

## Firebrand 481

### Chapter 481: Starting the Grind

#### Starting the Grind

Solday morning, Martel went to the workshops as he had done every fiveday since becoming a student at the Lyceum. Although this bell originally was meant for Martel to assist the artificer and thus pay for his stay at the school, Martel had spent it practising his enchantment for the past several months. But before he could begin this morning, Master Jerome entered the laboratory, making Martel wonder if he would be told to resume regular duties.

"Martel, afraid you're needed elsewhere. I would let you practice your skills, but you're one of the few mages at the school who can help with this."

The fire acolyte frowned upon hearing this; it was not what he expected, nor could he imagine what required his help in particular. "What is it, master?"

"Mistress Rana. She needs you in her laboratory. Asked if you could come help her today. And make sure you bring your key – the apothecary is locked, she said."

Strange; that never really happened during the day, as both students and nurses often needed to get remedies from the apothecary. Regardless, Martel had no reason to rebel. And he was rather curious what this was all about. "Alright. I'll go now."

"Good lad. Enchanting going well?"

"Yes, master, very well. I'm trying on different objects to see how long it lasts. Think I can make it last for over a month now."

"Well done. Alright, don't let me keep you." With those words, the artificer hurried along; at a calmer pace, Martel left as well.

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After fetching his key, Martel went to the apothecary and let himself in. Locking the door behind him, he noticed the door leading to Mistress Rana's laboratory stood open, which he had never seen before. There was no sign of Nora, but most of the herbs from yesterday had been treated in various ways necessary. Mystified, Martel continued through the open door, up the stairs, and into Mistress Rana's sanctum.

"Finally, about time. You recognise these ingredients?" The alchemist pointed at a table with bundles of reagents.

Several of them Martel had handled himself yesterday. He also recognised amaranth, though it had a peculiar colour, suggesting it had been altered magically. One by one, Martel named each of them.

"You know the potion that requires these?"

Simple enough, considering he could only think of one that used this kind of amaranth. "The elixir for pestilence."

"Good. The most important question – do you remember the recipe?"

Martel would have liked to consult his notes, but as he recalled, it was relatively straightforward. "I believe so. The ingredients must be added in the very order that they are laid on the table at a low boil. Count at least a hundred breaths between adding the next one."

"Good enough. Get to work. Coals aren't burning much, but I assume you can handle fire." She pointed at the hearth, which had a cauldron and other tools ready. "If something goes terribly amiss, you may wake me, but otherwise, Stars help you if you disturb me unnecessarily."

Bewildered, Martel looked from the fireplace to the alchemist, who walked over to a corner of the laboratory and dropped herself on a cot. Martel was quite sure he had never seen that before in this place. Afraid to ask questions, Martel followed her latest instructions and began his task, igniting the coals with his magic. Staring at the ingredients, he felt unease creeping in, thinking about why he was told to create a cure for pestilence. Especially as he noticed, on another table, at least ten or more vials already stood, gleaming with magic.

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Martel worked for four hours, the entire morning. When the noon bell rang, he had finished two potions and added them to those made by Mistress Rana. He wondered if he should begin on his third; if so, he would not be able to leave the laboratory until noon, making him miss dinner. But he could always go into town and buy something to eat later, and given the amount of ingredients left, it was clear that more elixirs had to be made.

Perhaps disturbed by the ringing of the bell, Mistress Rana stirred from her sleep and eventually sat up, swinging her legs over the edge of the cot. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Two bells, mistress."

"So which one is it now?"

"It's noon. There'll be dinner served soon." Martel mentioned it mostly for his own sake; Mistress Rana seemed like she needed four more hours of sleep easily.

The alchemist got up and crossed the laboratory, blinking and rubbing her eyes. She picked up the two elixirs made by Martel. "Adequate, I suppose. Alright, you should rest a bit and eat dinner. Come back in an hour and continue working. I'll leave the laboratory unlocked, so just remember your key to the apothecary. If you make two potions this afternoon, Nora will come and relieve you. Understood?"

"Yes." Martel only hesitated briefly before he spoke again; while Mistress Rana did not appear to be in a talkative mood, he felt that he deserved to know why his labours were needed. "Mistress, why are we making all these elixirs? Besides the obvious answer to cure someone of pestilence."

She gave him a look, and given her sleep deprived state and appearance, he could not tell how to interpret it. "Do not spread this around, as people become agitated and irrational whenever they hear words like pox or plague. A ship from Sindhu arrived in port last fiveday, and it was discovered to have victims of pestilence. Naturally, none are allowed to enter or leave the vessel. The sooner that we finished these elixirs, the sooner we can prevent any further outbreak and perhaps save the lives of these unfortunate sailors. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, mistress. I'll be back in an hour and continue working."

Either the alchemist did not hear, or she saw no need to reply; she was already busy grinding mustard seeds, and Martel left the laboratory without further words.

## Chapter 482: The Second Starlit Eve

### The Second Starlit Eve

Martel spent second bell the next morning working in the apothecary as usual, though alone. As before, he had to lock himself in, and he found a short note detailing his work. It was the usual chores, mostly creating salves and other supplies for the infirmary rather than anything to do particularly with elixirs for pestilence.

He saw no sign of Nora or Mistress Rana; either they were busy in the laboratory, or like yesterday, finding sleep when and where they could. When the bell rang, he cleared away his tools, locked the apothecary again, and left for his first lesson in fire magic.

As Martel went to the western courtyard, he received a surprise. The first sign of something unusual came when only three banners hung from the windows of an upper floor; the one marked as Martel's was conspicuously absent. The other acolytes mumbled to themselves, but neither they nor he knew what it meant.

The answer arrived along with Moira. "Martel, Mistress Rana has asked for your help. You're excused. Get going."

A little confused, Martel went back exactly where he had come from. Odd that she had not simply written this in the notes for him, but perhaps things had been decided at different times. It did seem like strange behaviour regardless from the otherwise methodical alchemist, who prided herself on thorough and thought-through practices.

That said, he was more surprised that Moira had agreed to let him miss a class just to help out with alchemy; the Lyceum apparently took this seriously.

Arriving at the laboratory, Martel saw that the number of prepared vials had more than doubled. Probably closer to thirty rather than twenty, even. No sign of Nora, and he heard Mistress Rana before he saw her; asleep on the cot with a slight snore. Well, he did not need instructions. Filling a cauldron with water, Martel began brewing.

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Martel did not attend his second lesson either, as today began the celebration of the emperor's reign at his palace; consequently, a carriage picked up both Martel and Maximilian, courtesy of his father. They had done this a few times now, driving together to a feast or the like hosted by the nobility, and Martel always found it impossible to predict his friend's mood. At times, he acted like himself, relaxed and swift to making jokes; other times, he could be quiet and distant, or the entirely reverse, constantly talking without actually saying much.

