

Firebrand 491

Chapter 491: Noble Privilege

Noble Privilege

Martel's regular routine of doing only alchemy and sleeping resumed, interspersed with his occasional return to the Lyceum for class. He and Nora worked mostly in silence; even the talkative apprentice seemed to have run out of conversational topics, or perhaps weariness had left its mark on her as well.

In general, the only sounds in the warehouse came from tools chopping or grinding ingredients, the subdued crackling of flames from the few fireplaces in use, the bubbling of potions brewing in a cauldron, or snoring from the corner of the building. Martel had become so accustomed to the noise, he barely noticed it anymore.

"I'll bring some food and supplies to Mistress Rana," Nora declared, for once having something worth saying. The alchemist was still in isolation after having ventured into the copper lanes to reach an arrangement with Kerra about restoring order to the district.

Martel looked up from his cauldron to glance in her direction. She had just finished an elixir, packing the vial into a potion case before moving on. "Oh, sure."

Placing different bits of food inside a piece of cloth, Nora looked back. "Has – has Mistress Rana paid you these last fivedays for your work?"

"Not a penny. Not surprised if she forgot with everything going on, or maybe she just hasn't had the opportunity. She's always here, unless she's going into the copper lanes or in isolation."

"I guess. I could use some coin, but it's not like she can get me any while she's still isolating herself. I'll ask when she is back here again, I suppose."

"Yeah," Martel replied in a distracted manner, his attention back on his cauldron.

Occupied with his alchemy and adding reagents to his brew, Martel did not notice the sound of a dozen boots marching into the warehouse.

"What are you doing here?" Nora asked.

That caught Martel's attention at last. Turning his head, he noticed six armed men. They wore the insignia of some house, marking them as household guards to some nobility; Martel did not recognise the crest. The various apothecaries at work had all noticed something underway and pulled back, putting distance between themselves and the intruders. Only Nora stood in front of them, placing herself between the soldiers and their small alchemical laboratory.

"We serve the count of Islemont. Your alchemist, the Sindhian woman, sold our lord a handful of the potions that you make in here. We are here to pick them up." Even as he spoke, his eyes surveyed their workplace, lingering on the empty flacons yet to be filled.

"Unless the quarantining of the copper lanes has been breached and disease is running rampant through your household, I can't imagine you have need of these elixirs compared to the poor souls inside the district, who are actually ill," Nora responded. Behind her, Martel prepared himself for a confrontation, eyeing the six potential opponents, but he would give Nora a chance first to persuade them to leave.

"I'm not here to barter with an apprentice," the guard snarled. "The deal was made with your mistress. Stand aside, girlie, let us take what we came for, and we'll be on our way again."

"Over there," said another of the warriors and began moving towards the potion case. "That looks right, doesn't it?"

Martel quickly advanced with fire engulfing his hand. "You take one more step, and I'll make you regret it."

The guard looked at his leader, who nodded to him; encouraged, he stepped forward and reached out for the elixirs.

Martel released a fire bolt straight into the man's stomach, making him bend over with an outburst of pain. Immediately, all his comrades drew their swords.

In response, the battlemage held out his hand with flickers of lightning jumping between his fingertips. "That spell was a warning. You take your man and leave, and he'll be fine. But my next spell will be lethal."

"If you have business with Mistress Rana, I suggest you return when she's present." In Nora's hand, an icicle took shape looking as sharp as a dagger.

The guards looked at each other; two of them took their wounded companion by the shoulders, and they all retreated.

Martel kept his spell ready until he saw them disappear before he allowed the energy to dissipate. "That was weird," he mumbled. "I didn't expect someone would come here and try to steal from us, least of all guards from some noble house."

"Plagues and pestilence put a fright into people," Nora responded. "They don't always think with reason. Probably a lot who'd feel safer if they knew they had the cure at hand."

"I don't think the timing was a coincidence either. They came while Mistress Rana is still in isolation, probably thinking that would make the theft go easier."

"They didn't account for us," Nora said in a chipper fashion, almost sounding like her usual self, though her tone of voice immediately grew concerned again. "But if that's true, they might bide their time and be back. You're going back to the school tonight, right? I'll be here alone." She glanced at the apothecaries, who had resumed their work. "I doubt they'll be much help."

"The city guard is nearby. They usually got ten or so watching the gate just down the street," Martel considered. "Not much trouble for them to have one man standing watch here, and if there's trouble, he can alert the others by the gate to come help."

"You think they'll agree to that? Even if it's just one person, the city guard seem really stretched thin."

Martel blew out his breath. "Let's find out. Finish my potion, will you?"

Martel walked down the street, approaching the rebuilt gate leading into the copper lanes. This time, the timber beams had been reinforced with iron. A handful of guards stood posted outside as usual. He did not recognise them, but evidently, they recognised him.

"It's the prefect," one of them mumbled, elbowing his comrade. "The battlemage."

"Who is in command?" Martel asked as he reached them.

"I'm the optio on duty, sir," one of them declared.

"You know the warehouse where the alchemists work? Some thugs tried to cause trouble. I want you to post one man outside as a guard, and the rest of you stand ready to intervene, should further trouble arise."

"Very good, sir." He saluted in recognition of the command, slamming his fist against his chest.

Martel gave a simple nod in response and returned to the warehouse.

Chapter 492: Wizard's Work

Wizard's Work

Another ten days passed without any sign that the pestilence would abate. Mistress Rana returned from isolation, confirming that her helpers had done right in her absence to refuse relinquishing any of the elixirs they had made; as for the household guards, they did not return nor make any claims or complaints. Possibly, the guard outside the warehouse helped dissuade further attempts.

After a brief conversation with the legionary on duty, upon her return to the warehouse, Mistress Rana approached Martel. "Did you pretend to be an officer of the legions in order to command the city guard to stand watch outside?"

"I never made any such claims," Martel responded truthfully. "I simply requested they posted someone by the doors, given recent events. If the soldiers assumed something, simply because they saw me use fire spells, I don't think I am to blame for that."

She wore an expression as if she could not decide whether to scold or complement him; in the end, she did neither. "I suppose there's no harm."

"Fire!"

The call was repeated until it lost all meaning and became only discordant noise in Martel's ears. Along with everyone else, he ran onto the street, looking in every direction.

A column of smoke rising upwards quickly showed them the afflicted location. Somewhere deep within the copper lanes.

This was not an unusual sight; they burned the corpses of the pestilent inside the district, having no other means of disposing them. But the smoke that rose came thick and black, accompanied by incoherent yet anguished cries.

"Get off the street!" Mistress Rana commanded. "Don't block the road!"

She was right; the fire patrol might pass this way. Even as Martel thought this, he did not really take note of her words, let alone adhere to them. His mind was already far away, fearing the worst. As if in a daze, he broke into a run towards the copper lanes.

At the gate, the guards were in a panic trying to open the enormous lock and chains that kept the construction closed. While an optio fumbled with the key, Martel could not wait that long. Without

slowing down, he made an empowered leap that allowed him to land clumsily on top of the gate; he lowered himself down on the other side, fell the last few feet to the ground, and continued running towards the fire.

Already, smoke filled his nostrils. While the street itself was empty, he saw people sticking their heads out of doors and windows, looking in the same direction as him. All of them looked terrified; as far as they knew, they were trapped inside the district. If the blaze spread, consuming its way through the old wooden houses of the copper lanes, how far could they run? Would the rest of the city allow them to flee the district and save their lives if that meant putting everyone else at risk of catching the disease?

Running with empowered speed, Martel finally reached the place of the conflagration. Several regular houses had caught on fire, and the flames would only spread further. A handful of people had gathered, trying to organise a human chain to carry water, but they lacked the numbers and the discipline to make a difference. Fear of contagion, presumably, kept the locals away, or maybe they were already looking for ways to escape the district. The fire patrol could be of great help, but who knew how many guards would dare to enter the district and put themselves at risk of falling ill; in any case, there was no point in waiting for them to arrive. Martel knew what to do.

Last time he had done something like this, the exertion had knocked him unconscious, and he had been forced to do it in a clumsy way, finding a vantage point and pulling all the flames towards himself as it was easier to move fire than extinguish it. Now, he was more or less a fully trained wizard of the Lyceum, and fire was his willing servant and familiar companion. Closing his eyes, he let his sense of magic stretch out before him to engage with the intense heat.

