fine. Seen any sign of the Night Knives?"

"Nothing so far. Might be they're already on a ship back to Aquila."

"Could be. Alright, thanks. I know where to go tonight."

The hedge mage reached out to take hold of Martel's arm. "Before you do – what exactly do you intend?"

Martel licked his lips. "Vitus needs to pay. I can't just let him get away with it."

"I can understand that, but have you considered how far you're willing to go? Any move you make, he'll feel forced to retaliate. You could start a war between him and you." Regnar looked at him apprehensively. "I'm worried about my people getting caught in between."

Martel exhaled, unsure what to say. Two days ago, he would happily have burned everything to the ground that Vitus owned. But he had begun to understand the scale of what this would require; it would require several attacks to dismantle Vitus' operation. It would also require a lot of information to be gathered, and he could not ask that of Regnar.

And Martel's anger, which had burned so fiercely, had begun to fade. Ruby was dead, but he had avenged her death immediately. It was not Martel that the Night Knives had betrayed or meant to attack; and he had taken revenge on them as well.

But he could not simply walk away without dealing a single blow to Vitus. Martel had allowed these Nine Lords to act with impunity against him time and time again. Even if Martel had not been the intended target, he would not simply stand aside meekly.

"Alright. There's something I must do tonight, but I'll stay hidden. No reason anyone knows it was me. And I'll lay low at the Lyceum afterwards. I won't come around here for a while, either. You discover anything, just send me a message."

Regnar nodded. "Very well. If that's what you think is best. Be careful, lad. Don't bait a fish too strong to haul ashore."

"I won't," Martel replied, doing his best to sound reassuring.

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As Martel walked south towards the harbour, he noticed the darkening sky. The sun had nearly set, but even before then, dark clouds covered the sky above him, and it began to rain. His cloak around him and his hood up, Martel looked like most citizens of Morcaster.

Even at this late hour, the streets were full of people as he approached the docks. Sailors on shore leave did not keep to regular hours, nor did many of the establishments that serve them. From across the road, Martel regarded The Broken Crown. He had plenty of memories of the place, none

of them pleasant. It seemed only fitting to take it away from Vitus. It was far less than what the scoundrel deserved, but Regnar was right. Martel was not ready to start or fight a war; he just needed to do something, a final act to release the anger inside of him that gnawed at him like building up a spell without releasing it.

The question was when to strike. Right now, it was full of light and life; lots of people who did not deserve to die. On the other hand, if Martel waited too long, there might be people inside asleep; usually, large taverns like this had quarters for the staff on the ground floor. They did not deserve punishment either.

In other words, Martel had to wait for when the tavern began to close and its patrons left, but before its residents would already be asleep. Accepting that he had a long wait ahead of him, Martel continued down the street until he found a small tavern down an alley with a quiet table and a mug of ale.

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Every now and then, Martel would leave his chosen spot and wander up the street to observe The Broken Crown. Every time he found it open and as lively as ever, making him continue and find somewhere else to wait for another half hour or so.

Finally, the right moment arrived. Drunk carousers stumbled out of the front doors, which closed behind them. The shutters of the windows were likewise closed; through the cracks, Martel could see lamplight being dimmed, one after the other. It was time.

He stepped into an alley, leaving him unobserved by others on the main street while still giving him vision of the tavern. It was a large building made from solid stone – except for the roof and the interior.

Martel looked up at the sky. The rain had turned into a near storm. Martel did not have need of it, but it made matters easier for him, almost as if the heavens agreed with his anger.

Raising one hand into the air, Martel channelled magic straight up until he connected with the brewing storm and unleashed its dormant fury. Making a fist and pulling his hand down, as if breaking a branch from a tree, Martel tore a thunderbolt from the skies to strike at The Broken Crown.

The surge of both natural and magical energy could not be denied. It hit the wooden beams that made up the construction of the roof and ignited them.

It did not take long before people became aware, as the flames were highly visible against the dark night. Shouts and screams could be heard. The smell of heavy smoke from rain-soaked wood burning permeated the air. The doors burst open as the people inside the tavern fled. One man on the upper floor lowered himself out of the window, hanging by his fingertips from the windowsill before dropping down to the ground.

