

Firebrand 51

Chapter 51: Seeing the Signs

Seeing the Signs

Martel did not appreciate this Soliday morning. As soon as they had returned last night, he had cleaned his cut and gone to bed; he had barely fallen asleep, it felt like, before the first bell rang. At least his few hours of rest had not been disturbed by the ill memories of yestereve. He continued to doze off in bed, nearly missing breakfast. He had to drag his feet as he worked for two hours in the washery; to his luck, Master Jerome did not supervise his labours, being busy elsewhere in the workshop.

No such fortune followed him to the apothecary. Both Nora and Mistress Rana were present. As the latter began explaining Martel's task, he struggled to even keep his eyes open.

"Boy, if you are wasting my time, you better leave my workshop right now," she told him sharply.

"I'm sorry," Martel mumbled in apology. "I barely slept last night."

"That is no excuse! If you wish to spend your nights carousing, you will not spend your days in my apothecary!"

"No, not at all!" Although Martel had decided to keep last night's events a secret, he did not want to lose this opportunity of working in the apothecary. "I try to help some kids, and then these street thugs – though I guess they were really veterans – kidnapped me. They were going to sell me to Khiva or to Cathai, wherever they could. So Maximilian, the son of Count Marche, he burst in and attacked them. They used gold on a necklace to take away my magic, but I got free, and we chased them off."

Rana stared at him. "That sounds so eminently foolish, it must be true. Nobody would come up with a lie that incoherent and idiotic."

"Is that how you got that?" Nora pointed at the scratch on his throat.

"Yeah. They tied this string with gold really tightly around my neck, so when we cut it, I got nicked." Martel figured he best avoid mentioning Weasel, the ten-year-old criminal mastermind. The story was ridiculous enough already. "It still stings a bit. Probably doesn't help that the blade was rusty." Despite how tired he had felt, he had cleaned the superficial wound again this morning.

Rana gave a deep sigh. "Nora, fetch me a bandage from the infirmary." That seemed a bit unnecessary to Martel, but he was not going to start an argument. As the apprentice hurried away, the alchemist opened a cabinet to take out a jar. "Blood salve," she explained curtly. With two fingers, she scraped out some of the paste and ran it across Martel's wound. "That should keep it from getting infected. Assuming the damage is not already done."

"Has a sweet smell to it."

"The main ingredient is honey." As the door opened, Rana extended her hand to receive a bandage from Nora. She began dressing up the treated wound on Martel's neck. "Understand, boy, this does not excuse you. I don't care about the reason why you are inattentive or tired. You are at the Lyceum to learn, not get involved in fights in the city. You have made a commitment to my apothecary, and if you do not uphold it, nothing will excuse you."

"I understand," Martel mumbled.

"Now pay attention. Either Nora has been going easy on you, or maybe you are a slow learner, but your knife work with these herbs is sloppy. Let me see you try with these, so I can correct your pitiful technique."

~

When Martel had finished his work at the apothecary, he was sorely tempted to sleep. But that would make him miss his chance to spend time with Shadi, and he would have to wait another fiveday. So he dozed a little while until lunch was ready, quickly ate something, and went into the city.

He kept to the wide streets. Just looking down the narrow alleyways made him feel unpleasant, especially if he saw any movement. He would have saved time by going straight through the marketplace, but he did not feel safe in the crowds either. Nor did the sight of city guards calm him; the short swords by their side, the spears in their hands, and their military bearing served as uncomfortable reminders. So he stuck to the open streets that went around the busy places of bartering to reach the statue of the rider dominating a square in the district.

Shadi stood there, waiting for him. She gave him a quick hug, but her smile disappeared seeing the bandage around his neck. "What happened?"

"I tried to help some kids," Martel began to explain, wanting that bit to be said first. "These thugs thought I was messing with them, so they jumped me." Though perhaps it was best to downplay the severity of the danger. "Luckily, Maximilian was with me. Together, we made short work of them. I got a small graze. The bandage makes it look much bigger than it is."

"Are you sure?" She regarded him sceptically. "You're not just putting on a brave face, right? Because if you faint from blood loss or something, I won't catch you."

Martel laughed. "I promise. I didn't even notice it myself. One of my teachers did all this." He gestured at the bandage.

"Alright, if you're sure."

"That reminds me. I have a job of sorts. Well, I'm not being paid, at least not yet. Except in knowledge."

"Knowledge is great, right until you need to eat. Speaking of that, I'm starving. Can we go get lunch from somewhere?"

"I just ate." Martel also did not have any coins. "But you go ahead, and I'll keep you company."

"And you can tell me about your trip. But first, that impossible question of what to eat."

Martel looked around the square, which lay lined with shops, most of them serving food. He tried to suppress how uncomfortable the sight of the homeless beggars made him, especially those looking to have scars and old war wounds. Doing his best to ignore them, Martel began walking towards one of the small taverns. "You should try this one! Maximilian showed it to me the other day. They make really delicious chicken."

Shadi followed him, but her friendly expression soon faltered. "I can't," she said hesitantly. "They don't serve Khivans." She pointed at sign painted on the wall of the tavern. Three interlocked rings with a cross over them. "That's the symbol of Khiva. Crossed over."

Martel realised he had seen this symbol elsewhere in the city, without paying attention to it. As it did not apply to him, he had never needed to know what it meant.

He looked up at a wooden sign, showing a chicken to advertise the tavern's specialty. It hung on a rope tied to small pole, making it stick out to be more prominent. Glancing through the open wall at the owner inside, Martel thought he looked like a veteran of the legions. It would certainly explain his opinion on Khivans.

"I'll go elsewhere. Come on," Shadi said.

"One moment." Martel stared at the rope. It had the same temperature as its surroundings, making it hard for him to sense, since he normally used heat for that. But being more solid, he managed to separate it from the air around and form an attachment to the rope through his magic. He felt a little short of breath, but the most difficult part was done. Now, he simply used his connection to increase the heat. A small flame burst out, burning through the rope. "Now we can go." In front of them, the sign fell clattering to the ground.

Chapter 52: Standing Against the Wind

Standing Against the Wind

Martel entered in the Hall of Elements, ready to learn. After a full night's sleep, he felt a lot better and able to focus on his teacher's instructions.

As for Master Alstair, he glanced at the bandage and frowned. "Combat training getting rough? Master Reynard is not letting anyone use sharp weapons on you, I hope."

"Oh no, I just happened to get a cut. Mistress Rana dealt with it immediately." Martel figured it was best to insinuate that he got the nick working in the apothecary; this way, he did not actually lie to his favourite teacher, nor did he invite scrutiny of his activities in the city.

"Very well." The Master of Elements cleared his throat. "Air is the most intangible of the elements. It is everywhere, surrounding us, which can make it feel as if it is nowhere. For when you reach out with your magic, what exactly is there to grasp?" He stared at Martel, letting the question sink in, before he continued. "For this reason, most mages struggle to learn control over air. Some, like mageknights and battlemages, never seem to develop any skill in it. And why airmages sometimes can come across as prideful." The teacher chuckled.