This time, Maximilian seemed closest to his usual self. He remarked on his hopes for the vintages that would be served, his doubts that his sister would behave despite his mother's watchful gaze, and other comments of similar nature.

Martel remembered his previous visits to the Imperial Palace well – given both its impressive stature and some of the events he had experienced, how could he not – but he was still struck by the sheer scale of its impressive construction. Pillars upon pillars, statues, and carvings; endless hours

of labour carried out by countless hands had to be responsible. It would leave any visitor in awe, as was undoubtedly the intention.

The praetorians quickly ascertained their identity before they were allowed onto the grounds. Once they could enter the palace, they found Maximilian's family and joined them. His mother quickly fell upon her second son to ask him a variety of questions, and Martel was satisfied to be left out of the conversation, though the count himself did give Martel an acknowledging nod.

Standing among the nobility of the Empire, Martel felt out of place, but he was not necessarily intimidated as he might have been on previous occasions. He would have preferred to be wearing his acolyte's robe, however plain it would make him seem; it suited him, it felt true to his nature, and he was more comfortable in it than any other clothing.

But Martel knew that regardless of garments, he was a wizard. These people had power, certainly, but it was bound into their wealth, lands, castles, and the assumption that their soldiers would follow their orders. Martel's power was his own; it did not depend on wearing silk or jewellery, the size of his purse, or the loyalty of others. And it let him do things that only magic allowed.

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The guests gathered in the Dome of Stars as last year. It was still a beautiful sight, to witness the night sky reflected in the ceiling, and while Martel felt that his time tonight could have been spent better than aimlessly milling about this place, he enjoyed being able to witness this feat of magic again.

Trumpets sounded, praetorians cleared the way, and the emperor arrived. He marched through the crowd to take his seat upon the throne, and the nobility began the yearly ritual of showing their fealty.

Not of noble blood, Martel was spared the exercise; he could stand against the wall and observe. For some reason, his mind went to the laboratory back at the Lyceum, where he had laboured earlier today. He thought of Mistress Rana, perhaps after chasing a few hours of precious sleep already returned to work, hunched over a cauldron while performing her alchemy. She was not a native of this land, yet she laboured all waking hours to protect the city from a terrible outbreak of disease.

Glancing over the crowd, Martel knew that nobody in this room would have the knowledge nor the skill she did to do the same. It was a power that probably few of these people ever thought about; and if they did, they probably did not rank it highly. But to those sailors, lying on the sickbed in a ship, the power of alchemy could decide between life or death for them.

Looking at the emperor during this moment, the pinnacle of his power where all the mightiest people of the Empire bowed to him, Martel knew what appealed to him most; it could not be found in this hall.

## Chapter 483: Plagued Ship

### Plagued Ship

Martel had his first lesson in combat the next day as usual. Compared to the various events of the previous days, it felt almost mundane. The only thing notable would be that Martel noticed the other acolytes catching up to him when it came to staff fighting. His earlier advantage from having

practised and fought in Tibert's ring had become eroded, and Martel had to focus on the fights if he wanted to avoid a beating.

As he arrived at the apothecary for his regular shift, another break in routine occurred. Both Mistress Rana and Nora were present; the former stood with two large cases on the table, bound in leather and with a strap to help carry them. Martel recognised them as much larger versions of the potion container he had used when bringing consumption elixirs to the urchins of the copper lanes. The vials were small, allowing each of these big cases to contain probably a score or so.

"Martel, good. I need someone to carry this." She pushed one of the cases towards him. "Nora has plenty of work to catch up on, so I thought it best you accompany me." The alchemist slung the other case over her shoulder, and it looked almost big enough to break her spine. Grabbing hold of his, Martel followed her out the door.

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They walked at a brisk pace directly south, cutting through the marketplace towards the harbour. The bulky burden made navigating the crowds a little difficult, but most people recognised an alchemist and a wizard, making them quick to step out of the way.

The smell of salt in the air told Martel of their destination even before he could see any of the tall masts against the horizon. He had not been back at the harbour since his clash with Vitus, but he assumed himself to be in no danger; should he be wrong, he felt more than capable of handling it. Still, he could not help but glance to either side and occasionally over his shoulder as well.

Mistress Rana did not speak a single word during their journey; not until the piers came into sight. "Over there," she told him, nodding in one particular direction. Martel dutifully followed.

A good number of ships lay moored in the harbour; while the winter season was near enough to close the sea between Aster and the Western Isles except perhaps for a few straggling ships, the Emerald Sea was more forgiving and could still be traversed by vessels going to and from Sindhu. At least for this month, though probably not the next. Still, one had managed to reach Morcaster only to be declared a plague ship.

Approaching the pier, Martel noticed no other vessels lay moored nearby, taking advantage of the available capacity to avoid the troubled ship. Furthermore, a patrol of five guards kept watch at the end of the pier, preventing passage. Tellingly, they were armed with spears rather than staffs. As Martel and Mistress Rana approached, their princeps stood up from a crate. "You're the alchemist, yeah? Sindhian woman."

"One of them to clear up the others' mess," another guard muttered, and Martel sent him a withering look.

If Mistress Rana heard him, she made no show of it. "I am. We brought the elixirs as you can see." She reached a hand around to pat the case on her back.

"We'll all be glad to know this is over," the princeps remarked. "Stand aside, boys. Let her through."

The guards had built a small obstacle, mostly from crates and such, leaving only a narrow passage between. They did as commanded, getting out of the way to allow Mistress Rana and Martel to walk through.

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As they walked down the pier, Martel wondered how far they would go. Were they to board the ship and administer the cures directly? While he trusted Mistress Rana, he was not particularly eager to step aboard a ship touched by pestilence.

They had nearly reached the plank that connected the ship with the pier when a face appeared above. He looked as expected; darker in skin and eyes than most Asterians, and dressed in the colourful garb of most Sindhian sailors. Seeing Mistress Rana, he called out in his own tongue, to which she replied.

A quick conversation followed, of which Martel understood nothing. Feeling a little awkward, he glanced around the harbour while trying not to let it show.

At length, Mistress Rana placed her case on the pier. "Martel, you may leave yours here as well. I have informed the helmsman what to do, and our work here is done."

A little relieved, Martel quickly did as told. Even outside the ship, the occasional moan and other sounds of pain or discomfort from within could reach them. The hull and perhaps the salt in the air prevented the smell from likewise troubling them, but Martel could only imagine. If up to forty people lay below deck, all of them sick and sweating, unable to move fast to relieve themselves or perhaps throw up – the infirmary at the Lyceum would be a rose garden in comparison.