Still, the fire burned merrily. It was not possible to see from the outside, but anyone with knowledge of the interior could imagine how it blazed through floorboards and furniture. The balconies surrounding the pit where Tibert had once hosted prize fights was likewise made from wood and became another victim for the conflagration.

The fire patrol arrived. They organised human chains carrying buckets of water. While the building itself seemed lost, it was important to prevent the spread of the flames.

Their work turned out easier than expected. Almost as if the fire agreed with their purpose, it grew less and less. Once it had eaten the interior of the tavern, it did not advance further, allowing the legionaries and volunteers to keep it contained and eventually douse the remaining flames. Some thanked Sol for this miracle, others attributed it to the heavy rain. Walking with visible strain and laboured breathing, Martel turned away from the crowd, retreating further into the alley before he set a course home for the Lyceum.

## Chapter 467: Sowing the Wind

### Sowing the Wind

When Martel returned to his chamber that night, he felt spent, physically. As he woke up refreshed the next morning, he felt spent emotionally. Calling down lightning and controlling the fire afterwards had taken all his strength. He had satisfied the embers of the rage inside of him, and he felt no further need to become entangled with the Nine Lords and their disputes. It was time to remove that mask and return to being Martel the acolyte.

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The lesson in the Circle of Fire proceeded as usual with the acolytes sparring against each other, learning how to incorporate their magical staves into their spells and fighting. Martel realised that he had reached the point where he had to hold back; unleashing a lightning bolt against another acolyte would grievously injure them, perhaps even kill them under certain circumstances.

Not that he ever intended to use the spell during class; there would never be need for such excessive force, and until he got a better grasp of it, it would also leave him exhausted for the rest of the day. But it was a strange sensation to admit to himself; his magic had progressed to the point where he could point his finger at someone and end their life with a thought.

After the first lesson, Martel left the Circle of Fire along with the other acolytes. Usually, they split into various directions at this stage, none of them eager to talk or spend more time together than necessary; but for once, Martel found himself approached by William.

"I waited for you yesterday, but you didn't show."

Ah. Martel had completely forgotten about his recurring meetings with William, teaching him how to use air magic. "I'm sorry about that. Last fiveday was an ordeal to get through. Lots going on, and it slipped my mind."

The other acolyte gave a shrug. "It's not a big deal. I figured something was up when you missed class on Malday. And besides, I think I've gotten the hang of it. We don't have to meet anymore. I'll keep practising during our regular class."

Martel gave William a look. This was the closest he had come to cordial relations with another fire acolyte; at the same time, he felt tired. All the hours he had spent helping others, like Weasel and his people, or teaching Sparrow. Added to that, his daily work in the apothecary and his attempts at learning enchantment; perhaps it was best to cut back. "Alright. Yeah, you seem like you've grasped the basics of it." For some reason Martel could not quite determine, he added, "I'm sorry the school

didn't teach you how to use these kinds of magic in a fight." Perhaps it was guilt that made him speak, conscious of being privileged by having the Master of Elements tutor him individually.

"It's alright. Most days, I'm completely knackered from regular class. I wouldn't have the stamina to take on a lot of extra lessons. We can't all be as quick as you are at learning." With a resigned smile, William walked away.

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Martel watched as Maximilian sank down on the bench opposite his own at the evening meal.

"Nordmark, given any thoughts to the harvest festival?"

"Nothing in particular. I know it's this month – in ten days or so? – But that's it. I'm not participating in any contests, after all. I assume you are?"

"I shall be in the skirmish on the fourth day, like last year. Stars grant that it goes better than last year," the mageknight.

"No archery?"

Maximilian shook his head. "I never enjoyed the sport. All that standing still and doing nothing, it feels like the exact opposite of what combat should be. Besides, any good mageknight fights at the front. Doing archery is just for show."

In Martel's opinion, Maximilian rarely had an issue with using his magic for show, but as he recalled, his friend was not particularly adept with a bow. Magic helped, of course, but when all the other contestants were also mageknights, it did not provide an advantage. "You won't be buying any rune arrows this year then?"