With a single burst of spellpower, he quelled the entire blaze.

Gasping for air, he tried to catch his breath. He felt himself tired, but not exhausted; no headache nor nausea plagued him. Around him, people stared in awe and fear. "The Copper Mage," many whispered.

"He saved us."

"He came when we needed him."

"Didn't save us from the pestilence, did he?"

"You can't expect everything."

"He's a hero!"

"My wife and youngest are dead. The others are so thin, I can count their ribs. What magic is going to help me with that?"

Too tired to care about their discussions, Martel walked away. People gave him a wide berth as he walked the slow march back towards the gate. But before he came that far, he stopped to look in another direction.

He thought about Sparrow, Mouse, Badger, and everyone else living in that derelict house, even Weasel. Martel knew the right thing was to go and check on them in case they needed his help, but part of him did not wish to do so. If some of them had died, what good would it do for him to show up now? He had stayed out of the copper lanes to respect the quarantine, but he also felt like he had

abandoned the children to their fate. He was not sure if he had the courage to go and find out the price of his neglect.

At the same time, whatever guilt he felt now would only increase if he simply left. Pulling himself together, he walked in the direction of Weasel's home.

Staring down a familiar alleyway, Martel called out, "Children! It's Martel!"

He believed he heard the sound of something shuffling before the door opened, and various heads stuck out of the building.

"Keep your distance," he warned them with a raised hand.

"We know," someone replied almost with indignation. "Weasel told us to stay indoors at all times. It gets really boring, but we know it's not safe outside."

"What about food? You got enough to eat?" Martel asked.

"He and Sparrow go out to get some. There wasn't much at first, though it's been better lately."

"Martel!" The aforementioned girl pressed her head out as well. "How did you get here? They let you in?"

The young wizard looked at his former pupil with a faint smile. "Of sorts. But I have to go back out. I'm needed to make medicine that helps those who are sick. I just wanted to see you all. Any of you sick?"

"No, we've avoided it so far," came the answer from someone else. "But how much longer? We can't stay in here forever!"

"I don't know how long," Martel admitted. He wished he could tell them. Winter was almost upon the city, and kept confined, the children had no opportunity to collect firewood or fuel; nor could Martel have any brought to them as he did once before.

But there was one thing he could do to alleviate that particular need. It would take him a while, but this might be his only opportunity to do it; to his shame, he had thought about doing this for the children long ago, but never actually got it done. He would rectify that now.

"Alright. Give me a little while, children. Don't disturb me. I'll need some quiet." Martel grabbed a large stone from a nearby house half in ruins. Placing both hands upon it, he began his enchanting.

It took him maybe half an hour to create the heating stone; the material was coarse and unsuited for it, but it would provide some warmth for the children at least. Better than nothing. Bidding them all goodbye, Martel walked back to the gate.

Along the way, he passed one of the infirmaries. A nun stood outside, washing sheets in a barrel of water. From inside, moans could be heard from the many patients, and even from a distance, Martel felt that he could smell the very sickness emanating from within. He hurried on.

Reaching the gate, he found Mistress Rana waiting, pacing back and forth in a restless manner.

"There you are," she spoke as he approached. "Everyone, stay back!" she added to the guards. "The gate is not locked yet. You may go through."

As the soldiers dispersed, keeping a healthy distance, Martel placed his hand on one half of the gate and pushed it open. "I'm sorry I ran in," he told the alchemist. "But there was a fire, and I was best suited for handling it."

"You did right," she simply declared. From her belt, she withdrew a small vial and a piece of cloth, emptying the former into the latter. "Put this on. You know where the house for isolation is. Nora has seen to it that it's stocked with supplies."

Martel placed the cloth mask around his face, smelling a strange concoction. "I do. I'll see you in five days."

As he walked past the rows of soldiers, all of them staying plenty of paces away, one of them saluted with his fist against his chest. The others followed, creating a disharmonious rhythm. "Well done, sir!"

"Glad to have you with us, sir!"

"That was real wizard's work!"

As with the people of the copper lanes, Martel felt too weary to respond. Doing the enchantment had left him drained, and his head pounded. So he walked on, making his way to the small house that would be his home for the next five days.

Chapter 493: A Visit from Affection

A Visit from Affection

If working in the warehouse had felt monotonous to the point of tedium, staying isolated in the small house seemed a double dose. It was basically just a big room with a fireplace, a chair and a worktable, and a mattress with two blankets in the corner.

His sole escape from the four walls surrounding him was a window allowing the room to be aired out more effectively than just through the chimney, but he was only allowed to open the shutters at night when the street outside would be empty. Even if nothing happened during that time, he pulled his chair to sit and stare out at the desolate street with its one remaining streetlamp; the others had their lightstone plundered to create the barrier around the copper lanes.

Martel might sit for an hour or longer to look out at the world beyond his reach, hoping for even just the small thrill of a cat running past on its nocturnal adventures, until weariness and the cold air made him seek sleep.

The rest of the time, he worked with the occasional break to eat. Every now and then, a knock on the door during the day announced a delivery; he would wait a brief while before opening up to quickly grab food, water, and reagents to make potions. As for those he made, they stood stacked in a corner; once his isolation came to an end, he would bring them to the warehouse. Until then, should he begin to develop symptoms, he had plenty of cures at hand, at least, but so far, he seemed to have avoided contagion.

Martel could simply drink one of his own potions and thereby end the need for further isolation, but every elixir meant saving one person in the copper lanes who might otherwise be likely to perish; thus he endured his exile, day in and day out.

On the third day, someone knocked on his door, but to Martel's surprise, it was followed by a familiar voice speaking. "Martel?"

"Eleanor? Is that you?" He walked over to stand by the door.

"Yes. Word at the school spread of your absence and why."

Mistress Rana must have sent a message to explain why he was not in class, Martel considered. "I'd invite you in," he jested, "but you'd have to stay in here with me."

"That would not be so bad," she replied, which made him feel a tingle in his stomach. "We are training every available hour these days, it feels like. Our examination is in a month's time, so Master Reynard is working us hard."

"So is mine, I think. Around that time, anyway." He sank down to sit with his back against the door. A small tremor through the wood moments later told him that Eleanor had done the same.

"How do you feel about it? You are working so much with alchemy, it cannot give you many opportunities to practise your fire magic."

"It'll be fine. I doubt the Empire is going to fail their only prospective fire-touched battlemage."

"You do have a certain kind of employment safety," Eleanor mused.

"How about you? I've seen you in class, you must be feeling confident too."

"I suppose. Certainly, I will not be denied becoming an officer, I am sure. They are only strict when selecting praetorians."

"Is Maximilian worried? I haven't really seen much of him lately."

"If he is, he hides it well. But he does practise constantly, even outside of class. So it is no surprise if you see little of him."

And soon, it would be too late; Maximilian would stay in Morcaster while Martel left for the front.

"I thought with his father's connections, his place in the Praetorian Guard was assured. But I guess if anyone can motivate Max, it would be his father."

"Maybe he wants to prove that he has earned it on his own merit."

"Do you know what the final examination consists of? I've not heard anyone really talk about it."

"For us, it is quite simple. We will be fighting each other like a simple tournament, and we will be ranked according to our results," Eleanor explained. "Those who do best will be given first choice as to their career. Become a praetorian or join a legion of their choosing. Those who perform worse will be assigned as needed."

Such as becoming protector to a battlemage, Martel thought. "I doubt our examination will be done like that, though."

"What about the other fire acolytes? There must be rumours passed down from older students or something like that."

"Fire acolytes, we don't really talk to other students. We don't even talk to each other, even if we got classes together every day."

"That sounds a little strange. Even if not everyone likes everyone, we mageknights get along well enough to spend our time together. Certainly, we share what we know about our classes and anything else related to the school."

"Have you ever seen us fire acolytes together?"

"Well, I see you all when we have class together."

Martel smiled, even if she could not see him. "Exactly. Only when we are forced to be within ten paces of each other."

"I see your point."

Although he could not know for sure, he imagined that she smiled as well. It made him emotional to think that just a wooden door separated them, yet he could not see or touch her. "We are known for our tempers for a reason, I suppose. And our teacher pits us against each other to motivate us."