"Come along." Mistress Rana quickly left, and Martel hurried to follow her.

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Once they had left the docks, Martel dared to ask the questions on his mind. "Is it over?"

"For the men aboard that ship, it should be. There is always a slight risk that a patient is too weakened to survive the elixir that would otherwise heal them, especially if other remedies have already taxed their bodies. But we have done everything we could."

"How did they know to come to you?" Martel asked without even knowing who he referred to.

"Was it the harbourmaster or some magistrate in charge of these affairs?"

"A physician inspects every ship that arrives," Mistress Rana explained. "In this case, he identified some of the sailors as being ill and placed the ship under prolonged quarantine."

"And then they ask you to produce the cures?"

"Yes. After I had done my own investigations, of course. I wasn't going to produce forty elixirs only to discover it was the wrong disease."

A sensible precaution, though Martel admired her decision to go aboard that ship and carry out an examination herself. "What would have happened if you weren't in the city?"

"The Asterians would have tried their own remedies, I suppose. Perhaps some would even have been successful. Luckily for the sailors, we don't have to find out."

The pride in her words could not be mistaken, but Martel did not begrudge her the feeling; he had seen how hard she had laboured over the last few days.

"Of course, some of the honour goes to you as well. Several of those elixirs were made by your hand, after all."

Martel smiled to himself; he already knew this, of course, but it was nice to hear it spoken aloud.

"I'm glad I took a chance on you, Martel. Even if you gave me reason to doubt a few times, I have not regretted it."

In almost two years, that had to be the kindest words she had spoken to him. Martel straightened his back a little as they continued their journey back to the Lyceum.

#### Chapter 484: Meal Conversations with Friends

##### Meal Conversations with Friends

With Martel's conscription as an alchemist at an end, nothing prevented him from resuming his regular classes, including those in fire magic. Early in the morning, he stood in the western courtyard and stared at his banner hanging from an upper window. He shivered lightly in the cold; presumably, the others felt it even worse, being born to a warmer climate.

If the cold bothered Moira, she did not allow it to show. She wore a cloak outside her purple robe, but she seemed at ease with the weather, unlike the acolytes keeping their hands inside their sleeves. "Don't wait for my sake," she told them with her usual demeaning tone. "You all know your task."

Martel glanced back at the fabric lightly blowing in the wind, marked by his initial letter. He could attempt a lightning bolt; he knew the spell well enough that it would not make him feel like his insides had been wrung out. The only question was whether he would hit. He had never aimed at anything that far away, and he had little idea how reliable his accuracy would be, and if it decreased the further away he aimed. It would look poor if his spell went through the window and hit a student inside.

Considering that option a last resort, Martel tried the other possibility. He allowed his magic to reach out. It had plenty to tell him, so he had to stay disciplined. Rather than allow it to spread in every direction, like his sense of hearing, he wanted it to behave like his eyesight; focused straight ahead.

Trying to shape it was a weird sensation, like attempting to box in air with his bare hands. He could to some extent direct it in one cardinal direction or another, but it still spread out like a cone in front of him, and the effect dissolved long before it could connect to the wavering fabric hanging out of the window.

Next to him, Harriet shot off a fire bolt that made it little over halfway before turning to nothing. Disdainful laughter could be heard from Moira. Doing his best to ignore everything else, Martel tried again.

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At dinner, Maximilian graced Martel with his company. "Ah, but you missed a night, Nordmark! Wonderful music, played by this troupe all the way from Anvillum! Plenty of daughters to dance with, even some who would not be scared away by the brusque demeanour of a battlemage."

In his thoughts, Martel compared Maximilian's event with his own yesterday and found it a little difficult to take his words seriously; he avoided articulating this and simply smiled, letting the viscount talk all he wanted.

"And lest you doubt me, I will have it known, your absence was noticed."

"Really? By whom?" Martel could not think of anybody else present at the Imperial celebration who would care about him, except Eleanor, and she knew he had no intention of participating.

Maximilian leaned forward and managed to whisper the answer in a loud manner. "None other than Prince Flavius, heir to the Imperial throne!"

Martel blinked, unsure how to react.

"I know, what an honour! I helped it along, of course. I saw him briefly and made sure to mention how I met him last year, along with you."

Of all the people in the Empire, Martel would be hard pressed to think of anyone whose attention he desired less.

"Do not worry." Maximilian gave him a cunning smile. "He told me to ensure you returned on the last night, just like last year, for a private meeting."

Martel slowly closed his eyes and clenched his fists to keep himself from saying anything he might regret. Finally, he was able to string together a row of words that could not be considered offensive. "Why would you do that?"

The mageknight stared at him, confused. "Martel, he will be the emperor one day. You will serve him in his legions. Do you not understand all the privilege that could follow by having his friendship?"

"I see it clearly from your point of view, as his future praetorian. But Max, my rank is locked. I'm not seeking advancement, nor is it even available to me in the first place. Mageknights may advance in rank, but I'll live and die as a battlemage." Even with his limited knowledge of the legions, Martel knew as much.

"That is your problem, Nordmark! You lack imagination. Impress the prince, and he will demand that you serve at the imperial court instead."

"As what? Heater of his bathwater? I set things on fire, Max, which is famously not considered welcome inside buildings."

"You do all that enchanting, right? What use is that on the battlefield? Light and heat, those are most welcome inside any home." The mageknight leaned back with his arms crossed and a smug expression.

Martel struggled to find a good retort, so he resigned himself to a scowl and renewed attention on his meal instead of his friend.

He heard rather than saw the grin on Maximilian's face as the latter spoke. "My father's carriage will pick us up the usual time on Soliday."

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The afternoon passed as the morning, but as Martel sat down for the evening meal, he found himself with a companion once again. This time it was the other half of his circle of friends. "Have you heard?" Eleanor asked.

"If this is about the Imperial palace, I'm not to blame. Maximilian insisted." And while Martel might be willing to disappoint his friend, he did not feel ready to defy the heir to the Empire.

"No, the rumour about the pestilence. I thought maybe with your work in the apothecary, you might know more than others."

"Oh, that. It's already dealt with. I went with Mistress Rana myself to deliver all the cures to the afflicted ship."

"I guess you have not heard," Eleanor considered. "Or maybe it is just a rumour and nothing more."

"Heard what? What do you mean?"

"Pestilence has broken out in the copper lanes. The entire district is being quarantined."

Martel looked at Eleanor, and for the second time today, he found himself at a loss for words.

## Chapter 485: A City Divided

### A City Divided

By the next day, rumours were proven true. Master Basil and his acolytes returned from the copper lanes, where they and other earthmages had raised walls to block off all the streets and alleys that led in and out of the copper lanes. In addition, doors and windows of the buildings along this new inner fortification had been boarded up.