"Waste of gold," Maximilian grumbled. "I will have to buy three for every round. More if a winner cannot be determined."

Martel glanced from his meal up at his friend. "Your father wasn't keen on paying, I take it."

"I did not even bother to ask. He will have to be satisfied with what I can accomplish in the skirmish. Much more fitting for a mageknight, anyway."

Almost a pity; compared to last year, Martel actually understood runes. He would have been curious to inspect the arrows that the skáld had sold Maximilian last year. "Will Eleanor be participating?"

"I assume so. Her father wants the glory as much as mine. It makes me wonder what he has planned for the Legio Urbis this year – what battle they will perform."

More and more memories returned to Martel. It had been quite the spectacle last time, though it was bittersweet to reminisce; Martel had spent every day of the harvest festival last year in Shadi's company. While he did not think of her so often anymore, it still happened every now and then, always making him feel strange.

"Anyway, I only came to inform you that I have naturally ensured a seat on the stands for you. Even when I am competing, you are assured a place."

Martel was not in a particular mood for festivities right now, but in ten days, that might have changed. And if he still felt in a subdued mood by then, all the more reason to spend time with his jovial friend at the celebrations. "Alright. Thank you. I'll look forward to that." Eventually, at any rate. He did not enjoy the thought of all the people and noise at the festival grounds, but he planned

to spend every day until then at the school, due to his own performance last night; after ten days, he knew that he would welcome a change of scenery from the Lyceum.

"That is what friends are for," Maximilian declared magnanimously before digging into his supper.

## Chapter 468: As the Arrow Flies

### As the Arrow Flies

As intended, Martel spent the full five days at the Lyceum. Besides class, he spent his spare hours practising his control of the lightning spell or enchantment. He was starting to feel satisfied with his results; his lightstones did not dim the slightest even after many days. Martel even considered asking Master Alastair for other useful ideas, hoping to expand his list of worthwhile enchantments.

As for the school, excitement slowly grew as harvest festival came closer with each passing day. The Lyceum itself did not mark the passing of the year in any way, content with treating every day the same. It only acknowledged such outer events like the harvest festival by letting the students have classes off during the games and spectacles. Other than that, the school did not care to celebrate even the slightest occasion. For that reason, any sort of celebration going on in the city was treated with all the more enthusiasm by the students.

This was especially true of the mageknights for this particular event; besides the interest in the general revelry soon to take place, they also practised endlessly. At least this was the case for those with intentions of participating in the contest. They already practise weaponry daily, often times twice, mornings and afternoons. Now, many of them added each evening as well. In addition, while their usual training consisted of close combat, a handful of them trained rigorously with the bow.

Passing by the arena, Martel cast an idle glance towards it, looking at the students in black tunics. He did not spot Maximilian among them – perhaps the viscount felt he trained enough – but the fire acolyte noticed Eleanor hard at work, letting arrow after arrow fly.

He stood in the entrance to the gymnasium, admiring her form for a minute before she turned her head and noticed him. "Care to join me?" She held out her bow with a teasing smile.

Martel approached until he could reach out and take the weapon. He placed one finger on the string, pulling it back slightly. It resisted. "Chances are, I'll hurt myself." He handed it back to her.

"We all have to start somewhere."

"You're participating in the archery contest, I take it."

She nodded. "And the small melee. But I am already practising swordplay during the day, so now is the only time to get better at archery."

"You're very dedicated."

Eleanor placed another arrow on the string and pulled back. After a brief moment, she released.

"This festival is important to my father. His legion will put on a spectacle for the whole city. If I can win any honour on the other days, the name of our family will be on everybody's lips."

A memory stirred, from last year. Martel recalled seeing the Legio Urbis re-enact a famous battle, and Maximilian explaining something about their legate – Eleanor's father. "He used to command the Tenth, didn't he? Why is he the legate of the First Legion now?"



Eleanor had another arrow on the string, but she lowered her bow rather than pull back. She was silent long enough that Martel wondered if he had offended her before she replied. "It is complicated."

"You don't have to tell me then."