"If they don't learn control over air, how do they pass the novice's exam? How do they even become acolytes to learn being mageknights and battlemages?"

"Those are the two wizard professions used by the legions. If you show any skill to become either, or just the willingness, nothing else matters. In the eyes of the army, that is." A flash of annoyance passed over Alastair's face. "But to you, air is almost as important as water. And if you still consider becoming a seamage, an invaluable skill."

Martel had forgotten about that with everything that had happened in the last month or so. But it did not matter either at present; he needed to master the elemental skills in either case. And perhaps

with more control he might also be able to use these elements to defend himself if needed, rather than rely on fire solely. "So how do I learn?"

"Stand right here." Alastair indicated a spot in the hall, where Martel moved to. "I'll bring the wind. Do your best to push back with your own magic."

Martel heard a faint whistle coming from a hole high up on the wall, big enough to put your hand through. He received no further warning before the wind hit him full blast, and he stumbled backwards. Barely able to open his eyes, he tried to do as instructed and push back. By the time Alastair ceased his spellcasting, Martel's eyes watered, and his hair stood in every direction.

"First attempts are always hard," his teacher reassured him. "Let's try that again."

~

One of the first to arrive for lunch, Martel grabbed his food and found himself a table. He had not progressed far into his meal before Eleanor sat down opposite him. She placed her plate rather forcefully on the table as she took her seat. "Martel, what is that around your neck?"

"A bandage," he mumbled.

"Why is your neck bandaged?" She asked pointedly.

"I got a scratch. Mistress Rana thought it needed dressing."

"And how did you get this scratch that required tending to?"

Martel was not sure whether her large hazel eyes or her stern expression was to blame, but he did not feel he could lie to her. "I got into a little fight."

"With six veterans, who abducted you. Tied you up and were going to do Stars know what to you. Yes, Maximilian told me when I chastised him for being sluggish during training."

Martel felt a jab of disappointment that Maximilian had admitted the truth when he had agreed not to do so; then again, he himself had folded quickly both when confronted by Mistress Rana and by Eleanor, though at least he had omitted most of the details. "Look, everything is fine. And I don't intend to do something like this again."

"How reassuring." She stabbed her food with her fork.

"I don't know why you are upset. I just went to help some children, which you also advised me to do."

"Oh, so I am to blame." Her stabbing intensified.

"No, nobody is to blame! Not you, not me," Martel replied irritated. "I don't get why you even care about this."

Eleanor's movement stopped, and she took a deep breath. "Some students are here because their families expect it. A mage is born to their house, and that child must bring honour to the family name. Most students are probably here because learning magic will get them employment with more pay than they could ever hope to see. And a few are here for the power." She raised her eyes to look at Martel. "You are the only one I have heard say he is here to help others, and I fear it will get you killed." She got up and walked away.

Martel stared at her plate, still full. The food she left behind would have sated a child on the street for a whole day. The waste bothered him, but not as much as her words did. She was so different from him, he sometimes found it hard to believe they were truly friends in any deeper sense of the word; yet for reasons he could not explain, the sense that Eleanor was upset with him hurt more than it should.

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Martel spent the remaining day speculating over his conversation with Eleanor and recent events. He did not feel that he had done anything wrong, and nobody he cared about had been hurt, including himself. If not for him, Ragnar would lie chopped up on a Sindhian alchemist's worktable. But he had also twice put Maximilian in grave danger.

And when they had visited the stone of Archen, it had only been because of Martel's involvement that the stone door had been opened, again exposing them all to danger. At the time, the thought of Cheval getting hurt had seemed like its own kind of justice, but his father was a powerful duke. If his son had been hurt, he might have gone looking for someone to blame, not to mention punish.

Taking a seat by his desk, Martel prepared his ink set and parchment. Amidst all this excitement, he could not forget about his other obligations.

Dear mum,

I'm really sorry I can't go home for the solstice celebrations. They were always my favourite time of the year. And you will have Juliet's brew to taste for the first time. I am envious. Tell William to stop giving you so much trouble, or I'll give him a pig's tail.

Lots have happened here as well. We went on a trip out of the city for a few fivedays. It was nice to get out. Morcaster is an incredible place, but so much is stone and hewn wood. I enjoyed seeing green and forest again for a while.

Speaking of green, I also found myself employment. Sort of, I am not being paid in silver yet, but I do learn lots. I work every day in the apothecary of the school, learning how to treat plants and other strange ingredients to make poultices, salves, and the like. If I do well, Mistress Rana will take me on as her apprentice, and I will learn to make all sorts of potions and powerful elixirs.

We also had a spring faire here in the city. Some travelling actors came, and they put on the most amazing show about Roland and his trials. I've never seen the story told so well. They also did another about some animals, but I didn't enjoy that one as much. The troupe had a mage with them, who used his magic on the stage to make it rain or howl or make the dragon breathe fire. I helped him the one time and had lots of fun with it.

Otherwise, I don't go into the city much. So if you heard about trouble on the streets here because of the war, don't worry about me. I mostly stay at the school anyway. I hope everyone is safe and doing well, just like I'm safe and doing well.

Martel

He set his quill aside, careful not to disturb the letter while the ink dried. He should probably do as he had written; avoid the city, at least until he felt more ready at using his magic to defend himself. He only remembered his lack of means as he prepared the envelope; he did not even own the four coppers it would cost to send this by Imperial post.

Chapter 53: Early Days of Summer

Early Days of Summer

For more than a month, Martel barely left the school except to spend an hour or two with Shadi on Soldays. He practised his magic diligently, chasing the elusive mastery of air. He worked every day in the apothecary, learning about the properties of the different reagents he prepared. He found time to help Master Jerome on occasion with different chores, earning a few pieces of silver for himself. And the days lengthened until summer solstice was upon the city of Morcaster.

~

"What is the Nether?" Master Fenrick's eyes, guarded by spectacles and bushy brows, stared over the class.

Martel looked away, not sure about the answer. He knew a few stories, about fiends that dwelt in the Nether and sought to torment people if they got loose. But it had always sounded like just that, stories. Usually about wizards that lived centuries ago or longer.

"I am not surprised by your silence, as our knowledge is scarce. It seems to be another realm, only accessible by magic. We know the stories, of course, of fiends that prey on the unwary mage, but not the circumstances under which such would happen. And perhaps that magic is lost to us forever."

"But isn't that a good thing?" Martel thought about the statue in the western courtyard. He did not know what exactly Nether-fiends were, but if saving Morcaster from them had earned Atreus a statue, they had to be nasty.

"Some would certainly argue that. Although it is only speculation, some believe the Nether caused the destruction of Archen, in which case, the Khivans' ban on magic could be seen as a prevention of the Nether ever affecting them again." Fenrick waited a moment. "Yet the question remains, if the Nether is so dangerous, what rewards enticed the Archeans to reach for it nonetheless?"

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Maximilian gave a disgruntled sigh as he sat down to eat, making Martel look up. "What's troubling you?" asked the novice.

The acolyte tore his bread into smaller pieces. "I was just reminded of Pelday. My father's solstice feast."