"I remember seeing her the few times she came to the arena to watch you practice. She looks – unusual."

"Trust me, whatever you imagine about her, the truth is much worse."

"I shall take your word for it. I should be getting back before my next class, but I left something for you on the doorstep to help you pass the hours. Goodbye, Martel."

"That's kind of you. Goodbye, Eleanor."

He waited a little while as per protocol before he opened the door to find a small, round basket outside, of the sort that the girls back home would use for collecting berries or nuts in the forest. He wondered where Eleanor had gotten this; he could not imagine her foraging for food in the woods.

Placing it on his table, Martel saw a book laid carefully on the top, giving him a reading material for many hours. It looked to be another tale of adventures akin to the one Eleanor had lent him when he was in the infirmary after being attacked. Underneath, the rest of the basket contained different kinds of sugarbread.

Martel felt a wave of affection towards his friend for showing him this kindness, and he decided that working on his next potion could wait a while. Grabbing the book and some of the pastry, he made himself as comfortable as he could sitting on his mattress, back against the wall, and began reading.

Chapter 494: A Stone in Hand

A Stone in Hand

After a few more days, Martel's isolation was at an end, and he could return to the warehouse. The content of his hours did not change greatly, only his surroundings; he continued the endlessly repetitive task of brewing potions, one at a time. By now, he knew the recipe by heart and could complete the process with closed eyes. In the first days of the pestilence, the work had invaded his dreams as well; visions of bubbling cauldrons and never ending stacks of ingredients to be prepared haunted his nights, but now that a month had passed, Martel slept without dreams.

Still, he appreciated just the possibility of leaving his workspace and walking on the street. While the air could hardly be called fresh, he enjoyed its many odours, even those of unpleasant nature, compared to the stale smell of smoke from the fireplace and his hours of labour that suffused his

previous residence. In addition, being suddenly surrounded by people felt eerie when for five days, he had not been within touching distance of another person.

It was likewise odd to return to the Lyceum. His period of isolation had made him aware of something otherwise buried in his mind by weariness from constant labour. Since he first arrived in Morcaster, he had spent almost every day and night at the castle, and it had always felt like a safe haven from whatever difficulties he encountered in the city itself. Now, he had spent the better part of a month away, including several days in a row. It felt like a foreshadowing of what would happen soon; his graduation and enrolment in the legions, which would see him bid farewell to the place he had considered home for the last two years.

But until then, he had class and a challenge to overcome. The banners assigned to each fire acolyte still hung from the windows on an upper floor, taunting the students. Martel noticed that in his absence, none of the others seemed to have made much progress in refining their magical skills to destroy their banner across the long range as demanded by Moira.

As they stood in the western courtyard by the statue of Atreus the Spellbreaker, waiting for their teacher to arrive and class to begin, the acolytes all constantly glanced at Martel while keeping even more distance to him than usual.

As soon as Moira appeared, Harriet addressed her. "Mistress, is it really safe to be around him?" She gave Martel a withering look. "We all heard how he was in the copper lanes."

"If there is any risk of him being infectious, they wouldn't have let him out," Mara said dismissively, making Martel feel weird about being defended by her. "You have your examination in a month's time, so I suggest you focus on the task at hand. You all know what happens if you fail to graduate."

A ruinous debt that he and his family would be saddled with; Martel remembered all too well. Around him, the other acolytes began practising, still keeping more distance to him than usual. Streaks of fire passed through the air as they all attempted to hit their targets hanging from the windows on an upper floor.

Martel had stuck to his own strategy, training to improve the range with which his magic could interact with an object. So far, his fellow students had barely concealed their disdain for his efforts, but Moira had not said a word to disparage him, and he felt certain she would have chewed him out if he was wasting his time.

And he had made progress during his previous lessons. Last time, he had ignited a twig more than thirty paces away, and he felt confident he could do better. In fact, with the added motivation of vindicating himself in front of the other acolytes, especially Harriet, Martel felt ready to accomplish what they had failed to do; he turned his eyes on the banner marked with his letter as it gently moved about in the breeze.

He extended his magical sense directly ahead of him, trying to connect with anything it could. Touches of frost on the ground, surrounding leaves of grass. The stonework of the castle walls with faint whispers of their own magic. Finally, he felt something that swayed back and forth, like the leaves on a tree in the wind. He sent a spark of spellpower through the connection, and to his immense satisfaction, he saw the fabric of his banner begin to burn.

The flame immediately disappeared. Confused, Martel looked around until he realised that Moira had extinguished the fire. "Take ten steps back and try again," she commanded him.

With a satisfied smile, Martel left the line of acolytes to count out ten paces of extra distance, trying for the second time to finish the task that the other students had yet to complete once.

Given his absence from the castle, Martel was not surprised to find a message had arrived for him, though the contents made him frown.

Master Martel,

I have found

an item worth

your interest.

Please visit me

at your convenience.

Your friend,

the merchant

At first, Martel had no idea who this could be. The lack of a name suggested someone part of Morcaster's underworld, as they were always keen on hiding their identity and obscuring their dealings with others. Following that trail of thought, Martel finally realised that this had to be the artefact trader, who Martel had tasked with finding something to cure Eleanor's sister of her permanent slumber.

Martel did not wish to get his hopes up – and certainly not Eleanor's – but if the merchant had found something that would work, Martel was ready to pay anything. He would go on his own, though; no need to mention anything to Eleanor until he knew more. Since he was returning to the warehouse by the copper lanes today anyway, he could find out soon enough.

Martel gave a heavy knock on the merchant's door. A heavy purse hung by his belt, filled with every coin he owned. It should have been a lot heavier, since Mistress Rana had not paid him wages for a long time, but it would have to do.

"Master wizard, please, enter my home," the trader said after opening the door, allowing Martel entry.

"What have you found?" he asked once inside.

"I shall hasten to show you." His host found a key from his belt and used it to open a small box on a drawer. From it, he withdrew a small, round object that looked like a nearly smooth pebble. Yet even before the trader placed it in his hand, Martel knew it was magical.

It was a Tyrian runestone, covered in symbols. Some of them, Martel did not know, but he did recognise what seemed to be the biggest one. The rune of unbinding. He felt a pang of disappointment. Of everything he and Eleanor had investigated looking for a cure, this had to be the

least likely. Its purpose was to undo harm or evil, but from what Martel understood, this had to be of a magical nature. Eleanor's sister had hurt her head in an entirely mundane accident.

At the same time, Martel did not regret coming here. The stone possessed powerful magic. It reminded Martel of the small token that Regnar had given him once as thanks for saving his life, which had held the smoke creature serving the maleficar at bay, breaking in the process.

But even if Martel had been far less attuned to magic back then, he knew that Regnar's small pebble could not compare with this. The runes glowed with such strength, this had to be inscribed by a powerful skáld, or perhaps even a seier-wife. He already knew that Tyrian magic affected the infernal creature, regardless of its origin. And Martel's theory was that it was a jinni, enslaved by the maleficar. That seemed exactly like the kind of magic that a rune of unbinding might affect.

Martel had no expectations he would ever face that creature again or its master. He had no plans to seek them out. But to literally be given such magic into his hands and let it go... "I'll take it." Martel emptied his purse onto the table in the room.

"I am overjoyed to hear this, master, and I praise your generosity. But I must confess, it cost me great difficulty and much gold to acquire such a rare item as this –"

"I'll return with another payment to double the amount," Martel declared. "That should be the end of your haggling."

"Most reasonable, good master. When?"

"When I have it." With swift steps, Martel left the trader's house.

Chapter 495: Amaranth

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Amaranth

Returning to his routines at the warehouse, Martel placed the runestone in an inner pocket and forgot about it; instead, he resumed his duties as alchemist and student. Several fivedays passed in the usual blur, creating potion after potion or practising the range of his magic back at the Lyceum.

Though eventually, Martel noticed a change of pace. After a month and a half since the beginning of the pestilence, work in the warehouse became less hectic as they occasionally ran out of reagents and had to wait for new deliveries, sometimes arriving from other cities or nearby towns. Rather than him, Mistress Rana, and Nora labouring continuously all waking hours, they divided the work between them, giving each of them respite now and then during the day.