As for maintaining the quarantine, several cohorts of the First Legion had set up guard posts to keep constant watch along the entirety of the perimeter and created an improvised gate along the only road that remained open into the district. Should anyone try to use the cover of night, lightstones had been placed to create constant illumination; in some cases, plundered from streetlamps in the other districts to gather sufficient quantities.

"It still sounds mad to me," Martel mumbled after hearing Eleanor explain the precautions taken by the city guard. "How will all those people get food?"

"Shipments will be brought in and distributed. This has happened before," she claimed. "It is the only way to prevent the spread."

Martel could see the wisdom of containing the disease rather than allowing it to run rampant through every district; even so, he wondered if the same measures would have been taken had the illness been found in the nobles' quarter first. "How long will this last?"

"You know more about a physician's work than me, I should think. But it could last months if comparable to previous outbreaks," she speculated before taking a bite from her bread. They had taken seats on the steps up to the Circle of Fire, eating their dinner meal; likewise, small islands of students sat scattered around this and other hallways, the common rooms of either dormitory tower, and some of the empty classrooms.

"That's a long time. Mistress Rana ran herself ragged making cures just for forty people. There must be thousands living in the copper lanes."

"Tens of thousands, at least. But all the alchemists and apothecaries in the city are at work creating remedies too; you have already seen that. And both the Crimson Friars and the Daughters of Saint Alexandra are setting up wards inside the district to help."

Martel shot her a look. "Who, what? Oh, religious orders?"

Eleanor nodded. "Both of them with a duty to assist the sick and infirm. Do they not have any chapters in Nordmark?"

"Maybe, but if so, not anywhere near where I lived. But Nordmark is a huge province. Most of it is also empty land." Martel held out his hand. "I can take your plate. I have to get back to it anyway."

"Alright, thank you. I should get ready for my next class. Strange to go about the old routines when the city feels changed. Especially the Lyceum."

"That might be the case for you. I no longer have classes on Mandays, meaning I get to spend the entire day helping."

"Lucky you." She wore a wry expression, but her face quickly turned serious. "It is a good thing that you do. Helping out with all the remedies."

"That's why I learned how to do it." Martel had never felt more validated in his choice to pursue alchemy than these last few days; at the same time, he suddenly felt the burden of this responsibility as well. If he made a mistake, a faulty elixir would kill a dying patient, their trust betrayed. "I may regret it in the coming days, spending all my spare time creating potions."

"Well, tomorrow evening you shall have a deserved break." As he looked at her without understanding, Eleanor continued, "Maximilian told me you will attend the celebration at the palace. I am surprised he was able to wear down your resistance."

"I forgot about that, with everything going on. Well, he left me little choice." Martel glanced over the small groups of students in the hallway; a small sign of the unusual days they were living in. "It'll be strange to be surrounded by song and merriment, especially since I could spend those hours working."

"Well, in difficult days, we need music and joy all the more," Eleanor argued. "You shall be back here, toiling over cauldrons soon enough. Enjoy an evening away while it lasts."

Martel felt unsure he could relax given the company he would be in; from what recalled of the prince, he was a strange fellow and difficult to read. Last year, he had commanded Martel and Maximilian to fight each other for his amusement; who knew what he would come up with this year? "I'll try," he replied. "I better get going. I'll see you around."

With half a smile in farewell to Eleanor, Martel took the plates and went to the dining hall. He deposited the dirty kitchenware by the other stacks and glanced out at the many tables in the great chamber. Normally, there would be benches filled with students, and the tables would only hold food and drink.

Now, the former had been cleared away, and large bundles of apothecary remedies and alchemical reagents filled the latter. Scores of students and those from the city plying the relevant trades stood throughout the hall, working endlessly to prepare the mixtures that would help defeat this terrible illness that plagued the copper lanes.

After gathering prepared quantities of various ingredients, Martel left the hall to make his way to Mistress Rana's laboratory, where both the alchemist and her apprentice laboured to make cures for pestilence.

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On the first night of the quarantine, more than sixty people attempted to flee the copper lanes. Most used ropes to climb down from rooftops; one man, lacking even that, lowered himself down from a window and fell the remaining distance, injuring himself to the point that further flight was not possible.

Lying in wait, the city guards apprehended the fugitives. Two died resisting; the remaining were marched or hauled to the gate into the copper lanes and thrown back into the district.

## Chapter 486: An Intellectual Debate

### An Intellectual Debate

Once Martel woke up, he wasted little time. As soon as he could grab food from the kitchens, he took a plate with him to Mistress Rana's laboratory. He found the alchemist asleep and Nora at work; the latter greeted him with a tired nod and worn expression.

"Have you already eaten?" he asked quietly. He could not imagine how she had been faster than him.

"No, I woke up a while back, before the bell rang. So I went here and got started. I'll eat when this potion is done." The cauldron in front of her simmered with the occasional bubble bursting up from the liquid inside.

"What about her?" Martel glanced at Mistress Rana. "Should we grab something for her? You think she'll wake up soon?"

"She'll take care of herself. Judging by the coals when I got here, she had only just gone to bed, so I don't think she'll wake up any time soon."

Martel devoured his porridge and set the plate aside. "I can't be here all day, unfortunately. I have to leave this afternoon."

"That's fine. I don't think Mistress Rana expects you to work a specific number of hours, and you have your classes, of course. Just help as you can."

He began gathering the familiar ingredients to start his own round of alchemy by the second fireplace, set up to accommodate an extra alchemist at work. "I'll try."

"That in mind, I think I'll sleep a bit earlier tonight, so I can wake up early tomorrow as well. So if you can, one fireplace will be available tonight."

"Alright. I should be back by then. I guess I can do one round before I go to bed."

She glanced at him briefly. "Back? I thought you had class this afternoon. Where are you going?"

Knowing that Nora worked every waking hour, Martel felt guilty about the answer. "I've been told – summoned, you might say – to attend the celebration at the Imperial palace tonight. I don't want to go," he hastened to add, "but they want their battlemage to make an appearance, I guess, and I had to follow orders."

"Oh. A celebration, that sounds nice. I didn't realise that was going on. They don't really send invitations to the apothecary at the Lyceum."

Unsure whether she had made a jest, Martel gave a half-hearted laughter and turned his attention towards his cauldron.

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When time no longer permitted Martel to remain in the laboratory, he returned to his chamber and changed clothes. He did not dress up as he had the other day, tired of playing the role of a courtier. The only concession he made was to change into his spare robe, which did not have the smell of boiling alchemy infused into the fabric. Martel was a wizard, and he would attend this function as one. If that raised eyebrows, hopefully that meant he would never be invited again.