Martel frowned. "What's wrong with that? Who doesn't love solstice?" He imagined the kind of lavish celebrations taking place in the palaces of the nobility, complete with food, drinks, and entertainment.

"I am the only mage in the family," Maximilian said; no surprise, given how rare magic was. As far as Martel knew, none of the students at the Lyceum had any close relatives with magical gifts. "So every year, my father trots me out to make me perform in front of his guests. And of course, every year has to be more impressive than the last."

"That sounds annoying," Martel said, though he did not quite understand the issue. Displaying his magic for one night a year, impressing people and receiving their accolades, it did not sound like much of a chore. In fact, it could even be fun. Though he had been nervous at the time, doing the

magical effects during the play at the spring faire had almost tempted Martel to join the travelling troupe.

"It is demeaning," Maximilian complained. "Performing like some market faire juggler. I cannot drink beforehand, because I need my head clear to fight, and I cannot drink after, because my father wants me to speak with his guests."

"And there we have the root of your grievance," Martel grinned. "Poor Max. A party where he cannot drink."

"Do not call me 'Max' while mocking me," the acolyte grumbled. "You are not my sister."

"I'll drink a cup in your name out in a tavern while you're sweating on the marbled floors of your papa's palace," Martel continued.

"Some friend you are," Maximilian complained. "Even worse, my father wants me to find a battlemage for the performance. To show something new."

"Plenty of them at this school, aren't there?" The novice glanced around the dining hall, spotting a few red robes. He had not really spoken to any of them; they seemed to dislike company.

"Yeah, but they all got terrible tempers. I guess setting things on fire all day makes them angry. Working with them is the worst. It is every mageknight's nightmare to be assigned protector duty for a battlemage, I tell you." The acolyte stuffed another large piece of bread into his mouth.

"I'll send you a kind thought when I have my second cup."

~

Martel arrived at the gymnasium for his second lesson in theory of magic, a bit poorly named considering this part focused on practical learning. Namely, unlocking his spellpower so casting the simplest magic did not make him break into a sweat. Master Fenrick had made him practise using water and earth, using the two elements he had so far trained in Master Alastair's class, with little result.

Still, he practised as he had been told rather than draw attention to how another element might help him learn faster. At least he was spared the humiliation of the younger novices in class surpassing him; they struggled as much as he did, trying to maintain their magical efforts.

Looking at the pebble in his hand, Martel sighed inwardly and raised the stone into the air with his magic. He stared at it intently, feeling the strain build up in his head, like holding your breath for too long. Finally, after what seemed like an age but only lasted a few moments, the stone fell back into his hand. Martel looked at it and thought about how often he had done an exercise like this, including those in combat magic. He was starting to hate that pebble.

Still, he understood the importance of the lesson; unlocking his spellpower was necessary for any mage. Especially if he ever wanted to have the power to defend himself or those he cared about, the way Maximilian had defended him. Water or earth just did not seem the right elements for this.

Thus, after the lesson, he went to his room for privacy. Mindful of Master Alastair's warning, he did not want others to see him working with fire. Before, he had practised growing the flame, making it burn brighter and stronger. Now he changed strategy. Calling the flame to his hand, he did not feed it much of his energy. Letting it remain weak, he instead focused solely on keeping it burning.

Meanwhile, he counted his breaths. Last time, he had reached thirty-seven before his concentration faltered.

Thirty-eight. Thirty-nine. Forty. Martel kept counting.

Chapter 54: The Gifts of Friendship

The Gifts of Friendship

Summer might have arrived with the promise of celebrations throughout the city, but Martel still had his ordinary schedule to get through. That meant two hours working for Master Jerome on Soldays. His tasks had started to become more interesting, though.

Because of his work for Mistress Rana, Martel had been entrusted to help making ink. The process resembled what he had learned to do in the apothecary, preparing ingredients and adding them step by step. Gallnuts, sap, vitriol, and water mixed together and boiled at intervals to eventually become ink. He even enjoyed it more than his work in the apothecary, where he mostly just prepared the raw ingredients. Here, he was part of the whole process, watching the finished product slowly take form.

When Martel had finished his two hours, the artificer approached him. He stood with his hands behind his back, observing the fruit of Martel's labours. "Looks good. I will finish this up, and we will have some new ink. By the way, I have something for you."

Martel got up from his workstation in the small laboratory attached to the workshop. "What is it?"

Jerome revealed one hand, extending it towards Martel. "I know you are far from home, and it could be a very long time before you see your family. So I thought you should have a solstice gift."

With wide eyes, the novice accepted Jerome's offering. It was a small knife, completely new. It had a little pommel with a lightning symbol engraved, and it rested in a brown leather sheath. Grabbing the hilt, Martel drew the knife to reveal a shiny blade. "It looks beautiful!"

"There is no magic in it, mind you, other than good craftsmanship," the artificer laughed. Martel did not doubt the skill of the work; a magnificent piece like this would cost at least thirty silvers at market, he reckoned. "You helped tan the leather for the sheath and hilt, so some of that craftsmanship is yours. But, you need a proper belt you can tie it to."

Returning the dagger to the sheath, Martel noticed it had a leather strap for that purpose. But before he could use it, Jerome revealed the gift in his other hand. A belt in black leather filled the boy's vision. The buckle had a prong shaped like a lightning bolt.

"I know being a weathermage is more about rain and wind, but this was easier to make a symbol from," Jerome admitted with a wry smile, tapping his finger against the buckle.

Martel could not recall receiving gifts so beautiful or well-made before. He felt an inclination to embrace Master Jerome, but that might be awkward, so he put the knife aside and squeezed the artificer's hand with both of his own. "Thank you. Those are the best gifts I ever received."

Jerome laughed. "My pleasure! Now put it on and get going. You don't want to be late for next bell."

~

With his new belt around his waist, knife hanging by the side, Martel felt a foot taller. He did not even mind if people stared at him. Not that many did anymore; the sight of the tall, lanky adolescent

in a novice's brown robe had long since ceased to be a novelty. But if any did, Martel was not troubled by it one whit.

"Nice belt." Nora glanced at him quickly before she resumed her work grinding seeds to a powder. "Bought it at the festival?"

"Thanks!" Martel beamed. "No, it was a gift."

"Well, someone has rich friends."

"No, just someone good with his hands."

"That's all well and good, but we have lots to do. Whenever there's a faire or festival in town, people get drunk. And that means more brawls and more accidents. The infirmary will be busy," Nora told him, "and they'll need skin and blood salves. You have a lot of strangleroot to prepare." She pointed towards a worktable with a large pile of herbs.

Martel went to work. "It's good of the school to have the infirmary, helping people who can't afford a healer."

"Going to the infirmary will still cost you a pretty penny," Nora explained. "I think the Lyceum makes quite a decent income from running the hospital. Still cheaper than magical healing, of course." She glanced at his brown robe. "You haven't done your month in the infirmary yet?"

"My month? No, what is that?"

"Every novice spends a month working as different things, to check their aptitude before they are given a specialisation. How long have you been here at the school?"

Martel quickly considered her question. He had arrived deep in winter, and now summer solstice was at hand. "About half a year."