"Someone at the door to see you, Master Martel," said the guard on duty as he approached the alchemists and their workstation.

Looking in that direction, Martel was pleasantly surprised to recognise Eleanor standing in the dim light coming from the outside. He glanced at Nora, who waved him away. "Go ahead. I'll take over for you."

Grabbing his cloak, Martel placed it around himself and joined Eleanor outside the warehouse in the early afternoon sun, weak as it was. "What brings you by?"

"I needed other surroundings than the castle and the arena. Have you eaten yet? I thought we could find some place nearby."

"That's a nice idea." Martel certainly would not mind a hot meal rather than the usual cold offerings given to those working in the warehouse. "I don't have any coin on me, though." In fact, he had none at all; Mistress Rana had still not paid him his wages.

"Not to worry. I have plenty for us both. Come on." She threw her head in the direction of the street, and they began walking in search of something to eat.

Given the cold weather this close to winter, they opted for a tavern with closed walls where they might sit inside, rather than the half open variety that served quick meals in and out to the workers of the city. Watching Eleanor find her coins and pay for their food reminded Martel of why he was currently penniless. As they sat down to eat, his hand found the Tyrian stone inside his pocket. Considering its rarity, he figured that Eleanor would find it interesting, so he pulled it out and slid it across the table.

She finished chewing and picked it up. "Where did you get this?"

"As it turns out, my misadventures in the city have the occasional advantage. I met someone who deals in artefacts like this, and he sold it to me. Hence the reason why my purse is currently empty."

"That looks like the rune of unbinding, if I'm not mistaken." Eleanor traced her finger across the symbol. "This must have been made by someone powerful. But why did you buy it?" She looked up at him.

"No specific reason, honestly. It just seemed a rare find, too good to let it slip through my fingers. I was really hoping to find something else," Martel remarked, enjoying the hot food.

"Such as?"

"Oh, I was... trying to find something that might help your sister. I had hoped for some kind of Archean artefact with a topaz, but no luck so far. Sorry," he added, regretting that he had brought any of this up. "I didn't mean to remind you."

"Do not be sorry," she told him, her voice almost strangely light. "My parents never speak of her even as she lies in a room down the hall. I suppose it hurts them to do so, but it feels as if she is being forgotten. That I am losing her a second time." Eleanor slid the stone across the table back to him. "I am glad somebody thinks of her."

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Martel accepted the token, placing it back in his pocket. "I should bring it to Master Fenrick, if I can remember," he said, changing topic. "Between classes and alchemy, there's been room for little else in my head lately."

Eleanor nodded. "Same here. I have never trained this hard in my life. At least it will be done soon. Our examination is next fiveday, on Manday. At least it is for us mageknights, but yours will probably be around that time as well."

"What happens after that? I don't actually know."

"Well, the Imperial administration will assign us our postings, but that is still a month away. Until then, we stay at the Lyceum, I suppose. Continue practising until it is time to leave."

The siege of Nahavand awaited; a thought that Martel had no desire to dwell upon. "We should get together, Max as well. Maybe once we've passed our examinations. We've earned that much."

"I would say so, you especially." She smiled. "Maybe next time you are back at the Lyceum."

Once they parted ways, Martel hurried back to the warehouse, feeling a little guilty for his extended break while the others laboured in his absence. Yet as he returned, he found only Mistress Rana at work. "I'm back," he said quickly, looking over their worktables to take stock of the situation and whether everything was ready for him to begin brewing.

"No need to rush," she said, which was a different tune than what he had expected. "I told Nora to take some time for herself as well."

"Oh, there's not much amaranth left." Martel ran his fingers through the small pile to get an estimate of how many potions they could make with what remained.

"That is the issue. Unlike the other ingredients, it's hard to source. Probably, I will soon have no further need of you and Nora down here, simply because there won't be anything for you to do."

Martel knew such a day would have to come sooner or later, yet it felt almost strange to hear it would be soon. He had grown so accustomed to his current routine. But he welcomed the news; while the work done here was important, he had no desire to do it any longer than necessary. "Does this mean the disease is on retreat? Can the quarantine be ended soon?"

"No. New patients are brought to the monks and nuns in the same number as before. So far, it shows no signs of slowing down. It will be several fivedays at least," Mistress Rana estimated.

"But what will they do if we don't have enough to make more potions?"

"They'll have to pray, I suppose. Not much else they can do."

Any feeling of relief that he might soon be done in the warehouse was suppressed by the knowledge that the disease would continue to spread, and they would be absent their most potent weapon to defeat it. Martel knew not to underestimate the lethality of this pestilence; on occasion, they saw the smoke rising from the pyres in the copper lanes where they burnt the bodies of the dead. Yet he had taken comfort in the knowledge that, if need be, he knew how to make the elixir that stopped the disease in its tracks. Soon, that might not be of any use to him.

His mood subdued, Martel went to work. He made several potions, watching the dwindling supply of amaranth; when he had the opportunity, when both Mistress Rana and Nora had gone to sleep before him, he finished his last elixir and placed it in his belt.

Chapter 496: A Potion in Hand

A Potion in Hand

The following day, Martel was back at the Lyceum, attending class. As before, the other students kept their distance to him, but since he had no interest in talking to them, Martel did not care. Before too long, he would never have to see these people again.

Moira arrived, but uncharacteristically, she did not immediately yell for them to begin practising. Instead, she spoke almost at a normal volume. "On Manday, you will have your acolyte's examination. You must all appear in the entrance hall at second bell."

"Mistress, what should we expect?" asked William. The others nodded and looked in anticipation at their teacher, all of them clearly wondering the same.

"I'm not going to tell you. Everything you will be asked to do should be well within your limits. If not, you'll be an absolute failure as a battlemage, and it's better we know now than when the lives of others depend on you. But if you are worried, I suggest you start practising," she barked, her voice resuming its usual temper.

Martel took his position on the grounds, gazing up at the banner that served as his target for the lesson. Three days left.

The mageknights' schedule had changed, since they practised more frequently now, and Martel went a few times to knock on Eleanor's door in vain; on his third attempt, in the evening, she finally answered. "Martel? What is it?"

He glanced in either direction of the hallway. "Can we talk inside? I don't want anyone to see." She gave him an inquisitive look but stepped back, letting him cross the threshold. As he did so, he pushed the door behind him to be ajar, preventing anyone passing by from seeing him. That done, he pulled out the elixir from his belt. "This is for you." He placed it in her hand.

She held it up, inspecting the bright, green liquid inside the glass. "What exactly is this?"

Martel cleared his throat. "It's the elixir that cures pestilence. I want you to keep it for yourself."

She gave him another look. "Why? I would not assume the quarantine has failed, has it?"

He quickly shook his head. "No, but you never know. Just in case the worst should happen, I want to be sure you're not in danger from this disease."

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"Martel, there must be plenty of people in the copper lanes that actually need this." She held out her hand for him to take the vial back.

"That's the thing. We are running out. Even faster than I thought. I don't think we'll be able to make many more." If they did not receive more amaranth, they could reach the end of it in a matter of days. And if Mistress Rana dismissed him even sooner because there was not enough work for three alchemists, this could be Martel's last chance to secure an elixir for Eleanor.

"All the more reason this must go to someone who has need of it. Martel, I know you. Of all the mages in the city, you care about the people of the copper lanes. You would not let them suffer just to bring me a gift I do not need."

Martel was unsure about her claim; he had wreaked havoc on the city, burning down several buildings in anger over Ruby's death, who had after all not meant that much to him. If something happened to Eleanor, Martel could not imagine how he would react. But he knew she spoke the truth, and he could not deny her. As she once more pressed the flacon into his hands, he accepted it. "Alright. I'll bring this back."

She gave a little nod along with a smile. "Good. By the way, did you find out when you have your examination?"

"Manday. Same as you if I recall."

"Indeed. Let us meet up in the evening? We can celebrate together."

"I'd like that very much."

After his conversation with Eleanor, Martel returned to the warehouse. With his examination looming, he could have defended remaining at the Lyceum to spend the last days training; given that Mistress Rana had mentioned her diminishing need for his help, Martel figured that she would not mind.