"No, I do not mind. You asked in good faith, at least."

It made Martel wonder how often Eleanor had been asked this question, but he kept quiet rather than interrupt.

"If you did not know, the Tenth Legion holds the Savena delta. When the war began, they crossed the river to seize the eastern bank and ensure the delta remained under our control," Eleanor explained. "We had limited knowledge of the Khivans and their new weapons, but it was assumed that their cannons were only useful in open battle on flat terrain. The eastern bank is hilly and forested, and my father's legion had a good, defensive position."

Martel listened intently; she related everything without hesitation, as if a story she had heard or told many times.

"The Khivans launched a fierce assault, achieving great surprise – it was expected they would seek battle on more favourable terms, but they fooled us. They drove the Tenth back over the river, and matters only became worse. They sailed a ship equipped with cannons into the delta and began a terrible bombardment of the legionaries fleeing into Esmouth, the town on the western bank." She cleared her throat. "Losses were substantial."

"That is gruesome."

Eleanor did not react to his remark. "When night came, two cohorts made a crossing upriver and fell upon the Khivans before they could set up their defences. The legionaries also recaptured their own machinery, such as catapults, which they turned on the Khivan galley, forcing it to retreat. Eventually, my father restored control over the delta, but half his legion lay dead or wounded."

"It sounds like your father did the best anyone could."

"Yes, but it was still the most casualties any Asterian legion had suffered in a near century. And the first sign that the war would not go as easily as expected." She exhaled. "Someone had to bear responsibility, even if my father had not done wrong. So he was recalled, given a ceremonial posting as legate of the First Legion, while leadership of the Tenth went to an ally of Duke Cheval." Eleanor finally turned to look at Martel with a joyless smile. "You are not the only one affected by his machinations."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It is what it is. I doubt my father will ever have his old command back, but he believes that he might. If performing well in the festival games can bolster his hope..." She gave another smile of the same sort as the last. "I will do my part."

"Well, I'll be rooting for you all the way."

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Leaving the arena, Martel did not return to his chamber as he had meant to originally. Instead, he went west towards the faculty wing. He intended to do more than just cheer for his friend. To that aim, he went to Master Fenrick's chamber.

"Enter."

Martel stepped inside, finding the room a whirlwind of strange items and artefacts, books and parchment. Its owner sat in the eye of the storm by his writing desk.

"Martel? What do you need?"

"There's a rune I once saw," he began to explain, "but I don't remember how it looks or the activating word. I saw it used on an arrow to make sure it struck true."

The Master of Lore furrowed his brow. "Aye, I've seen it as well. Used by hunters in Tyria. You don't strike me as the hunting type, or are you planning to be a mageknight?"

"No, nothing of the sort. But I'll learn any rune I can."

"Well, I admire that. But I can't help you with this one. I had plenty others that I needed to learn during my time among the tribes, and I didn't commit this one to memory."

Well, it had been a long shot. "I see. Thanks anyway, master."

"Always happy to answer questions."

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Martel did not give up yet. He knew someone else who possessed knowledge of the rune; he just did not know where to find them. But Maximilian did. Crossing the castle, Martel hurried up the stairs to the top of the boys' dormitory tower until he could knock on the door to his friend's room.

"Nordmark? What is it?" Standing in the doorway, the mageknight looked at the fire acolyte.

"Last year, you went to a skáld somewhere in the city to buy rune arrows from him."

"Do not remind me," Maximilian complained. "No need to keep bringing it up."

"Where was he? I need to speak with him."

The mageknight arched an eyebrow. "They don't allow battlemages in the archery contest."

"I'm aware. I don't want his arrow, but his knowledge of runes."

"Well, I cannot remember his location either. But I heard about him from... who was it..."

Mumbling to himself, Maximilian turned back into his room and began rummaging through drawers. "He gave me... but did I keep..." More mutterings followed, indecipherable, until Maximilian pulled out a scrap of parchment with a triumphant motion. "There we are! One of the other mageknights wrote down where to find him. Consider yourself lucky that I never clean out my desk."

"I am truly blessed," Martel replied, grabbing the parchment with the location. It was too late to seek out any peddlers tonight, but tomorrow, he would go and find the knowledge he sought.