She nodded. "You should soon be starting your tour then. And novices always start at the infirmary, because if someone has the skill to be a healer, they won't let you train as anything else." Nora grinned. "Healers are far too rare to waste on anything else."

Lining up the strangleroot before its impending massacre, Martel's imagination began to wander. He had never witnessed magical healing or even seen a healer before coming to the Lyceum. Even then, he had only watched Master Kelsos from afar, and Martel knew nothing of his capabilities.

But he could not imagine a greater power than the ability to heal the sick and wounded. He thought about his father, dying from a small but infected wound. Being constantly reminded of that for a full month, working in the infirmary, was going to be an ordeal; but if at the end of it, Martel was revealed to have the gift for healing, it would be more than worth it.

~

"Martel, my good friend, I am pleased to see you." Maximilian sat down with his own lunch.

Martel frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"I am glad you asked. I am having trouble finding a battlemage for my father's feast tomorrow."

The novice regarded the acolyte with eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Did you ask any?"

"I considered it, but I did not wish to deal with any of those prickly bastards. And I realised there was no need when my dear friend Martel is such an apt hand with fire."

Martel felt like a snare had been set for him. "I'm really not. I'm practising water, earth, air. Everything but fire. And I'm positively lousy with empowerment."

"Nonsense! I have seen you summon flames brighter than Master Fenrick's balding forehead in the moonlight. I just need you to bring a bit of that. Really, what any decent novice can conjure up. Make it look sparkly and put on a good show. In particular, make me look good."

"But I know nothing about being a battlemage! And my fire's not really hot enough to properly injure someone." Martel started to feel anxious; revealing his skills with fire in front of a crowd of nobility was exactly what Master Alastair had warned him against.

"All the better," Maximilian argued. "I do not want you to actually try to hurt me. Just shoot some harmless flames at me that I can look brave defying. The brighter, the better. These people know nothing about magic anyway."

"I really don't feel comfortable," Martel mumbled.

"Come on, mate. We have barely spent time together this past month. You are always studying. You cannot spend one evening helping out your friend Maximilian?"

"I just think you should find an actual battlemage. Like your father wanted."

The mageknight leaned back a bit, crossing his arms. "You leave me no choice. Martel, I have twice risked my life on your behalf, and now I ask for one small favour. Three to four hours of your time, with a lot better food than what is on offer here." He uncrossed his arms again to prod a boiled carrot on his plate with his fork.

Martel felt the snare close in around his throat. "Fine. I'll do it."

Chapter 55: Clothes Make the Mage

Clothes Make the Mage

Shortly after the first bell had awakened the Lyceum, Martel heard a knock on his door. This had happened only a few times, and he wondered at the occasion. Dressed just in his long nightshirt, he unbolted and opened his door. On the other side, he found Maximilian. "Good, come with me. The tailor is waiting."

"Tailor? I have clothes," Martel replied confused.

The young nobleman gave him a look. "Martel, you are not attending my father's feast in a plain, brown robe. Not to mention, no need to announce your status as a mere novice. Now, come along." Martel turned around to put on his clothes, but the acolyte stopped him. "The less you wear for your measurements, the better. Besides, he is just upstairs waiting in my room."

In nightshirt and with bare feet on the stone floor, Martel followed his friend up the dormitory tower. They quickly reached Maximilian's room, larger than his own and more richly furnished. Inside stood a man with a long, strange ribbon. Curiously, it had little markings all over. "Stand here. Feet apart," the tailor commanded, and Martel obeyed without understanding. An odd ritual followed, where the craftsman stretched his ribbon along Martel's limbs and around his waist, chest,

and neck. He finally understood why Maximilian's clothes fit him so well, rather than hanging like an over-sized sheet around his body.

As the tailor called out measurements, the mageknight acted as apprentice and wrote them down. A while later, the task was complete, and the needle-wielder left to complete his work. Only when he became alone with Maximilian, the ritual at an end, did Martel regain his senses. "Max, how much will this cost?" He did not think his friend would make him pay for a new set of clothes, but he did feel uncomfortable at the thought of how expensive this would be, regardless of who bore the cost.

"Hardly much. Since we are the same height, he will fit some of my clothes to your measurements." The mageknight pulled his black tunic on, giving Martel a glance, who felt relieved to hear the tailor would not be making a whole set from scratch. "Are you going to breakfast in your nightshirt?"

~

As the day passed, Martel grew increasingly excited and nervous at the same time. Tonight, he would attend a feast among the high nobility of the Empire; a year ago, this would have been unthinkable. As it was not a feudal province, Nordmark did not have landed nobility as such, nor great palaces or the like. Thus, Martel had little to no experience of what to expect, but just seeing a palace from the inside was sure to be splendid.

Maximilian provided little help clarifying what Martel should envision. "It is the usual affair." The acolyte shrugged. "Most of the nobility will be there, probably a member of the Imperial family, but obviously not the man himself. There will be some music, a minstrel, dances, and like a monkey, I will display my skills as a mageknight."

Unsure of what a monkey was, Martel moved on. "What of me? You really shouldn't expect too much of me."

"Relax, you are acting like you have anything on the line. Look, I will do some fighting against different opponents, show some tricks and whatnot. At the end, you shoot some bolts of fire at me, which I deflect with my shield or something." Maximilian waved his hand around. "You know. Whatever will look impressive to the ungifted."

"Alright..."

"My father's horses will pick us up at fifth bell."

"I can't," Martel quickly said. "I got class at sixth."

"Calm your ears. I got us both excused."

The novice widened his eyes. "We can be excused from attending class? Nobody told me!"

~

A carriage stood outside the main gate right after fifth bell. The door had a coat of arms depicting an axe, which seemed rather fitting for his friend. A servant held the door for Maximilian and him to enter the carriage. Once ready, the driver spurred the horses into motion.

"This does go a lot faster than walking," Martel remarked, looking out of the window.

"That is the idea," Maximilian replied. He leaned back, stretching his neck. "We will take the carriage back after my performance, so better make sure you have eaten before that."

"Alright. What's the food going to be like?"

The young nobleman laughed. "Anything you can imagine, and too much of it."

The carriage rumbled against the paved streets, travelling northeast. Martel had never been to this part of the city, but it reminded him of the temple district. Broad streets of stone lined by lamps with magic glow, no dark alleyways or dirt roads in sight. They passed more than one patrol of city guards, and trees grew to provide shade for those on foot, few as they might be. The number of carriages was another peculiarity; anything with wheels in the districts south of the Lyceum would be carts, carrying goods. The air smelled different. With neither the saltwater from the harbour or the refuse that lay piled in the slums, Martel's nose was left mostly untroubled. Lastly, he noticed the lack of beggars, maimed veterans, and homeless people in general.

~

Arriving at the Marche estate, Martel saw several other carriages in front of the main doors into the mansion, but their driver continued past to reach the stables. "I told him to take us through the back so we can change clothes," Maximilian explained. "It would take us ages to get through the big entrance."

That also avoided any issue of the nobility seeing a novice in his brown robe attending as a guest, Martel considered.

Soon after, the carriage came to a halt, and they stepped out. "Follow me," Maximilian told him.