Maximilian did give him a pointed look as they met up, but the viscount made no remarks. Maximilian was affected in different ways when an evening like tonight lay ahead; it seemed that specifically a meeting with the prince caused the subdued effect. Martel felt much the same way, and they stood in silence until the carriage arrived.

The drive through the city to the palace district passed by quickly, though Martel could not help but think of the copper lanes, where such movement was made impossible. He wondered if the containment failed and the pestilence spread to the other quarters; would the city guard wall up every district, one after the other, until Morcaster had become nine cities?

He supposed that if it went that far, and the disease could be found in every neighbourhood, there would be no point in walling anything off. Perhaps the people of the copper lanes would be best served with the illness making its escape, Martel thought with grim humour.

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They had not been long in the palace before summoned. Unlike last time, the servant did not take them to an outdoor garden, but deeper into the complex; presumably, the private chambers of the prince.

As they arrived, Martel noticed that the young prince had a small gathering of other nobles around his age, like last year. If they were the same, he could not tell, as he did not know them, except for Cheval. Martel should have expected as much, and he knew to expect the worst from him; well, it had been a while since Martel last humiliated him, so perhaps it was overdue.

Prince Flavius, pale and dark-haired with large eyes that seemed devoid of expression, turned towards the newcomers. "Viscount Maximilian and his elemental mage."

Martel watched his friend give an elegant bow and made one himself, albeit a shorter and simpler version.

"You are dressed for war, master wizard," the prince remarked.

Martel glanced down at his red robe. "I am a battlemage, or soon to be, anyway. I prefer to dress as what I am."

"Better than borrowing feathers. And Maximilian here claims that you study alchemy and that you are involved in our efforts to restrain the plague."

"That's true, Your Highness," Martel replied, trying not to sound surprised. He had not guessed this to be the reason for the summons, nor did he realise that Maximilian knew about his recent efforts in alchemy. Perhaps he had underestimated how observant his friend could be.

"But the Master of Alchemy at the Lyceum is a foreigner, is he not?"

"She is, Your Highness," Martel replied, trying to be as subtle as possible about the correction. "From Sindhu, where the knowledge of alchemy exceeds ours. Hence why she has the position."

"Of course the half-breed would claim that," Cheval interjected, and Martel wondered what had taken him so long before he began spewing his bile. "Always undermining Asterian magic and our belief in ourselves."

"Should the pestilence reach your home, I will remember your opinion when you are at death's door begging for a cure," Martel replied coldly.

"As if I would ever accept anything from you or that Sindhian poisoner!"

Anger burned through Martel's mind. "She is the best alchemist in this city and my teacher, possessing invaluable knowledge. You will not speak of her in that manner, or I will put you in your place."

"Perhaps take a moment to calm yourself," Maximilian mumbled.

"You would never dare," Cheval sneered. "A Tyrian peasant laying his hands on me? Preposterous!"

"I do not think it is." The prince, his expression strangely placid in comparison to the others, looked from the young nobleman to the fire acolyte. "Please elaborate, master wizard. How exactly would you put Guillaume in his place?"

"Never mind what I said. Beat him up," Maximilian whispered.

"I'll burn his ears right off." Martel raised a hand and let sparks of lightning jump between his fingertips. "That'll remind him to listen to me next time he sees me."

"I doubt that will improve his hearing, but very well." Prince Flavius turned his eyes on Cheval. "You have heard his threat. Will you rescind your words?"

The young nobleman looked around the room and saw nobody willing to come to his aid. His eyes rested on the inkling of a spell taking shape around Martel's hand. "I do."

"Because you were wrong or out of fear from having your ears burned right off your scalp?"

Cheval swallowed. "I was wrong."

"Interesting. I suppose we should be glad to have such a talented alchemist at the Lyceum, given the challenge our city faces." The prince spoke devoid of emotion, as if concluding an intellectual debate on an abstract matter. "Master wizard, tell me more about the advantages of Sindhian alchemy."

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Chapter 487: Rolling up Sleeves

Rolling up Sleeves

A fiveday after the quarantine began, Martel made his way through the city with a great bundle on his back. The mood felt subdued on the streets, even if the pestilence had been contained to the copper lanes; perhaps it was merely the effect of winter suppressing trade and traffic, but it felt to Martel as if the city lay dormant, or perhaps holding its breath.

Martel walked straight south until he had passed halfway through the harbour district before turning right. Soon after, he could see the gate that separated the copper lanes from the rest of the city; it was not made of solid wood like the outer gates, but rather it was built like a fence to keep animals inside their pasture. On a small pillar on either side, a lightstone lay to keep the place illuminated even at night.

Ten soldiers stood guard, mostly pulling their cloaks around themselves to shield against the howling wind. Furthermore, they had made a station out of a nearby house, so additional patrols constantly came and left. Martel approached, but when he was still a small distance away, he made his final turn to enter a small warehouse.

Inside, he saw the same sight as the dining hall of the Lyceum last fiveday, before operations had been moved here to be closer to the copper lanes. Long tables filled with ingredients and remedies, along with apothecaries turning the former into the latter. A handful of alchemists were also at work; some of them used Asterian methods, while two others practised the Sindhian manner.

Approaching Mistress Rana, Martel carefully placed his big bundle on the table by her fireplace, where a potion happily bubbled. "Everything on your list, mistress," he said as she turned towards him. "As for the apothecary, supplies will last to the end of the month, maybe a few more days."

"The infirmary will have to get it from elsewhere," the alchemist muttered. "Nora and I will not be back before that, by the looks of it."

"Is it bad in there?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm going in for the first time tomorrow, bringing in the fruit of our work and explaining to all these monks and nuns how to use it – and just as importantly, when it would be a waste to use it." She picked up an empty vial, waiting to be filled with life-giving elixir. "If they waste a single one of these, I'll tan their hides."

"How many do you think you'll need?" Martel asked.

"Far more than we can ever make," Mistress Rana admitted. "For everyone we can expect to get sick, we'll have potions for less than one in a hundred. Even if some of them can be saved by – other means," she remarked with a glance at the Asterians at work in the warehouse, "most will have to simply get well on their own. These cures will be for those who have no hope otherwise, yet aren't so close to death's door that even a potion is too late." She sighed. "A difficult distinction to make. Hence my trip tomorrow."

"Is it safe? I mean, for you?" Martel did not wish to imagine the implications if Mistress Rana became sick.

"I shall take what precautions I can. And when I return, I shall remain isolated for a fiveday – a small house has been prepared for that purpose, complete with supplies that I may continue doing alchemy. You and Nora will have to bring me more ingredients as needed, and ideally some food and water as well, but she has been informed of all that. Just make sure you come by when your classes allow it."