"Thanks, mate."

"Buy me a drink and consider your debt repaid."

Martel grinned as he left. "Sounds reasonable."

## Chapter 469: Going to Market

### Going to Market

Once his lessons of the day were over, Martel quickly went to his room, put on his cloak and woollen gloves, and left the Lyceum. The skáld had kept his stall by one of the squares in the market district last year, according to Maximilian's note; hopefully he had chosen the same spot this year.

It was not a long trip, and Martel soon found the right square, identified by a column raised in honour of Emperor Corvinus the Second. Looking around, Martel recognised the northern bard and approached him. "You're the skáld, right?"

This scrawny man looked at Martel. It always felt a little strange to look at eyes of the same colour as his own; it did not happen often in Morcaster. "Yes, yes, I am. You need good knife? Blade always sharp, never grows dull. I'll give you good price since we have the same blood."

"That's not why I'm here. You sell arrows marked with a rune. My friend bought some from you last year."

"Yes, yes, true. Are you mageknight? You don't wear their clothes."

"I'm not, but I'm still interested in buying one."

The skáld nodded and dug one out. "Three crowns. You sure one is enough? I can sell you more."

"One will be sufficient." Martel stared at the small symbol carved into the shaft of the arrow. "But I need you to activate the rune for me."

"Of course." The northerner held out his hand, and Martel placed two golden coins and ten made of silver in his palm, which he quickly deposited in a lockbox by his feet, out of sight. This done, he placed one hand over the arrow and whispered a word. "*Visir*."

Martel strained his ears to hear, silently mumbling the sounds to himself.

"Here you are. You need rune to keep water fresh? Simply place stone in barrel, and water will stay good."

Martel did not, but he had considered another question. He doubted this fellow could help – if he possessed such powers, he probably would not be peddling minor runes and the like. Still, no harm in asking. "What if someone has been grievously injured? Their head, that is. Their wounds are healed, but a blow to the head keeps them permanently asleep."

The northerner struck an apologetic expression. "That requires deep knowledge of the runes. A seier-wife would know, or the greatest of skálds, but humble Helgi? That is beyond him."

At least he did not try to sell Martel a fake cure, which was more honesty than one might expect.

"Alright. Good day to you."

"Same to you!"

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Walking back, Martel kept the arrow pointed at the ground to avoid accidentally stabbing others. Even if the harvest festival had yet to begin, people had begun to arrive in great numbers to Morcaster. This would be the last big event before winter closed down many roads and sea routes. Despite the cold, Martel allowed his cloak to remain open, showing his red robes underneath. Others on the street understood; here came a wizard, and it was best to get out of the way.

Straight ahead, a man moved directly towards Martel. Although he wore the clothes of an ordinary day labourer, something about him seemed odd. Besides being muscular, he walked with a straight back, rather than one bent from many years of hard toil. Perhaps most tellingly, he made no move to get out of the mage's path.

Martel let his magical senses extend forward and felt it. A cold pocket around the man's wrist. For instance, concealing a mage killer blade inside the sleeve.

Alarming, but as he wore no other gold, it would not protect him from Martel's magic. Without hesitation, he blasted air with such power, it sent the would-be assailant away and flat on his back.

Besides immobilising the threat, the spell also served as a gentle suggestion to all bystanders to immediately get out of the way. They quickly reacted dutifully, panic spreading at this display of magic. Except as Martel glanced to either side, he saw someone pushing their way forward through the crowd. If he had to guess, a fourth attacker approached him from behind.

Abandoning all caution or restraint, Martel invoked a wall of fire to cover his back and his left side, protecting those angles. As for the man now running forward on the right, he took a fire bolt straight to the stomach, which made him double over in pain.

The first assailant had gotten back on his feet; a fire bolt made him regret the decision.

The remaining two attackers finally managed to circumvent the flame wall and came at Martel from either side. One of them took a fire bolt to the gut as well, but as Martel whirled around to deal with the fourth, the attacker had already closed in and slashed out. Acting on instinct, Martel raised his arms in defence and received a long gash, dropping his arrow. Wincing in pain, he swiftly sent out a burst of air to push his attacker away and buy a few precious moments.