Turning his head every way, Martel saw the long row of horses in the stables, each of which would cost a handful of silvers at least, if not more. The mansion itself did not disappoint either. It rose many floors, probably equal to the height of the Lyceum. Unlike the school, built as a small castle, this building did not appear to have any defensive capabilities. Large glass windows adorned the upper floors. Even around the back, numerous doors gave entry, including some larger ones to drive a cart through; Martel guessed it allowed for easy delivery of goods, such as big barrels of drink for a feast.

As they walked inside, the servants quickly stood aside and bowed their heads seeing the master's son. Martel hurried after, feeling uncomfortable with the deference shown, even if only towards him by proxy. Paying the other people no heed, Maximilian led Martel through the small passageways that connected the servants' quarters to the upper floors.

Soon, they entered richly furnished chambers, all of the furniture exquisitely carved. "Here we are." Maximilian began undressing while Martel still looked around. The bed was larger than his room at the Lyceum. A wardrobe stood, large enough to hold all the clothes Martel had owned in his life; two more could be found elsewhere in the room. "Your clothes are there." The young nobleman pointed at a set of clothes on a wooden dummy.

Martel reached out to touch the white shirt. It felt softer than any other material he had ever touched. Above it lay a blue doublet with silver patterns, which might be wool. Trousers also in blue with a red belt and black shoes completed the set. Removing his brown robe, Martel could scarcely believe how pleasant these garments felt, or how well they fitted him. He suddenly saw the value of a tailor. He only made an exception with the belt, keeping the one given to him by Master Jerome.

Maximilian waved him over to stand in front of a mirror. Martel regarded himself from head to toe, and his image stared back. He had never seen such a clear reflection of himself before. Even if he had, Martel would not have recognised the boy in the mirror. Dressed in silk and dyed wool, wearing shoes that looked nice but would certainly wear out after several days on the road. He studied his own face, committing it to memory. He was unsure how to feel about his blue eyes; Martel liked them, but he knew others did not.

Next to him, Maximilian opened a bottle and let a few drops fall into Martel's hair before doing the same to himself. "I thought it best you do not smell of dusty classrooms," the mageknight grinned. He was dressed similarly to Martel, except wearing different colours and with his family crest on his chest. "There we are. Let us get to this celebration."

Chapter 56: Marbled Performance

Marbled Performance

As Martel and Maximilian descended the stairs to the grand hall, they had a perfect view of the ongoing celebration. Across the wide space, tables stood scattered, decked with food and drink. In small groups, the guests congregated around these, supplying themselves with all manners of nourishment. While some of it looked recognisable to Martel, he could not claim to know the dishes. Various kinds of roasted fowls, for instance, but stuffed with vegetables. He reached out to grab a boiled egg, taking a bite. Rather than yolk, a spicy liquid filled his mouth. He almost spluttered in surprise, barely able to keep from spitting out the food.

"Do not choke," Maximilian chastised him. "That would be supremely poor etiquette." He grabbed two cups of wine, handing one over to Martel. "Some quick advice. Say as little about yourself as possible. In fact, avoid conversation unless others engage you. The more expensive clothes someone is wearing, the further you should stay away from them. See that man dressed in the purple doublet?" Maximilian discreetly nodded towards the other end of the hall.

"Yeah, what about him?"

"That would be the emperor's cousin or nephew, son-in-law, something. Definitely stay away from him. And if you are desperate, Eleanor is over there." The mageknight grinned and emptied his cup. "I better seek out my father. Do not let the wolves smell your fear." He abruptly left.

Martel felt too relieved at seeing a familiar face to be upset at Maximilian jesting with him. Trying to walk in a calm manner rather than rush over, he approached Eleanor. She stood with her friends from class, Elaine and Clarissa. The latter two looked at Martel like he was a smelly dog, and he waived.

"It is good to see you, Martel," Eleanor said pointedly, to which he smiled and gave a small, awkward wave.

"I see Maximilian dressed up his pet," Elaine remarked. "Clothes are not everything, however. Come, Clarissa, leave Eleanor to her fraternisation with the lower classes." The two girls left for other circles of socialising.

"I apologise for them," Eleanor quickly said. "I am supposed to stay on good terms with them for my father's sake, but I find it increasingly difficult."

"You've nothing to apologise for," Martel told her. "I'm just glad to see one person I know."

Eleanor glanced over the grand hall. "I can imagine." There had to be hundreds of guests, spread out across the large space, with servants nimbly moving between to keep tables filled. The amount of food would probably have fed Engby for a month.

As for the clothes, they surpassed what even the richest people in Nordmark would wear. Martel had been impressed by his own garb, but he realised that he was wearing everyday clothes when comparing with the other guests. His shirt was white and plain as opposed to the other men with bright patterned shirts that matched those on their doublet and trousers. Their belts and shoes had buckles of gold. The women wore elaborate dresses, likewise richly ornamented. All wore jewellery of every kind, from rings on fingers and in ears to necklaces, armbands, and even in the hair. The thought came to Martel that if his borrowed garments were considered ordinary, that meant the rich wore silk every day.

"So what happens at these celebrations?"

"People arrive, eat and drink for now," Eleanor explained. "Later, musicians will play, allowing for dancing. And last year, Maximilian demonstrated his skills fighting with magic. I imagine he will again this year."

"You two have known each other a long time, I take it."

She shrugged. "It was mostly peripheral. Our families attend the same functions. We did not have classes together as novices. That only began when we started training as mageknights."

Martel reached out to grab a chicken leg. The meat had been seasoned with something he did not recognise, but he could not argue with the result. "I wish I could have been here in past years, and not just for the food."

Eleanor laughed, and Martel always felt a little touch of pride when he accomplished that. Her hair had been elaborately set in ways she never wore it at the school with soft curls that framed her face. It was also the first time he saw her in a dress rather than the mageknight's tunic, and her athletic form bore it well. She was the prettiest woman in the hall, without doubt; at the same time, Martel knew her magic in time would make her stronger than any of the ungifted men. For some reason, his mind turned to Shadi with her short hair and boy clothes.

Glancing around the room, Martel became aware of a man staring at him. Middle-aged, he wore a knight's sword instead of the more ornamental daggers and knives others did. His hair had been closely cut, and he was clean-shaven. An armoured fist served as the insignia on his clothes.

"Eleanor, do you know why that man is looking at us so intently? Is it me or you?"

She followed his gaze before laughing again. "Probably both. That is my father, Legate Richard Fontaine."

His title explained the sword, Martel supposed, though it felt a bit much appearing so armed for a celebration. "Let me guess, he is not fond of boys talking to his daughter."

"Most likely, he is simply curious as to who you are. He cannot determine so from your clothing, lacking any emblem."

"If you plan to tell him tonight, wait until I'm beyond reach of his sword, please."

She chuckled. "He respects mages, do not worry. Any who serves the Empire, really."

Their conversation ceased as musicians entered the hall, clearing a space.

~

Led by a minstrel, song and music followed as could be expected, along with dancing. Martel retreated, as he did not know any of the steps. His companion in conversation left him, turned into a dance partner by Maximilian. Martel watched them float around the floor; he enjoyed seeing his friends smiling and enjoying themselves, though he wished that he could participate.