But he was not particularly concerned about the examination; Martel knew he was the best battlemage among the acolytes. Besides his strong talent, he had more spells at his disposal than most, not to mention a few surprises in the pockets of his belt. He also had experience fighting in a variety of situations against different kinds of enemies; something the Lyceum could not teach its students, but which he had learned on his own. If Martel could not pass the examination, none of the acolytes could.

So to Martel, any need for training was superseded by his need to return the potion, and if his time at the warehouse was coming to an end, he might not get another chance. Best to get the vial to the others expediently and ready for the next transport of supplies into the district.

As he walked on the streets of Morcaster, Martel also felt increasingly guilty, unable to forget Eleanor's gentle reproach of his motivations for taking the potion. He remembered the household guards sent by some selfish noble with the intent to do basically what Martel had done, even if the acolyte had only taken one, not a whole case.

Still, it bothered Martel. Eleanor was right; how would he feel knowing someone probably died in the copper lanes because they had no more elixirs to give, just because Martel had an irrational fear that Eleanor might catch the disease?

The best cure for his guilt would be an evening's work, whatever hours remained, brewing one or two potions before he would have to sleep.

Approaching the warehouse with all these thoughts of responsibility and choices, feeling chastised, Martel could nonetheless not avoid a selfish thought disturbing him; with the ingredients for the cure running out, he hoped the quarantine of the copper lanes held, no matter how the city guard would have to enforce it.

Chapter 497: One in the Belt

One in the Belt

After a short night's sleep, Martel worked for about three bells, producing three potions, before he sat down at the one table reserved for food rather than work. He always missed the hot meals at the Lyceum whenever he ate at the warehouse; the building was not meant for habitation, and the big doors allowed plenty of cold to enter from the outside, struggling against the warmth created by the fireplaces that they used for their alchemy. The apothecaries had it even worse, as their work did not involve any fire at all. Martel had noticed though that their numbers had diminished over the last fiveday or so. He did not know why, but he assumed that they were also running low on materials, reducing the need for their labour.

Nora sat down next to him, dragging bread and cold cuts of meat to her. "Is all the dried rabbit gone?"

Martel dug out a plate hiding behind a block of cheese. "Still some left."

"Thanks."

They sat, eating in silence. Martel glanced at her, noting that she looked about as tired as he felt. They had never been close friends, and he doubted they would be even after this; but they had a shared experience now that nobody else at the Lyceum would ever understand. No matter what, Martel respected how much work Nora had done, night and day, working endlessly to help others. And unlike him, she had not had the luxury of going twice a fiveday to the Lyceum, escaping the dreary routine of the alchemy. And the same could be said for Mistress Rana.

Thinking of the sun only to see it shine, Martel looked over to find the alchemist entering the warehouse. She had gone to the Lyceum on some unspecified errand, and Martel guessed that her purpose had been to fetch ingredients or something else for the work. She did carry a small basket, but rather than go to their workstations, she brought it over to her apprentice and helper. "I think we have reached the end."

Nora and Martel looked at each other and back at Mistress Rana. "How so?" he asked.

"There's not enough reagents left to justify that you stay here. Nora, the apothecary back at the school is sorely lacking in supplies. As for you," she added, looking at Martel, "I know you have your examination soon. Focus on that. I will remain here and finish making what potions I can."

It was an eerie feeling for his labours to be dismissed in this manner. Martel had expected that by the end of their efforts, the quarantine would be lifted, the people of Morcaster would flock to the streets in jubilation at the end of the pestilence, and he would feel some sort of accomplishment. Instead, this felt like simply abandoning the work and leaving. At the same time, there was little gained by him staying; and though he tried to hide it, he felt relieved that his long hours in the warehouse had come to an end.

"Of course, I'm aware of how much you have done to help." Mistress Rana reached down into her basket and pulled out two large bags that jangled as they hit the table; the largest landed in front of Nora. "Not sufficient wages compared to how much you have toiled, but as much as I could spare. Most of it comes from the apothecary back at the Lyceum, though I added a little from the funds given to me by the Imperial administration to procure materials. Considering your work to save the city, I felt that only reasonable."

Martel took hold of the purse given to him; that certainly solved any immediate need he had for coin.

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"As I said, I realise this is inadequate payment. For that reason, I have something for each of you from my private store." Mistress Rana reached into her belt that, like Martel's, had several small pouches for potions. She pulled out two vials and carefully placed one in front of each of them.

Martel had never seen an elixir like this, but judging by Nora's reaction, he should be impressed. He picked up the vial, which contained a softly glowing, red liquid.

"Is this... a healing elixir?" Nora asked.

Mistress Rana nodded. "It has reduced efficacy against diseases, and you'd be better off finding the appropriate remedy for that. But if you are injured, no matter how grievously, this will bring you back from death's door."

Martel's eyes widened. This was a gift far beyond any value measured in coin. If Mistress Rana had been more approachable, he would have been tempted to hug her in gratitude. Instead, he cautiously placed the vial in his belt, making sure it was securely fastened, and bowed his head to the alchemist. "Thank you, mistress."

"You're welcome. Now make room. I missed dinner at the castle."

Making the journey to the Lyceum, Martel swung past the trader's house to make good on his promise and pay the remaining amount for the Tyrian runestone. He still had a sizeable amount left in his purse afterwards, and he knew what to spend it on next.

As he reached the castle, he did not intend to stay long; he steered directly towards Maximilian's room. Luck favoured him unlike the other day, where it had taken him several attempts to find Eleanor; after a few knocks, the scion of House Marche opened the door.

"Nordmark! What brings you to my doorstep?"

"We haven't really had any fun together since the festivities at the Imperial palace. My work is done down by the copper lanes, so I figured it was time. I got the silver to spare." He rustled the purse hanging by his belt.

"I have plans to spar tonight," came the dragging answer. "Our examination is in a few days."

"Exactly. You have all day tomorrow to prepare. Or has it come to this? You extol the virtues of attending school, and I must persuade you to spend an evening out?"

Maximilian raised one hand. "Enough. I will not be shamed in this manner. Let me grab my cloak, and I shall make you regret your words."

Martel grinned. "Be my guest."

Rather than go to their usual haunt, the pair drifted around the market district, trying one tavern after another. The cold weather drove people inside, leaving many places packed with customers thirsty for something that brought warmth.

Pushing his way through a crowd, Martel reached his friend and placed a mug in his hand. "It's weird to be surrounded by so many people after spending five days in a house, all on my own."

"Ah yes, Eleanor told me of your ordeal. But you seem no worse for wear."

"I was fine, yeah. Unlike the people in the copper lanes."

"That is what it means to be a mage." Maximilian took a hefty sip. "We are always fine."

"Until we are not." Martel paused for a moment. "I'm going to war, Max."

"You're shaping up to be the best battlemage in all the legions, Nordmark. They will not risk you by placing you directly on the front," the mageknight argued. "Your greatest enemy will be boredom. And at any sign of danger, you shall have a dedicated protector taking all the blows."

"I suppose. Do you have any idea who might be assigned to me?" Martel had no insight into how the Imperial administration decided these matters.

"Impossible to say, really. It seems unlikely it will be anybody from our year – most are either becoming praetorians like me or officers like Eleanor. I am sure they will have someone experienced and skilled for you."

Except if a mageknight was available to fight alongside Martel as protector, it made him wonder what had happened to the last battlemage they protected. "I guess."

"It will be grand, Nordmark. Whenever you have leave, you shall be back in Morcaster, and I shall ply you with drink commensurate with every night you have been gone."

Martel wanted to share his optimism, but it was harder to feel hopeful as the one actually going to war.

"Speaking of such matters, this is some watered down swill. On to the next establishment! We must find one more worthy of our patronage."

Martel gave half a smile and followed his friend into the night.

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Chapter 498: Examinations

Examinations

Martel spent the next day attending his last classes before the examination. Nothing about it suggested anything out of the ordinary; they practised improving the range of their magic under Moira's disdainful gaze. If she had any further wisdom to share with her students or final advice for them, she did not share it. As the lesson ended, she marched away, and the four acolytes scattered, for now.

On the following morning, they gathered in the entrance hall at second bell. They watched the mageknight students, all of them armoured, make their way towards the arena; evidently, their test would take place at the expected place. As for the fire acolytes, nobody had told them what to expect.