"Of course, mistress." Martel looked towards the various workstations around the warehouse, nearly all of them busy. He could work a few bells, enough to make a potion or two, before he had to head back to the Lyceum. Tomorrow was Solday – assuming Master Jerome would let him work down here rather than his usual chore in the workshops, he might come back all day tomorrow.

And perhaps Martel could help even more. He quickly made a decision; rather than start working now, he resolutely turned around to walk back to the Lyceum.

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Once he returned to the castle, Martel went to the chambers of the overseer. He had not spoken to Mistress Juliana in a long time; relations between them were cold, to say the least. But he assumed she would not allow that to affect her decision regarding his request.

"Enter."

Martel stepped inside and found Mistress Juliana in a comfortable chair with a glass of wine. "You have a moment to speak?"

"Speaking to students is one of my responsibilities." She beckoned for him to take a seat as well, which he did.

"I would like to help out down by the harbour. Working alongside Mistress Rana to make potions. I'm one of the only people in the city who can, and they need every single one."

"I would not object to that. The Lyceum does not care how you spend your spare time, as long as you break no laws. Doing alchemy work supervised by the Mistress of Alchemy is something we can only encourage."

"The only thing is, I'll spend a full bell walking to the district, and another walking home. That's two potions I could have made if I didn't spend all the time moving about."

She took a sip of her glass. "What is your point?"

"I would like to be excused from all classes, so I might stay by the harbour permanently, just like Mistress Rana and her apprentice."

"In less than two months, you will be examined on your abilities as a battlemage. If you do not pass, you will be thrown out and made to pay the entire cost of your education. It seems unwise for you to disrupt your studies at this point."

"I have learned nearly all that I can. I'm as good a fighter as I'll be – at least, a few lessons in combat once a fiveday won't make a difference with that. And I think it's better I spend my time helping at the docks than assisting here in the workshops. Lastly, I'm by far the best of all the fire acolytes. If I can't pass this examination, none of them can."

The overseer gave him a long look. "I can agree that you will be excused from your various duties at the Lyceum – except for lessons in fire magic. That gives you three days out of five that you may assist at the docks."

This was not ideal; it meant Martel still had to run back and forth on some days. But he suffered no illusions that arguing or badgering Mistress Juliana would accomplish anything; he accepted the compromise. "Thank you."

"I am simply glad to know that you are spending your spare time more wisely than you have in the past."

Martel let the remark go unanswered.

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Carrying another bundle to the harbour, this time containing his personal belongings, Martel returned to the warehouse. He found Mistress Rana and Nora still at work, though they paused seeing him at this late hour.

"I'll have to be at the Lyceum on some days," he began to explain, "but the remaining days, I can be here. It seemed expedient to sleep here."

"You can leave your things over there, by our sleeping corner," Mistress Rana told him. "And you may use that space over there for working."

"Understood." Martel received a tired smile from Nora as he walked by, depositing his bundle before returning to start brewing.

## Chapter 488: Copper Lock

### Copper Lock

Martel did not feel particularly rested when he woke up the next morning. While his mattress was fine, the warehouse was cold, and his blanket could not shield him sufficiently. He would have lit a fire, but any fuel had to be reserved for the alchemy.

Therefore dreary-eyed, Martel got up and saw that Mistress Rana had already risen and returned to work; Nora lay nearby, still asleep. Their improvised beds, consisting of cloth stuffed with hay, lay scattered around the corner, where the other people working to make remedies also took rest.

Besides the small contingent from the Lyceum, more than a score of alchemists and apothecaries worked here as well. Given the size of the city, Martel assumed more people of these professions were gathered elsewhere to likewise help meet the mounting need for anything that would abate the pestilence and save lives.

A table held piles of food, mostly bread – a day or two old – some cold cuts of pork, and a small assortment of fruit. There was no strict routine like at the Lyceum. People worked, slept, and ate according to their own decisions; some worked even a few hours at night, and it was typical to see a handful sleeping during the day.

Martel supplied himself from the table of food and quickly ate before he walked over to help Mistress Rana stuff potions into a case.

"Time for me to leave, but you and Nora shall be fine on your own until I can return. If you do have any questions, now's your chance to ask them," she told Martel.

"How long will you isolate yourself before returning?"

"Five days is sufficient for the first symptoms to appear. Coughing, inklings of fever or a light sweat. In which case, I'll take an elixir, so nothing to worry about."

"Where will you stay?"

"I suppose I might as well show you, since it's about time I get going." The alchemist walked out of the warehouse with Martel following her. Close by on their right, they had the improvised gate into the copper lanes. A handful of guards stood there as usual, rubbing their hands together and complaining about the cold. Mistress Rana pointed at a small, unassuming house on the other side of the street. "We have prepared that, complete with a small fireplace and everything needed for alchemy."

Martel looked at the building; even if it would be more than adequate for a single person to live in, Martel imagined how small it would feel if you could not leave it. He did not envy Mistress Rana her task.

Next to him, she took out a cloth mask and a vial, pouring the contents of the latter onto the former. A strange odour reached Martel, and he could not guess what manner of concoction it might be. After taking a deep breath, Mistress Rana tied the cloth around her face to cover her mouth and nostrils. "See you in a fiveday."

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Martel remained outside the warehouse for a little while, watching his teacher walk down to the gate and join up with a small convoy. More guards had appeared along with numerous carts. Martel could not tell from this distance what they contained, but he assumed food and other essentials to be delivered.

He wondered a little at how it was all organised. As far as he knew, the guards did not quarantine themselves after escorting the carts into the copper lanes, so presumably, they avoided all contact with the people inside and simply left the supplies inside the district. But if so, they could not keep watch that the food was distributed fairly; Martel could easily imagine people fighting over it or hoarding it while their neighbours starved. Even in a small town like Engby, where people knew and helped each other often, people had soon stopped sharing food during the winter of famine some ten years ago.

Martel thought about Sparrow and the rest of Weasel's gang, and how they fared. He could only hope that matters had been thought through better than he imagined, and that the children got all the food they needed to get through this.

But he had no way of knowing, nor could he venture inside and make certain; while he did not fear contracting the disease as such, given that he could make a cure for himself, it seemed irresponsible to enter and leave the district on the slight chance that he brought the pestilence back and allowed it to spread to the rest of the city. No matter how minuscule the risk, given the precautions they took, Martel was not prepared to roll those dice.