"They make a magnificent couple, do they not?" Elaine sauntered over next to him.

As she only ever spoke to him with venom on her tongue, he did not reply.

"Rumour has it their fathers might be considering a match."

That made sense. Both mageknights, both from families of high status, close in age. That seemed like a good match, and Martel knew he ought to feel happy for them. Watching them on the floor, treading steps he did not know, it also reminded him that his only friends at school belonged to a world forever beyond his reach.

"Of course, Count Marche may have his doubts, given that Eleanor's father does not have the highest standing at court. Anything that reflects poorly on her, such as lesser company, could endanger her future. I have tried telling her this, but she is disinclined to listen. Honestly, she does not deserve my friendship. As you do not deserve hers."

Her message delivered, Elaine left. Martel did not dignify her with a single look.

~

Once the music came to an end, it was time for Maximilian's performance. Receiving a sword and shield - Martel noticed it was not a hammer - Maximilian took position in middle of the hall. He did not strike a particularly warlike figure, dressed in fine clothes; the four swordsmen who surrounded him looked more than ready for a fight in comparison.

They fell upon him from all sides. Presumably the swords were blunted, for they did not hold back, aiming their weapons against Maximilian's unarmoured body; plenty of experienced warriors in the crowd, Martel assumed, who would have noticed if their attacks stood no chance to actually hit. Maximilian moved faster than them, turning to deflect blows. Although impressive, Martel did observe a marked difference from the other fights he had witnessed. Every man here fought with a cool head, unlike the savagery that might accompany a battle involving life or death. Still, it provided great spectacle.

One after the other, Maximilian disarmed or struck his opponents to the ground. When all four had been vanquished, the crowd cheered.

After that, an archer stepped forward, and Maximilian lay his shield aside. The bowman loosened several arrows in swift succession, and this felt more dangerous. Even with blunt tips, they flew with such force to cause real hurt if they struck their target. But just a hand's width in front of the mageknight, the arrows hit his magical shield and fell to the ground. Once again, the audience voiced their approval.

A herald announced the next performance, involving a battlemage. It took Martel a moment to realise they meant him. Further space was cleared, presumably in fear of the famed destructive

powers of the battlemage. Well, they were about to see the modestly shiny powers of the novice. No matter what his friend expected, Martel was not going to do anything more impressive than what any typical student at the Lyceum could conjure up.

Martel and Maximilian took position opposite each other. Picking up his shield, the mageknight gave a small nod. In response, the weathermage-in-training conjured a flame into his hand. It shone brightly but hardly had the heat to light a candle. Martel threw it across the room until it burst against Maximilian's shield. The flames dispersed to all sides, quickly disappearing, but it looked imposing as the mageknight stepped forward through the remnants of the fire.

Not sure what else to do, Martel simply repeated the manoeuvre. He heard gasps from the crowd, so presumably he was doing it right; anyone with actual magic talent in the hall would know how harmless a spell it was. Meanwhile, Maximilian moved steadily towards him, shield raised and sword ready.

Martel wondered how this was meant to end; he quickly found out. Resisting another benign bolt of fire, Maximilian came within reach of the novice. With the flat of the blade, he struck Martel on the leg while his shield pushed against the chest. All done swiftly in a fluid motion, no doubt it looked great; Martel could not tell, as the loss of balance sent him flat on his back. Hitting the marble floor, he groaned while the audience laughed and applauded.

Looking up to see Maximilian waving his sword in the air, accepting the crowd's accolades, Martel felt a flash of anger. He did not deserve to be humiliated this way, especially not when he had only agreed to do this for Maximilian's sake.

The feeling subsided as swiftly as it had appeared. Maximilian had come to his aid twice, risking life and limb. If the price was a little loss of pride, Martel could not complain about such a bargain. As the mageknight reached down a hand to help him stand, he accepted it.

"Well done, mate. You were brilliant."

Martel felt anything but, yet he accepted the praise with a hollow smile. Catching Eleanor's eyes in the crowd, he thought he saw pity on her face; it stung worse than any humiliation.

Chapter 57: Plays in Motion

Plays in Motion

When Martel woke, the events of yesterday felt more like a dream, but a pair of black shoes next to his own boots dispelled any such notion. He opened the drawer to look at his borrowed garments. Inside his commode, the clothes lay neatly folded together. The value of the silk shirt alone made him uncomfortable. Martel pushed the drawer shut and got ready for breakfast and kitchen duty.

~

Since he spent breakfast helping, Martel only saw Maximilian at lunch. "Hullo. Last night was fun."

Martel grunted in reply. He still felt a little sore about how his own part had played out. He had not spoken much either when the carriage drove them back to the Lyceum after the feast, though Maximilian had been too exuberant to notice. "I still have your clothes. I can give them back after we've eaten."

"Keep them, mate. They do not fit me anymore, and I hardly need them anyway."

Martel disliked receiving such an expensive gift; he did not have need for such garments anyway. Then again, this had all been for Maximilian's sake, and if he did not want the clothes back, so be it.

~

His lesson in empowerment passed as usual, though at the end, as Martel was leaving, a familiar voice called out to him. He turned around to look at Eleanor. "Martel, do you have plans tomorrow night?"

"Not as such, why?"

"My family has their summer celebration then. I have been asked to invite you," she explained.

"Asked?"

"My father saw you perform, and it is his custom to invite all mageknights and battlemages," Eleanor elaborated. "Anyone who will serve in the legions."

"But I'm not a battlemage," Martel stressed. He knew this whole thing had been a bad idea.

"I told my father as much," she quickly assured him. "But since we are friends, he told me to invite you regardless. He probably wants to convince you to become one." She laughed a little, but her mirth disappeared seeing Martel's alarmed expression. "Only a jest. He will probably be too busy with other guests."

"I don't think I quite fit in at your family's celebration."

"You fit in with me."

Martel did not wish to argue against that. "I suppose I'd be happy to go." At least he already had the clothes for it.

"Great." Eleanor smiled. "I will let Maximilian know. You can drive with him."

~

With all his duties done for the day, finally, Martel went into the city to experience the festivities. The summer festival had begun, much like the spring faire, only this promised to be greater. For the Faith of the Sun, no day held greater importance than summer solstice, and pilgrims would arrive from all over the Empire to bring offerings at the holy sites. Naturally, this attracted traders and peddlers in equal droves, whether they sold goods or entertainment. If Martel thought the city had been full during spring, he nearly fell backwards at the sight of the crowds that filled the market district.

Every street and lane burst with people. Martel regretted going here, but he became swept up with the throng and had to move along. At least his purse barely held silver, so did not have to worry much about cutpurses, but every time he saw a grizzled beggar who looked like he had been in the wars, Martel flinched a little and tried to push in a direction away.

At length, he saw an opportunity to slip down an alleyway. He leaned against a wall, making use of his breathing room. An old crone, selling buttons, combs, and the like carved from bones, grinned at him. "Not used to the big city, lad?"

"I live here," Martel defended himself. Even if he had only done so for half a year. "I just don't like crowds."