Moira finally appeared, and with a toss of her head, she gestured for them to follow her out of the castle. The sight of the wild-eyed woman and four young wizards behind her made everyone steer clear, and they had no trouble navigating the streets of the city.

She led them north. Martel wondered what lay in this direction, and why they did not have the examination back at the Lyceum. But nobody spoke as they moved along the main roads, reaching the nearest city gate. Still Moira continued.

In the flat landscape beyond the walls, the wind came howling at them, and they all pulled their cloaks tighter. It had taken more than an hour of walking just to reach the edge of the city, and Moira showed no signs of stopping.

She led them away from the cobbled road down a smaller path, and after a while, something came into view in the horizon. A compound of some sort, though it looked strange. As they got closer, Martel realised why; it was in ruins.

"Mistress, what is this?" someone finally asked.

"An old estate. It was ravaged by fire long ago. Rather than rebuild or tear it down, the Imperial administration uses it for a few purposes, such as your examination," Moira explained, feeling uncharacteristically generous with information, it seemed.

The acolytes looked at each other as they continued towards the ruins.

Getting closer, Martel noticed various details. Most of the walls of the main building remained standing, but the fire had eaten the roof. No sign of smaller constructions such as stables, a barn, or housing for farmhands and the like. Presumably, the fire had cleared them away.

However, something new also stood on the yard before the ruined manor. A tent had been raised, and a few members of the city guard milled about outside. A few carts stood there as well and a weapons rack, mostly empty except for several staves.

Spotting their approach, one guard stuck his head inside the tent. Shortly after, an elderly clerk appeared. Giving the man a second look as they came close, Martel realised he was not some ordinary scribbler; he wore gold jewellery in different places, and his tunic was made of finer cloth than a typical clerk might afford.

"Alright, we're here. There's chain shirts and staves in the carts or on the rack, so get dressed. Trust me, you'll want it." Moira nodded at the wagons, and the four acolytes walked over and began removing their red robes. The guards regarded them with mild interest. "Your turn," Moira said to the scribe.

He waited until the young wizards were armoured, clearing his throat to gain their attention. "Well met." The acolytes all looked at him. "I am here as a representative of the Imperial administration to ensure you are fit for duty as battlemages in His Imperial Majesty's legions."

Martel wondered if every sentence out of this man's mouth would be this long.

"Your task today is simple. Once completed, you are free to return to the Lyceum and remain there in the following days. The Imperial administration will determine your posting in the next month, and you will receive your orders accordingly."

All to be expected.

"The task is this." The clerk turned towards the ruined manor behind him. "You must enter the front doors of the estate behind me and make your way through the building. Directly on the opposite side, you'll find the kitchens and the back door. All you have to do is leave through that door, and you pass the examination."

Simple enough. Martel assumed various obstacles or adversaries waited inside, but he was not worried.

"I will remind you that failure to pass the examination will have dire consequences. If you are unfit to be a battlemage, you will owe the Empire a heavy debt for all its expenses incurred in your

training. You will still be put to work where your meagre magic might serve some purpose, but you will not have any rights, and all your wages shall go towards repayment of your debt. Furthermore, to hasten that resolution, your closest relatives will likewise be placed under forced labour. The men will become galley slaves and the women given to pleasure houses."

Martel narrowed his eyes. He was not going to fail the examination, but the mere mention of this threat raised his temper. He balled his hands into fists, suppressing the urge to release a bolt of lightning at this pompous little fellow, who spoke of such evil intentions with a dreary, monotone voice. Looking at the other acolytes, Martel was not alone in his reaction, it seemed. He now understood why the scribe wore gold.

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"Any questions, ask your teacher. I shall leave to witness the outcome." The scribe looked at Moira. "Send them in one at a time." He immediately left, setting a course to walk around the building.

As for Moira, she turned to Martel. "Let the fire-touched go first."

Still incensed at the threat, Martel strode past the front doors, staff in hand. As he passed through them, the guards outside closed the doors behind him.

He took a few deep breaths, realising that his emotions worked against him right now. He needed a cool head and his senses sharp, not distracted. He looked around. He stood in a modest entrance hall, though missing the roof. Along one wall, a balcony ran. Ahead were the remains of the staircase that led up to it, though the path was blocked by debris, perhaps from when the roof caved in.

Martel's observations were interrupted by an arrow embedding itself into the ground in front of his feet. His instincts flared up, and he summoned his shield to protect him. He looked for cover and saw more debris lying against the wall opposite the balcony. With no better options – standing still was not a choice – Martel dashed over to dive beneath the rock.

This bought him a few moments, but if the archer stood up on the balcony, he only had to move down until Martel would be in his sight again. He needed to find his attacker and disable him first.

Martel let his sense of magic flow out from him. No trace of heat could be felt, rather the opposite. Cold pockets, like a man wearing gold. This did tell Martel that the archer was higher up than him, using the balcony at his vantage point, but it also meant any direct spells were unlikely to hit. Nor could he easily go into close combat, as the staircase was blocked. Besides, running out into the open would only play to the archer's advantage.

However, Martel knew exactly how to stop such an opponent; rather than go for the bowman, he went for the bow. The gold protected the archer himself, but not his weapon. Trusting in his magical shield, Martel glanced towards the balcony to find his adversary.

He was rewarded by seeing movement as the archer stood up to release an arrow before crouching back behind the railing of the balcony. The arrow struck Martel's shield by his shoulder and fell to the ground. Renewing his protective spell, Martel allowed himself to be a target once again.

As soon as the archer showed himself, the wizard made his move. The bowstring was easy to sense; residual heat from friction and fingertips made it stand out from the cold surroundings of the gold-wearing soldier. As he drew back his bow to release another arrow, the string burst in his hands.

Unexpectedly, laughter issued from the balcony. "Well played!" came a shout, and Martel watched the soldier stand up on the balcony and walk away. Quickly, the acolyte hurried across the hall to enter through one of the small door openings on either side of the staircase.

Though the lack of furniture made it difficult to tell, Martel figured he stood in the dining hall of the estate, about the same size as the one he had just left. If so, the kitchens would probably be nearby; most likely, he just had to cross this room as well. The only obstacle, and what presently demanded his attention, was the mageknight in the middle of the hall. Seeing Martel, he drew his sword and charged.

Martel could not expect to beat a mageknight in close combat and a contest of arms. Distance and elemental spells were his friends. To buy himself time, he sent a powerful gust of wind against the warrior. It made him stumble and stop to catch himself from falling, but it did not send him to the ground as Martel had hoped. He followed up with a quick fire bolt, which the mageknight caught with his shield. Evidently, he was accustomed to fighting elemental mages.

As Martel had feared, close combat ensued. He parried as best he could with his staff, but he knew the knight would break through his defences. He thought of the best way to keep his opponent at bay and realised what to do. In the small space between them, Martel conjured up a wall of flames.

They stood so close, the sudden fire stung not only the mageknight but also Martel, yet it worked as intended. Both of them immediately stepped back, and Martel ensured the wall spread from one side of the hall to the other. Flames taller than any man now rose with intensity separating them; as they flickered, Martel caught glimpses of the warrior and could fling spells at his opponent.

To his disappointment, none of them landed. The mageknight seemed well-versed in defending himself against such attacks, and the flame wall prevented Martel from using his ability to sense the warrior's body heat to guide his spells. Still, Martel could attack, and his opponent could not; he had the upper hand.

Presumably reaching the same conclusion, the mageknight gave himself a running start and charged forward. He leapt through the flames, pain visible on his face, but he cleared the fire and once more attacked Martel.

Their fortunes reversed once more, Martel could not defend himself adequately and took several hits. His chain shirt saved him from the worst of it; he could summon his shield, but that burned his spellpower and only bought him a moment's respite. He tried to parry with his staff and also attacked the mageknight with another fire bolt, but the warrior foresaw this and caught the spell with his physical shield.

Seeing the wall of flames behind the mageknight, Martel realised that he attacked from the wrong angle. He cast another spell, the same as his first one in this combat. Raising the wind, he pushed his opponent as far back as he could. As before, the mageknight did not fall down, but he stumbled backwards into the towering flames behind him.