He felt admiration for the monks and nuns who had volunteered to enter the copper lanes, trying to help as many sick people as possible. It seemed certain that sooner or later, they would contract the disease themselves. If so, their best hope of survival rested with the potions made in the warehouse behind him. While perhaps not as dedicated as those working inside the district, Martel had his own role to play, saving lives. With a final glance at the copper lanes, Martel returned to his task.

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Late in the evening, Martel finished a potion and had to consider when to leave, as he had lessons in fire magic the next day, requiring him to be back at the Lyceum. He might start work on another elixir; it would be finished around midnight, and with some two hours to walk home, it would leave him tired the next morning.

Looking at the corner for sleeping in the cold warehouse, another thought came to him. While perhaps a little frivolous, since he could spend those hours doing alchemy, Martel decided to use his remaining time doing enchantment. He found a large stone tile, perhaps left behind or brought here

for some unknown purpose by another working in the warehouse; regardless, Martel claimed it as his.

It took him a while, but when he was done, he felt certain the enchantment would last a few months. Hopefully long enough for the pestilence to end. As Martel moved the stone tile to the sleeping corner, the other alchemists and apothecaries nearby noticed the emanating heat. All of them looking as weary as Martel felt, they simply mumbled their gratitude or nodded to him briefly before resuming their work or lying down to seek rest. His work done, the fire acolyte left them and the warehouse, returning to the Lyceum.

## Chapter 489: The Eagle Flies Alone

### The Eagle Flies Alone

Martel felt confused briefly when he woke up until the familiar surroundings of his room at the Lyceum asserted themselves. Minimal sleep and the change of bed from the warehouse to his school had thrown him off until he remembered why he was back. He had classes today in fire magic, which he would attend per his agreement with Mistress Juliana. .

After eating breakfast at an empty table, savouring the hot porridge, Martel went to the western courtyard for his lesson. The statue of Atreus greeted him, wet from last night's rain. The banners hung from the windows, ready to become targets; the other students stood around as well, keeping their distance to him as usual.

Moira appeared. "When you feel done wasting time, go ahead with the lesson."

Martel looked at the other students. All of them had chosen to use a ranged spell to directly attack the target, rather than establish a connection with the fabric and igniting it directly.

Martel understood why; it seemed more likely to succeed. If his need to burn a piece of cloth flapping in the wind had been urgent, he might have chosen the same. But this was a lesson, meant to help them grow their magical prowess. Hitting his target with a spell might improve Martel's aim, but not his talent with magic. It seemed to him that extending the range with which he could use magic seemed more beneficial. For that reason, while the other acolytes unleashed bolts and blasts of fire, Martel simply let his magical senses extend forward as far as it could.

He felt nothing, other than the flashes of heat from his fellow students' spells streaking through the air. The distance was too great. But it could be increased, he figured. Martel had improved his spellpower, enchantment, and other aspects of his magic simply by practising; the same could hold true here. He would ask Moira for guidance if he thought it helped, but he had no desire to interact with her; perhaps he might seek out Master Alistair if he wanted advice.

For this lesson, he would let his own thoughts and instinct guide him. But he needed a way to measure whether he improved his magical reach. Looking around, Martel saw a twig on the ground about twenty paces away. Although wet from rain, it was still a material that would happily burn if persuaded. Reaching out with his magic, Martel provided the needed persuasion, and the wood ignited.

"Someone's far of the mark," Harriet snickered before resuming her own spellcasting.

Ignoring her, Martel raised the wind to push the twig further away from himself before he once more reached out with his magic to tangle with his target, testing his abilities at this new distance.

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Martel looked up to see Eleanor take a seat opposite him at his dinner table. She gave a quick smile. "It has been a while since I last saw you around the castle."

He nodded a little, swallowing his food before replying. "I'm spending most days down by the docks, making potions. I sleep there as well to avoid wasting time going back and forth. I'm only back on the two days when I have fire lessons."

"I had heard something to that effect," she related, "that you had left to do alchemy with Mistress Rana. I just found it hard to believe that you would be excused from all classes, but I see now the truth was somewhere in between."

"I'm surprised anybody noticed I'm gone. Other than you."

"Oh, everyone's eyes are on the copper lanes and those in near proximity." She hesitated. "You may have noticed that people are keeping their distance to you. Words like 'pestilence' scare people to a nearly irrational degree. Hence all the talking about you, I guess. People are nervous, even if you are not going inside the actual district."

"Honestly, I hadn't realised. I usually eat alone, which suits me fine. Not that I mind my present company." He looked up at her with a smile.

Strangely, Eleanor seemed apprehensive. "Yes. I am sorry that I join you so rarely. I spend my days with the other mageknights, one class to the next, so we usually eat together as well."

"I know, don't worry," he impressed on her. "I'm just glad to have you as my friend. You're not required to do anything."

"Maybe I just feel guilty because you are volunteering your services to help the city while I and others do nothing. At the very least, you should be thanked for your efforts rather than shunned."

"I guess that would be nice, but it's not something on my mind." Martel gave a shrug as he finished his meal. "It doesn't really matter what others think. I'm doing it regardless."

"So you are. Morcaster is fortunate to have people like you."

"And some who do far more than me. At least I'm not in any danger of getting sick, unlike those who've gone inside to the copper lanes. Me, I just work in a warehouse."

"Still, most of us do nothing." Eleanor gave him a mirthless smile. "Suddenly, all my spells and magic seem far less impressive."

"That's the hardest thing about learning magic, isn't it," Martel considered. "It's not just about all the things you can now do. It's also about all the things you'll never be able to do." He rose from his seat. "I'm going to get some sleep before my next class. Not a lot of it available down by the docks," he jested. "I'll see you later."

She looked up at him, her expression remaining much the same. "Of course. Take care."

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Getting three hours' sleep between classes felt like a luxury; about half of what he usually got at night lately. For his afternoon lesson, he resumed his attempts at improving his ranged magic, still

with little success. Afterwards, he waited until supper was served, ate his fill, and then returned to the harbour, where he had time to brew two potions before going to bed.

## Chapter 490: The Seed of Leadership

### The Seed of Leadership

The days passed, seemingly without change. The quarantine continued with no sign of the disease lessening its grip upon the copper lanes; in the warehouse near the district, the apothecaries and alchemists toiled all waking hours, sometimes at night as well.

After one such late night, Martel slept soundly even after the sun rose in the morning. He only woke from the sound of terrible commotion that likewise drew the attention of everybody else in the warehouse. Many of them ran outside to find out what was happening.

"Nora, finish my work here," Mistress Rana told her apprentice, abandoning her alchemy to likewise seek out the source of the noise. Putting on his robe and tying his boots on, foregoing socks in his haste, Martel finally hurried outside as well.