"How about a comb for your sweetheart? Every girl always has need of those." She held up a few examples of her wares.

"No thanks." Neither Shadi's short hair nor his thin purse recommended such a purchase.

"Don't have a sweetheart, do you? No wonder, being such a miser."

Martel continued down the alleyway with the crone's laughter in his ears.

~

Once away, Martel slowed his pace. He had no particular aim; usually, he would have gone with Maximilian, who knew the places to visit, but on occasion, it was also nice to drift around on his own. So he ended up simply following familiar paths. He passed by The Golden Goose, but did not enter; even though he had a few pennies to afford a mug of ale, Martel did not feel thirsty, and the place was packed anyway.

As he reached a square, the mass of people kept him from noticing a familiar sight at first. Pushing through, Martel had nearly crossed before he saw the brightly coloured canvas hanging over a cart. Making his way towards it, a happy expression crossed his face upon recognising several actors preparing a stage next to an old man puffing on his pipe.

"Regnar!"

"I wondered when I might see you," the hedge mage laughed. "Faster than I thought. We only arrived today."

"Where you've been?"

"Touring the provinces," Regnar explained. "But solstice in Morcaster is when we make the most. We'll be here for over a fiveday before it's off north. The only months when those lands are tolerable."

"You're like birds, flying south for the winter and back again for summer."

"Indeed, and just about as free, except we travel by cart, not wings."

"Do you ever travel beyond Aster?"

"Certainly! When winter beckons, you'll find us in Sindhu. But that's in the future," the hedge mage laughed. "Those who travel, we don't make plans far in advance."

"I'll be sure to come and see your plays while you are in town," Martel promised. "Is it Roland and his trials?" he asked hopefully.

"While I'm sure my compatriots are happy that you appreciate their past work, I think the crowd requires a new spectacle." Regnar's eyes twinkled. "In fact, we have a brand new play, written by our own storyteller, never performed before in Morcaster."

"That's exciting. Do I know the story?"

"You do, but I won't reveal anything. Come see it when you can, and bring your friends!"

~

Regnar watched as Martel left, smiling while he puffed on his pipe.

"Old man, you could lend a hand!" came the reproach from the storyteller of the troupe.

"Yes, yes, hold your horses. Just seeing the boy off. I owe him quite a debt, after all."

"True. Almost a pity they rescued you – else we might have been so lucky to have him take your place," the actor remarked. "Come on. We could use a magic hand to hoist the scenery."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," the old hedge mage declared. "Where's Ian? I need to let him know our new play will have special guests who should have free seats."

"Boy's out fetching food. Don't worry, the play will be a success, and your new friends suitably impressed! I wrote it myself, after all."

"With liberties," Regnar added, smiling slyly.

The storyteller gave a shrug. "Every good story improves with embellishment."

Chapter 58: A Challenger Appears

A Challenger Appears

Glunday morning passed quietly, Martel tending to his chores and classes as usual. Tonight was the feast at Eleanor's home, but he did not feel nervous the way he had before Maximillian's; nothing would be required of him, after all. He would show up, eat as much of their expensive food as he could, and maybe even enjoy himself in Eleanor's company, assuming she had time for him. He gathered there would be other students and mages, which on one hand made him feel less out of place; on the other, they would be mageknights and battlemages, and he did not expect much courtesy from them towards a novice aiming for the elemental arts.

Martel got dressed in his new clothing when the time came before meeting up with Maximilian. He noticed that the young nobleman wore new garments of different colours, though still with his house insignia and made from expensive fabric. "There you are," Maximilian remarked casually. "Glad you are joining us. At least tonight we can drink!"

"I was too busy eating at your family's feast to think about ale much," Martel admitted. "Probably will be tonight again."

Maximilian looked at him aghast. "Ale? Mate, we served wine from as far away as Cathai and beyond. Are you telling me that you did not taste a single drop?"

"I'm not really fond of wine," the novice mumbled.

"We will have to do something about that tonight. Lord Fontaine may not have the best wine cellar, being a legate rather than a gentleman of leisure, but I am sure we can find a decent vintage." Maximilian placed his hand over his heart. "I pledge to you that I shall sample them all to find the best for you."

Martel laughed a little, and if any annoyance from the other night still lingered, it was now gone. Soon, they entered the carriage and drove towards the celebration.

~

The estate belonging to House Fontaine appeared differently from the others in the noble district in a few ways. For one, it was smaller. More noticeably, while others had exquisitely wrought metal

fences, the home of House Fontaine was surrounded by a wall, and its gate looked sturdy enough to withstand anything but a battering ram. The home of a legat.

For now, the gate stood open, and numerous carriages entered the courtyard beyond. Martel felt out of place as they ascended the stairs to the grand main doors, but any hesitation on his part was strangled by the need to keep up with Maximilian's determined pace. Servants in fine livery on either side of the entrance inclined their heads as they walked inside.

"Maximilian of Marche and Martel of the Lyceum," the young nobleman said in response to an unspoken question from the majordomo who greeted them with a bow.

"Lord Fontaine and his family are honoured by your presence," the servant replied and gestured for them to proceed.

Probably more honoured by Maximilian's presence, Martel thought. He looked around from the marble floor to the columns as they reached the painted ceiling. Impressive, though less grandiose as compared to the estate belonging to the House of Marche.

They moved from the entrance to the main hall. Hundreds of guests had already arrived, dressed as expensively as could be expected. Similarly, all manner of dishes had been brought out and dispersed. A multitude of scents tickled Martel's nose, chief among them roasted and seasoned meat.

"Come along," Maximilian told him, moving towards the wine casks. "I will find a cup of squeezed grapes to suit that dainty palate of yours."

~

The evening progressed with entertainment in between servings of food and refreshment. Martel kept to the fringe of the gathering; the nobles congregated around their host and hostess, and being of humble origin, Martel was not expected to join in. At some point, Maximilian deserted him, either lured by some delicacy elsewhere or simply seeking other company.

Martel recognised a handful of students from the Lyceum like himself; every mageknight from his class was present, and Cheval sent him a glare as their eyes met. He also spotted some mages in red robes, though he did not know their names. They looked out of place with everyone else wearing festive garments, and they kept to themselves.

Feeling a little awkward on his own, Martel focused on eating. He tasted half a dozen different kinds of fruit floating in some kind of cream, somehow kept cool despite the warm evening. He wondered if magic was involved but could not see any sign of it.

"Enjoying dessert?" Eleanor's voice took him by surprise, as he was engrossed in his deliberations.

"Uh, yes, it's great. Really enjoying how cool it is, very pleasant. I was wondering how that's done," he admitted.

"The house has a cold room. Enchantments laid into the timberwork keeps it cold," she explained.

"Really the only way to get through a hot summer's day."

"I bet."

"I am sorry I have not come sooner. I had to greet my father's guests."

"I understand. Plenty here to keep me occupied." He noticed that both her dress, jewellery, and hair looked different from the celebration at Maximilian's home. He wondered if she had made the opposite observation about him, and how he wore the same clothes.