Two of the others were back in the fight, lunging at him. Standing side-by-side, they were an obvious target for a fire ray, striking the first before moving to the next. They both screamed in agony, turned, and fled.

Martel looked for the fourth, but could not see him. Turning back towards his right to deal with the one assailant who had managed to draw blood, he could not find him either. The panic of the crowd had turned into a stampede, and it appeared his attackers had chosen to withdraw, using other people to hide their escape.

"Make way for the guard!"

Martel dismissed his wall of fire. While all he had done was defend himself, he was in no mood to answer questions or explain what had happened. Especially not since word would undoubtedly get back to the Lyceum. He picked up his arrow, pulled his cloak around him, and made his own hasty retreat.

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Martel kept up the pace until he could step across the threshold to the Lyceum, finally feeling safe. Leaning against a wall in the entrance hall, he realised that he drew stares. He quickly realised why; he was gasping for breath while holding an arrow in his hand. At least his clothes hid his wounded arm, but if he began dripping blood on the floor, it would get awkward. Swiftly, Martel hurried to his room.

Once alone, he allowed himself to relax, placing the arrow on his drawer. His hand shook a little as he grabbed a writing instrument to note down the activating word for the rune, lest he forget. His wound hurt; it would need attention. More than that, he needed to know what had happened.

While he did not recognise his attackers, they had military bearing. Most likely, they were Night Knives. If they had carried out this attack in service to Vitus, this assassination attempt could be retaliation for The Broken Crown. Which amounted to nothing less than a declaration of war.

At the same time, using the Night Knives was clever. If Martel invoked the protection of the Lyceum, the school would go after the mercenaries, no doubt violently exterminating them as they had done to the islanders after their attack on Martel. He would have a hard time explaining why Vitus was behind the attack without having to elaborate on his own involvement. As much as being a battlemage gave Martel a certain privilege, being involved with criminals probably strained it to the breaking point.

On the other hand, Martel was unsure whether this actually bore the mark of a cunning mind with many resources at hand. Four assassins, but without sufficient golden protection to actually stand a chance against a wizard. This attack seemed as ill-conceived as it had been ill-fated. The dying gasp of a mercenary band attempting to gain revenge without sufficient means to do so.

If so, Martel could tell the Lyceum and claim their protection. They would destroy what remained of the Night Knives, and Martel would have his revenge.

But he would not do that for two reasons. Firstly, because Martel had no desire to attract more attention from the school administration or its Imperial counterpart. He had pushed back against Mistress Juliana's attempts to confine him; he was not sure what happened if he had to keep pushing. Also, being the target of a second assassination attempt could raise a lot of questions he was uncomfortable answering.

Secondly, Martel wanted to know. If he handed this over to the school, he would not find out the details of why he had been attacked. Perhaps most importantly, he wanted to be sure that the right people were punished for this transgression, and he wanted to do so himself.

Feeling calm and collected, Martel removed his cloak. Thankfully, the Lyceum served as a safe space where he did not have to fear further attacks while he figured out his countermove. Though just to be sure, he knew to continue using the rune of warning every night before going to sleep.

He pulled up his torn sleeve to look at the wound along his arm. This would definitely need stitches. With a sigh, Martel left his room to make his way towards the infirmary. Already, his mind concocted an explanation for the nurse. Something with preparations for the harvest festival and zealous mageknights training even at late hours – yes, that would do.

Chapter 470: Confessions of a Nocturnal Knife

Confessions of a Nocturnal Knife

Martel spent both the remaining evening and the next morning going over the attack at the market. This had been the first time he had left the Lyceum in a five day or longer. They had been watching the school, striking at the first chance they got, regardless of how opportune the moment. This strengthened his impression that the attack had been not just poorly executed, but also poorly planned.

It did not change the fact that a response was required, but he needed information. The location of the Night Knives, their current affiliations, and confirmation that they had carried out the attack. Although he had promised to stay away from The Golden Goose, Martel could not readily think of others besides Regnar that he trusted to investigate this. But first, as foolish as it made him feel, Martel had to attend his lessons and pretend nothing was amiss.