A yell of pain escaped him, and he threw his sword down as he stepped forward to escape the fire. "I yield!"

Relieved, Martel dismissed his spell and allowed himself a deep breath. "Sorry that I hurt you," he mumbled.

The mageknight picked up his sword and placed it in its scabbard. "Never apologise for fighting your enemy, boy. Out there, it is you or him. Only one of you leaves alive. Always make sure it is you." He gave half a smile that softened his words and gestured with his head at the doorways behind him. "Move along. Let me catch a breather before the next."

After the dining hall, Martel stood in a corridor, typical of the kind that allowed servants to swiftly move about the place. He wondered what else awaited him, if anything. The first challenge had been ranged combat, and this had been close quarters; would they test him further, or had he passed the examination?

Rather than celebrate prematurely, Martel kept his wits about him as he continued through the manor. The doors of the place had all burned, so he could easily glance into the different rooms. These looked like servant quarters; the kitchens had to be nearby.

Down the end of the corridor, he saw a larger room beyond and guessed that to be his destination. Crossing the threshold, he noticed three things. A large fireplace in the middle, where large meals could be cooked; a newly built door in the other end of the area, presumably leading outside; and a hand wielding a dagger aimed at him.

Chapter 499: Sullied

Sullied

The assailant had been standing up against the wall by the doorway, waiting for Martel; as soon as the wizard stepped inside, he attacked. Sensing the movement, Martel dodged to his right. He slammed into the wall on that side, but avoided the dagger.

Seeing a golden glint upon its edge, Martel guessed that he faced an opponent protected by gold like the archer. Direct spells would not work, but his staff was a superior weapon to a short blade, even if his opponent was a mageknight. Changing stance, Martel raised his staff to defend himself.

His opponent lashed out several times, but as predicted, Martel could easily hold him at bay, and he even swung his own strike to hit the man on the shoulder. It made impact on something soft; evidently, his adversary did not wear armour.

It also made him take a step back, beyond the range of Martel's staff. He gave the young wizard a calculating look; probably assessing his best avenue of attack.

Martel did similar, but with his magical sense. Perhaps the man was unprotected somewhere. To his surprise, Martel felt no gold anywhere except upon the knife in his hand. This brawler had no armour, no gold, and no magic either, it seemed.

Incredulous, Martel released a fire bolt straight into the man's chest. He doubled over with an agonised expression. Moreover, Martel noticed that he had not even tried to block the spell with his golden blade.

"You're a mage," the man coughed. "They didn't tell me that."

"I am." Martel did not understand this fight at all; the archer and the mageknight had each been a challenge of a different kind. This man stood no chance against him. "I suggest you surrender. Nothing you can do here." He let fire fill his hand as a warning.

His attacker seemed indecisive for a moment, perhaps weighing his options. Finally, he relaxed his stance and lowered his weapon. "Alright. Yeah. I surrender." He gestured towards the door. "Go on. I won't stop you."

Martel nodded a little in acknowledgement, even as he felt confused. This made no sense, but at the same time, he did not care either. As long as he was done. He moved towards the back door, but some instinct, perhaps his unease about the situation, kept him alert. As soon as he turned his back on the other man, he felt him move.

Turning on his heel, Martel swung out with his staff to strike his attacker on the chin and sent him to the ground. "I don't appreciate deception," the young wizard growled. "Stay down, or I'll hurt you much worse than that."

Slowly, disregarding the warning, the assailant got back on his feet and wiped the blood from his mouth. "I can't let you through that door, boy."

"Why in Sol's name not?"

"You leave here, they take me back to Morcaster, where the hangman waits for me. But if I kill you, they'll set me free." The calculating look in his eyes returned.

"But you stand no chance! Didn't you wonder why they gave you a knife with a golden edge? But even with that weapon, you have no hope against a wizard!"

"You're probably right," the brawler admitted. He relaxed his body, but only briefly before he launched himself forward to bury his blade in Martel's chest.

Reacting with empowered speed and strength, Martel grabbed the man's wrist and forced it around, turning the dagger around with it. Momentum carried the assailant forward nonetheless, giving him the fate he had intended for Martel as the blade became embedded in his chest.

He fell to the ground, and Martel released his hold on him. An eerie smile appeared on his mouth, still bloody from Martel's strike before. "Faster than the noose," he croaked before he became still.

Disturbed by this whole affair, Martel quickly walked over to tear the door open and walk through. Outside, he found the elderly scribe and a few guards waiting.

The clerk looked over Martel's shoulder at the body inside. "Well done. You have completed your examination. You are now a battlemage in the emperor's legions. Congratulations." He turned his head towards the soldiers. "Remove the body and fetch the next. Don't forget his dagger."

As the guards did as ordered, Martel walked up to stare down at the scribe. "What was the point of that? You made me murder that man!"

With a cool demeanour in the face of an angry battlemage, and wearing a lot of golden jewellery, the old man looked up at Martel. "He was a criminal slated for execution. I think that was the poisoner, though I may have him mixed up with one of the others. Dreadful business – poisoned his wife to marry another woman, if I recall."

"I don't care," Martel spat. "Why did you make me fight him? It was pointless!"

The clerk wiped his cheek with a slow, deliberate movement. "On the contrary. Now you know how it feels when a man is bent on taking your life. Good to see you didn't hesitate when it came to a real fight."

"It wasn't a real fight! He was practically defenceless."

"He had a golden weapon," the old man argued.

Martel threw his staff aside and pulled his robe over his head to reveal his armour. "Gold against my chain shirt? Useless. He was no threat to me." He began to remove the mail as well.

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"Your complaints are noted. Regardless, your examination is at an end. You may wish to join your teacher in front of the building and wait for the others."

Clenching his jaw and suppressing the urge to release a fire bolt, Martel stalked away.

On his own, Martel strode down the trail that led to the main road. He was in no mood to sit around and wait with the others. He felt several emotions, none of them positive. Anger was easy to identify; another was more elusive. Unclean, somehow, or sullied.

Martel had killed before; Flora and the Night Knives in the Undercroft came to mind. But on that occasion, Martel had defended himself in an ambush. He felt no qualms about that.

This was different. Martel was not troubled necessarily by guilt over the death of a criminal, but because they had forced Martel to use his magic and skills for such a demeaning purpose.

He had a rare and wonderful gift. Two years ago, when he walked this path towards Morcaster, his mind had imagined all the good he might do once he finished his education. And those Nether-born scum had made Martel use his magic, his acquired skills, to kill some hapless, defenceless fool. Whether he deserved it or not, Martel did not know, nor did he care; the fact remained, his magic and his very person had been sullied by this unworthy act, making him an executioner.

It only made things worse that he understood why they had done it. Battlemages used fire to destroy their enemies, preferably lots of them at the same time. The screams of dying men and the smell of burning flesh; one could not be squeamish nor afford weakness, and certainly not hesitation. For the mageknights, the legions wanted soldiers; for their battlemages, they wanted killers.

Reaching the highroad, Martel looked south towards Morcaster. It was getting dark, but the lights of the emperor's city beckoned to him in the distance. The thought struck him that if he was to change his path, quite literally, now was the moment to choose.

He looked north. Many hundred miles in that direction lay Engby. He had not seen his mother in two years; considering war awaited him, he might not ever see her again.

He felt tempted, and had the thought occurred to him right after his examination, he might have given it more consideration. But he had walked for a while now, he felt weary from all his exertions, and the storm of emotions inside of him had begun to wane. If he did not return to

Morcaster, he would be a deserter. Even if he could disappear and avoid capture, he could never return to Engby; that would be the first place they looked for him.

Sighing, Martel turned south and resumed walking. Although he felt calmer, his anger did not dissipate as such; rather, it settled like dew upon his mind.

He remembered feeling like this before, after Ruby's death. In the immediate aftermath, he had been furious enough to lash out at anyone nearby, killing her attackers. Later, even when the worst of his anger had been sated, it still smouldered inside of him, and he had burned down The Broken Crown to satisfy it.

He wanted to do the same now, except he did not know where to direct his wrath. The old clerk back at the ruins was just a tool, doing the bidding of others. This had been devised by the Imperial administration, or the legions; how could Martel take vengeance on them? What could he burn down, whom should he teach a lesson? Everything would just be replaced, whether buildings or men, to continue anew.