The sounds came from down the street, where the temporary gate to the copper lanes lay. Looking in that direction, Martel saw a concerning sight. A crowd had gathered on the inside of the quarantined area, looking both angry and desperate. In between shouts and the occasional rock being thrown, the mob pushed up against the gate; being a temporary construction, it was not solid, but rather constructed of wooden beams much like a fence. It was locked by a heavy chain, which the protesters could not damage; but some of them had brought axes and began chopping on the construction, where it was hinged on either side. A handful of guards stood trying to prod their spears through to drive the crowd back, but they found themselves attacked by thrown rocks in return.

Already, Mistress Rana ran towards the brawl, and Martel followed as quickly as he could. Just as they reached the fight, the gate came crashing down. Even with better weapons, the few guards stood no chance against the scores of angry citizens.

A few steps ahead of Martel, Mistress Rana emptied a vial into her mouth. A moment later, a great burst of fire erupted from her lips as if she breathed flames. This sudden eruption of fire and magic had the expected effect; anger turned to terror as the people of the copper lanes began to push back, though the rows behind them made this difficult.

Next to Martel, a stone struck a soldier on his head; his helmet likely saved his life, but he fell to the ground with a groan and a line of blood across his forehead. Summoning his magical shield lest he suffered the same fate, Martel knew he had to act fast before the situation was hopelessly beyond control. These were ordinary people; he did not wish to kill anybody. But if they escaped, they might spread the pestilence to the rest of the city. Fortunately, he had the perfect spell for this occasion.

Taking advantage of Mistress Rana's efforts to hold back the crowd, Martel summoned his wall of flames in the empty space between the citizens and the guards. He made it tall and burning hot that none should be tempted to even go near; this also made it clearly visible to those further back in the mob as a sign that their attempt to flee was futile.

Slowly, Martel moved his wall forward until it fit into the gap where the gate had stood. It was not a permanent solution, but it would buy them time.

"Build a barricade!" Mistress Rana exclaimed to the soldiers. "Carts, crates, debris, whatever you can find! Pull up the cobbled stones if you must! I'll get more guards!" She ran down the street towards the temporary barracks used by the city guard.

"Sir! Are those our orders?" asked one of the soldiers.

To his surprise, Martel found all of them staring at him. "Of course! Get to it!"

The guards jumped into action, dispersing in every direction to find any kind of material that would serve. Even the wounded soldier by Martel's feet began to stir, trying to get back up. As he tried to do so, he almost fell back, and Martel had to grab him by the shoulder.

"Easy now. Sit back down," Martel told him. "You're in no condition to help."

"As you say, sir." Once more on the ground, the soldier carefully removed his helmet and tentatively placed a finger against his head wound.

Half of his attention dedicated to his active spell, Martel glanced around to see how the other guards fared with their task. "Hope they find something soon," he muttered. He could not maintain the wall forever. "Not sure why they bothered waiting for me to say something."

"Soldier's instinct," replied the guard sitting down, even if Martel had mostly been talking to himself. "We always look to a commanding officer for orders in situations like this, but we are so stretched thin, most days we don't even have an optio with us."

"I'm not a commander of any kind," Martel mumbled, his attention still on his spell and the other soldiers.

"You may not command a cohort, sir, but you still hold the rank of prefect. And in situations like this, we are glad to have you with us, sir."

Martel finally understood what the soldier meant. Thanks to his spell, they thought Martel was a battlemage attached to the legion, making him an officer and their superior. No reason to disabuse them of the notion until the current crisis had been averted, Martel figured, but it was a strange feeling to have men twice his age or older look to him for leadership. He did not particularly like the thought of such responsibility. Around him, the soldiers returned, hauling rocks, crates, bags of sand, and anything else near at hand.

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Mistress Rana eventually returned with about thirty soldiers, not all of them in full uniform or looking particularly sharp-eyed; the need to patrol the entire perimeter around the copper lanes left the city guard as strained as the apothecaries and alchemists working ceaselessly in the warehouse. Swiftly, they helped strengthen the improvised barricade, and finally, Martel could let his spell dissipate.

Wiping sweat from his brow, Martel looked at Mistress Rana. "That could have gone badly."

"It could have. You did well."

"I'm shocked they tried to break the quarantine. Are things that bad inside the district?" Martel had not been inside the copper lanes, but the alchemist had gone several times now to oversee the treatments carried out by the monks and nuns administering to the sick.

"Many are ill, but I don't think it's fear of the disease that caused this desperate attempt," Mistress Rana considered. "I have heard more complaints about lack of food. It's difficult to bring in enough supplies every day for thousands of people, let alone get it properly distributed. It would not be difficult for unscrupulous thugs to rob it from others in this district, either for their own needs or to sell it back at exorbitant prices."

"But I thought the guards went inside with the deliveries of foods to prevent such a thing."

"They do, but they stay only briefly and generally leave it to the people themselves to oversee distribution. If the guards did more, they would have to get into close contact with the locals, running the risk of catching the disease. We already have dozens of guards isolated after being inside the district, just to be on the safe side, which barely leave them enough to maintain the necessary patrols elsewhere." Mistress Rana crossed her arms, looking in the direction of the copper lanes.

As much as the thought displeased him, Martel knew of the solution. "You need help from inside. From someone already in the district, who can provide the necessary organisation and manpower."

She gave him a look. "Something you can conjure up?"

"Not exactly, but I know who you must speak with. Her name is Kerra, and she owns a place called The Copper Drum. She has a host of people at her beck and call. Former legionaries, prize fighters, and all that sort. The kind who can help maintain order."

"And how exactly do you know of her and her underlings?"

"I used to run my own little apothecary in these lanes, if you recall." Close enough to the truth and the most innocent of Martel's possible explanations. "In a place where the guards never visit, you soon figure out who holds the power."

"I see." Despite her sceptical tone, Mistress Rana did not challenge his explanation. "And she can be trusted?"

"Not in the slightest, but she's pragmatic. Enlisting her help to ensure food supplies are orderly distributed will prevent trouble in her backyard. She'll no doubt skim some of it for her own needs, which I suppose will be a payment of sorts to her. But if she gets too greedy, or she doesn't get this done properly, tell her a battlemage will show up and burn down her tavern. If you say my name, she'll know it's not an idle threat."

The alchemist scrutinised the acolyte standing before her. "I'm half surprised you expect me to deal with her rather than simply run inside and negotiate yourself."

"She might not take kindly to the idea if it comes from me. I'm better used as a threat." This might even be true, though Martel's real reason was that he wanted nothing to do with that woman, nor did he wish to isolate for a fiveday after going into the district.

Mistress Rana slowly let out her breath. "Very well. Prepare the small house for my return, so I can keep working while I isolate."

Martel bowed his head. "Of course, mistress."