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In between combat classes, where Martel's bandaged arm drew some attention and gentle mockery, a message arrived to disturb all his musings.

Martel,

Meet me outside your  
school when you can.

I'm alone.

Marcus

If a trap, it was so obvious, Martel had to admire the audacity. It could be a naked attempt at luring Martel outside the protective walls of the castle, but attacking a student of the Lyceum right outside the building seemed a tad too optimistic, even for the fools that had jumped him yesterday. While naturally Martel would have to keep his guard up, he might learn something of use from the meeting, regardless of Marcus' intentions. Burning the note between his fingers, Martel went to eat his dinner.

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Once his hunger was satisfied, Martel decided to go outside – after he had returned to his room and donned his leather armour underneath his robe. Even if he could not imagine anyone attacking him right at the gate of the Lyceum, it still felt a little eerie to step across the threshold.

The square outside had the usual trickle of people, crossing it from one direction or the other. Martel glanced at the surrounding buildings, none of them particularly tall. Not much of a chance for any archer to have a good line of sight.

The middle of the square had a small pedestal with a sculpture of some wizard – Martel had never bothered to read the inscription. A circle of stone surrounding it served as rough seating, where Martel noticed a fellow passing the time. He had the worn clothes of a workman, and the young wizard almost laughed at seeing the stout Marcus dressed like an ordinary labourer.

"Nice clothes."

"It didn't seem clever to walk around in the uniform."

Martel used his magic and found that Marcus was indeed unarmed, at least in terms of golden weapons. And his presence seemed to confirm that the Night Knives were involved in the attack

yesterday, or else knew who had perpetrated it; knowledge of the incident could hardly have spread far and wide in Morcaster already. "What do you want?"

"To talk. Explain. Hope you'll be lenient."

"Does that mean you admit your fellow soldiers tried to kill me?" Martel stared at him with a harsh look.

"Yes. I won't bother lying. I told them to leave you alone, but they went behind my back. Just like I told Flora that switching sides wouldn't end well," Marcus claimed.

"If only everybody listened to you."

"People think mercenaries got no honour because we fight for gold. But that's a far cry from turning traitor." The big warrior crossed his arms. "As for going after you, Flora and the others died in a fight they started. We had no cause for seeking revenge."

"Agreed. Yet here we are."

Marcus sighed. "Look, I know you can tell your school what happened, and we'll all be dead by morning. Maybe you already have. But if not, I'm here to ask you for mercy. The lads are nursing their burn injuries – they've learned their lesson. I've found us all passage on the next ship to Aquila. You'll never see us again, and our prayers will mention your kindness."

Now it was Martel's turn to cross his arms, considering this plea. But first, he needed to know everything. "How did you know it was me who killed your compatriots?"

"One of the lads, the one on guard, recognised you when you went down the hatch. Neighbours saw you come back up. Wasn't hard to guess what had happened."

"Whose idea was it to attack Lady Pearl?"

"Vitus, the new master of the harbour. Things had been going poorly for the lady, and Flora began to doubt we'd get paid much longer. So she struck a deal. Vitus already controls the docks here in Morcaster, and he's been making inroads at Smallport to control all traffic on water. But he needed the bridge gate to really make Smallport worth it for him," Marcus explained.

A couple of acolytes came out of the gate, giving odd stares at Martel having a discussion with a day-labourer. Taking a few steps away, Martel lowered his voice as he spoke again. "So you were meant to work for Vitus now?"

Marcus nodded. "Aye, but with our mage dead, he lost interest. Told us we couldn't stay in the harbour. Hence the next ship to Aquila."

"What about the attack yesterday? He didn't order it?"

"No." A brief pause. "It was the bleeding idiots' own idea."

Martel had suspected the mercenaries acted on their own accord, given the poor attempt. Yet Marcus' pause made him frown. "You don't sound convincing."

"Look, this part is speculation. But I'm not sure they'd have gone after you without some assurance from Vitus that he'd protect them afterwards until we could sail away. We all know what your school did to those islanders," Marcus said. "Who knows? Maybe Vitus even promised them a bit of coin to take back home for their trouble."