Watching the gate of Morcaster come into sight, Martel had to concede defeat. The Empire had beaten him. But he would not forget, and certainly never forgive.

Martel arrived just in time to eat supper. Plenty of students were in high spirits, and not just the mageknights; other acolytes had also been through their examinations, it seemed. More than ever, Martel was glad to eat alone.

"So, we talked about celebrating tonight. Would you mind if we went together with all the mageknights? I know you are not friends with all of them, but Maximilian will be there, and you get along with Alain too, right?"

Martel gave Eleanor a weary look. He had forgotten about that. "Go without me. I'm really tired. Walked for hours and hours today."

"That is a pity. What if we go somewhere close by? You can have one drink and go back to the Lyceum," she suggested.

"I appreciate it. I'm just not in the mood."

She lowered her voice until he could barely hear her over the noise of the others. "You did pass the examination, right?"

"Yes, yes. I'm going to be a battlemage. I just don't feel like I have anything to celebrate." He tried to give her a reassuring smile, but his face did not cooperate, so it simply became another weary look as he got up and left the table.

He had made it out of the hall, past the Khivan clock in the entrance hall and a little down the corridor when her voice reached him. "Martel, wait a moment."

He stopped and turned around. "What?"

"Something vexes you. I understand you may be concerned about the future, but I am sure you will be fine. You have a rare skill, which makes you valuable."

He took a deep breath. "How was your examination? What did you do?"

"Various kinds of fighting. Demonstrated our prowess with weapons and spells. Duelled each other."

"For me, as the last thing, they made me kill a man."

She looked at him with an expression moving between shock and disbelief. "How do you mean?"

"Some criminal. They tossed him a golden dagger. As if that gave him much chance. Told him to kill me if he wanted to be set free, so I had to kill him."

"Well, if he was a criminal, you should not feel burdened by it," Eleanor considered.

"Whether he deserved to die or not, that's not the point," Martel said, trying to contain his frustration; he was not angry with her, after all. "They might as well have tied him up and placed a knife in my hand. They made me use my magic to execute someone." His voice became unsteady. "That's all I am to them. That's all I'll be. All my magic's good for. Killing people, burning them alive."

She reached out to grab his hand. "Martel, you have just spent a month making potions to save lives. You are far more than your talent for fire magic. That was given to you. Your knowledge of alchemy, you earned that step by step."

Her touch and words had a steadying effect on him. "You're right. Thanks."

She released his hand but gave him a smile instead. "You are welcome."

"I'm still too tired for celebrations, though. You go with the others. I'm fine, promise."

"Very well. Some other night, perhaps?" she suggested.

"Sure. From what I understand, we got plenty of time before we receive our postings."

"Indeed. It will be some time next month before the Imperial administration makes those decisions. Actually, that reminds me of something."

"Yes?"

"Thanks to my father, I do have some acquaintances in the military administration. If I make a request within reason, I believe they might look upon it favourably."

Martel frowned. "What kind of request?"

"As a battlemage, you are most likely to be sent to one of the legions at the siege of Nahavand. That would be a natural place for me to go as well if I am to advance as officer. I could request that we are assigned to the same legion."

"Really? I just assumed they threw us to whatever legion has an opening."

She laughed a little. "That might not be far from the truth. But I can certainly ask. We might not be side by side all the time, but we would live in the same camp."

"That would make it far more bearable," Martel admitted with a relieved smile. The thought of life in the legions seemed less intimidating with a friend by his side.

"Very well. When the time comes for them to decide matters, I shall be sure to make the request." She gave him a final smile and returned to the dining hall; as for him, tired from a long day, he retired to his room.

Chapter 500: Looking for Questions

Looking for Questions

From long hours doing alchemy, interspersed only with classes at the Lyceum, Martel's routines changed entirely. He had no chores or obligations anymore other than to wait for his graduation day and the missive from the Imperial administration.

He found ways to keep himself busy as best he could. He could never practise enchanting too much, even if progress seemed to come slower and slower. He returned to the warehouse and helped Mistress Rana with a few minor tasks, quickly done; the pestilence was finally abating, and though the quarantine could not be lifted yet, an end was in sight.

He spent some leisurely evenings with Eleanor and Maximilian, though both of them often left the school to visit their families, leaving him on his own.

Thus, try as he might, Martel found the hours long and idle from time to time. Until two five days had passed and the full moon rose over Morcaster.

Hearing the rumours fly around the castle, Martel deliberately did not pay them any attention at first. He knew nothing would come of it. He had trudged through the streets of Morcaster, the sewers, and the catacombs, time and time again; all in pursuit of this elusive phantom. The city was simply too big and the trail either cold or incomplete that anybody might stand a chance of finding the maleficar. And even if they did, they had to contend with the creature of smoke that protected him, a foe beyond Martel's abilities.

On the other hand, he could spend an hour in his room practising his enchantment for the slightest incremental gain to his skill, or he could take a stroll through the city and indulge his curiosity rather than attempt to suppress it. Trying not to feel foolish despite going on a fool's errand, Martel fetched his cloak and cap, tied a scarf around his neck, and left the Lyceum.

Rumours led Martel westwards to the merchant quarter. That fit the pattern; as far as he knew, the maleficar had not attacked anyone in this district before. Once he assumed that he was near the location of the assault, Martel glanced around to find someone that could direct him to his destination. When it came to maleficars, adults were reluctant to talk, especially to a wizard; instead, Martel found a child happy to show Martel the location in exchange for a few pennies.

Crossing a square to get there, Martel realised the location was familiar to him. He had to search his memory until he recalled passing this place at the beginning of this year; he had been ambushed by inquisitors while working with the Night Knives, forcing him to rely on Weasel to guide him back to the Lyceum unseen by the mage hunters. Ironic that Martel had been so fearful for Flora's life that night, wounded in the fight against the inquisitors; now her body lay rotting in the Undercroft, slain by his hand.

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"Just down there, master. Them mage hunters in blue were all over the place this morning." The boy extended his hand and watched with a grin as Martel dropped two copper coins into his palm before he ran off.

Martel was uncertain what he had expected to find. Obviously, the body would be long gone. But he had hoped to maybe catch some trail of dark magic, which would be undetected by the inquisitors, being bereft of a magical sense. He knew that powerful sorcery could leave a presence, as he had felt it by the relic that the Friar had made him hunt down; even removed from the small temple, Martel had sensed its powerful presence lingering behind.

As for this place, there seemed to be nothing. It could be that rumours were wrong; perhaps this was an ordinary murder, or the maleficar had been interrupted before he could carry out his dark rituals. This was certainly a more public place than the derelict house where he had kept Sparrow, or the home of the old woman he had killed in the copper lanes, for that matter. Regardless, there was nothing to learn.

Even so, Martel did not return straight to the Lyceum. He knocked on doors and asked people in the vicinity who might have witnessed something. Nothing. Either people had been asleep, or they did not wish to share anything with a wizard. Martel tried to pressure those who appeared shifty, but it only made them double their protestations of ignorance.

As a final thought, Martel went back to retrace his steps from the night he had been running from the inquisitors, led by Weasel. The boy had taken Martel to this part of the city in order to descend down a sewer hatch, allowing Martel to return to the Lyceum unnoticed. It took him a little while, but he found the same alley and walked down to locate the hatch. Unlocked. Martel felt certain that the maleficar had used this as his route to enter and leave the district; unfortunately, that knowledge did little to help him.

He had already searched the sewers and the catacombs, the latter even in company with inquisitors. Nothing had come of it. Even underground, there was too much ground and too many dangers to properly search it all. As much as it pained him, Martel would have to concede defeat. He wondered for how long the maleficar would continue to haunt Morcaster; would he continue month after month, year after year, always claiming another victim? The inquisitors clearly had no clue how to find him, let alone stop him. As for other institutions, such as the Imperial administration or the city guard... if one person died a month, in a city that saw plenty of violence and other deaths, would they really care enough to consider the problem?

Having no answers, nor finding any concerning the maleficar, Martel trudged back to the Lyceum. Deep in his thoughts, he did not notice the man in blue uniform following him all the way to the castle square to watch him cross the threshold into the school.