It was a compelling argument, especially since Vitus might have figured out what had happened to his tavern. If it worked, he got rid of a troublesome mage; if not, he lost nobody of consequence. Should the Lyceum be involved, the trail would lead to the Night Knives, not him.

And even if Vitus had not encouraged the attack, he had done nothing to hinder it either, even as the mercenaries stayed in his district. More importantly, he had been told Martel's name and knew the young battlemage was his enemy.

There was no way around it. Vitus had to be destroyed.

"So?" Marcus' voice broke through Martel's thoughts. "Will you let us go?"

The young wizard regarded the warrior. They had not been friends, but they had fought side by side more than once. Even if his brethren deserved to die, it was not clear to Martel whether Marcus did. And he had bigger crabs to boil – let them return to Aquila in disgrace, with burn marks on their skin as a reminder of their mistake. "Fine. But if I see you or your comrades in Morcaster again, don't expect mercy a second time."

"I wouldn't." Marcus inclined his head and stalked away. Martel watched him for a moment before he turned to enter the castle.

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Martel waited until dark before he left the Lyceum again, this time through the infirmary gate. He avoided main streets and stuck to their smaller counterparts, even if it doubled his travel time.

He needed information, which he was ill-equipped to gather himself. It was not fair to drag Regnar into this, making him a target; besides, he doubted that the hedge mage could be of sufficient help. Martel sought the kind of knowledge that usually required plenty of coin to buy, along with an intricate understanding of the criminal networks of Morcaster.

Walking south-east, Martel hoped to find that in the Khivan district. He remembered the location of the Fire Eater's home; making his way there, he noticed all the stares he attracted. An Asterian, a wizard no less, walking these streets after dark. But none accosted him, either due to the goodwill he had earned, or because they did not dare to interfere with a mage.

Someone only spoke to him once he reached his destination. A guard outside the Fire Eater's home. "You're at the wrong place, friend."

"I'm not. Tell Navid that Martel wants to see him. Now."

The Khivan looked hesitant, but he finally opened the door ajar. Keeping one eye on Martel, he mumbled words to someone inside. As the reply came, he allowed the door to open further. "Your weapon."

"You really think if I want to kill someone, I need my dagger for it?"

"Let him inside," came the command from within the house. The guard stood aside with a disgruntled expression as Martel pushed past him to enter. A handful of people met him inside; he recognised the woman he had seen on his last visit, along with Navid. "Master Martel. Unexpected to see you."

"I must speak with you privately."



"Follow me." Navid turned and left the room to go up a flight of stairs. Once Martel had joined him in another chamber, presumably the study in the house, Navid closed the door. "What is it?"

"Have you heard what happened yesterday? To me."

"Word has not reached us, no."

"Some men tried to kill me. Vitus was involved. Though I can't blame him, since I burned down his tavern."

Navid gazed at Martel, looking almost impressed. "That was you? Why this feud?"

"That doesn't matter. But since he intervened when we tried to undermine the construction work on the insula here in your district – I assume you know this?"

"I eventually figured out as much, yes. In fact, I believe he is the Ninth Lord supporting Duke Cheval with his building projects. Bringing in the needed stone through the harbour, among other collaborations."

"So we have a common enemy. I propose we work together to ensure his downfall," Martel suggested.

Navid carefully ran his fingers around the edge of his oiled beard. "Open war is not good for business."

"You don't have to play coy. I figure you're in the weaker position, since you can't even stop the insula being built in your own district. But you won't have to risk anything. Just gather information for me, and I'll act on it."

"Even that carries risk. I must send my people to the harbour to gather this intelligence – if their purpose is discovered, I have no means to see them freed."

"But if it works, your rival is ruined. He runs both the harbour in Morcaster and Smallport. With the bridge gate under his thumb, his territory strangles yours. And his ally brings in Asterians to take up residence in your district, pushing your people out," Martel argued. "A few years from now, you'll have nothing."

Navid slowly exhaled. "I suppose we better lay our plans carefully."