"There will be some entertainment soon. Similar to at Maximilian's house. My father wastes no opportunity to let anyone know of his ties to the legions." A slight strain could be heard in her voice.

"Will you perform?" He tried to imagine Eleanor fighting in her dress.

"My mother is against it – it does not seem ladylike to her," the young noblewoman explained. "Not sure what she thinks I will be doing once I join the legions and go to the front."

"Out of sight, out of mind."

"Maybe." A hush fell over the crowd as Lord Fontaine entered the middle of the hall, raising his arms. "Ah, it begins," Eleanor whispered. "Battlemages first, I suspect."

~

Four young wizards in red robes stepped into the centre. Most of the guests retreated to the upper floor, where balconies allowed them to watch the spectacle; the rest, like Martel and Eleanor, pressed backwards to the end of the hall.

The battlemages began. One sent pillars of fire from his hands into the air. Another made a circular motion, and a flaming ring appeared in the air, slowly moving until it merged with the pillar to create the holy symbol of the Sun.

The third and fourth traded magical blows, sending fiery bolts against each other. Neither did anything to evade, and the bursts exploded into countless sparks upon contact with their target.

It looked highly dangerous, and even some of the mageknights looked suitably impressed at the display of skill and control over fire. Martel knew better, thanks to his own abilities. He could sense the heat, or rather lack thereof. The fire bolts were little more than magelight, creating bright flashes but hardly posing a threat to anyone.

"I have never seen the battlemages train," Eleanor revealed. "At the school. It is hard to imagine they are only acolytes with how well they control fire."

"They're pretty good," Martel remarked. In truth, he suspected that he might have the same level of control as they did, simply by virtue of his innate gift. The main difference lay in their endurance. Summoning flames to such an extent as they did would have left Martel exhausted immediately, yet they continued to perform.

"I am glad I never have to face this on the field," she admitted as her father returned to the centre, signalling the end. While others prepared to perform, the battlemages bowed and moved away.

"You would be fine," Martel told her. "Not like any of these flames could have done anything to you if you wore armour."

"What did you say?" An incredulous voice interrupted their conversation. One of the battlemages stared at him. "Are you insulting me?"

"No," Martel replied confused. "Just pointing out you took it easy on each other."

The acolyte's face turned as red as her robe. "How dare a fop like you judge my magic!"

"Peace," Eleanor interjected. "He meant no slight."

The battlemage ran her eyes over Martel. "He caused it nonetheless. I'll not have some prancing peacock cast aspersions on my skills!"

"Look, I'm sure you're very good," Martel said. "It only makes sense that you'd restrain yourself when merely providing entertainment."

As her eyes narrowed, Martel understood his words had only dug the hole deeper. "Who the blazes are you to judge that?" The battlemage's hands began to glow red.

"Is there an issue here?" A deep voice broke through their squabbling. Marching with precise steps, their host appeared. At the legate's arrival, Eleanor immediately lowered her head a little, and even the battlemage seemed to hesitate.

"This hexed fool claims my magic is inferior," the battlemage sneered.

"I didn't!" Martel objected.

"Eleanor, this is your friend, the mage you study with?"

"Yes, father."

The legate studied Martel, who felt uncomfortable under his gaze. "A bold claim. I have seen and heard of your prowess from my daughter, even if you are but a novice. I should like to see your claim tested."

"Father!" Eleanor protested.

"A novice?" spluttered the battlemage.

"A sparring match to provide a spectacle for my guests. That seems only fair now that you have caused a disturbance at my celebration," Lord Richard continued. He spoke with a commanding voice, clearly accustomed to being obeyed. Even Eleanor simply looked away.

The red-robed wizard, on the other hand, seemed only too eager to match herself against a novice. "With pleasure."

"But we have already seen fire against fire. We can provide better," the legate mused. "After all, every battlemage fights with a protector by their side. Do we have any willing mageknights to join this demonstration of skill?"

"I would be happy to," Cheval declared with a broad grin.

Of course. Martel groaned.

"Then I will stand with our challenger," Maximilian proclaimed, stepping forth. Martel breathed a sigh of relief, knowing he was safe. Or so he thought.

"Not so fast. This boy is my daughter's guest and her responsibility," Richard considered. "Let her stand as his protector. Using only your weapons and magic at hand. This will be a proper test of skill, requiring swift and decisive thinking."

Martel looked at Eleanor in her dress, unarmed; in comparison, Cheval had a long dagger by his side. It seemed like Lord Fontaine had stacked the odds against his own daughter, which Martel could not understand. Regardless, he did not see any way to get out of this without suffering

humiliation. Everyone at the feast stared at him. And as the legate had pointed out, or certainly ensured that this would be the view, Martel's actions would reflect on Eleanor. He took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

Chapter 59: Encore

Encore

The four duellists entered the centre of the hall with all eyes on them. "Martel, let me have your knife. I will subdue Guillaume and we can handle the battlemage together. You just distract her until then."

Having no better plan in mind, Martel silently gave his knife to Eleanor. Opposite them, Cheval drew his dagger with a smirk, clearly relishing the situation. The battlemage simply looked angry, her hands already glowing red with magic.

"Begin!" Lord Fontaine called out.

To the side, Martel saw Eleanor and Cheval throw themselves against each other. He only had time to spare a single glance before a sudden burst of heat warned him to look towards his own enemy. A bolt of fire flew across the hall towards him; thankfully, his innate ability with fire had given him enough warning to dodge out of the way.

Another followed, and another. He felt grudging respect for his opponent's ability to continue the barrage, knowing his own magical power would have been long depleted by all the magic performed tonight. He wondered if he could simply wait out his adversary until she became exhausted; her constant attacks did not suggest that would happen anytime soon. She did not appear the least bit hindered or slowed in her assault.

Martel needed to go on the offensive. Yet he could not rely on his strongest talent and fight fire with fire in front of a legate; like with his so-called sparring match against Cheval, he needed to find another way.

The same tactic would not work; they were indoors, and neither rain nor muddy ground could aid him. Martel's eyes ran across the edges of the hall, desperately looking for resources to use. Nearby, Eleanor defended herself, unable to do much else. While undoubtedly a better mage than Cheval, her dress constricted her movements, and her knife allowed for few opportunities to attack against his longer dagger; his magic might be weak, but Cheval had trained in weaponry since childhood, and he knew how to press his advantage.

A burst of fire flew straight at him. Distracted, Martel did not evade in time. On instinct, he threw up his hand to protect himself, and the flames smashed against him, burning his skin. He grimaced at the pain, but it served as a strong motivator to get his head back in the fight.

Scrambling to avoid further hits, Martel's eyes fell upon a cask. Using his magic, he pulled the tap out to let the contents spill. Ale poured onto the floor. With a swift gesture, he moved the small pool underneath the battlemage's feet. She looked down at her shoes getting wet, frowning, even as her hands prepared another blast of fire.

Martel knew how to make things warmer, especially when the object was already hotter than its surroundings. It was like seeing a lit candle and gently blowing air to feed the flame. The reverse

came less naturally to him, but his magic obeyed. Drawing all the heat from the pool of liquid on the floor, he froze it into ice. The battlemage barely had time to look up before her shoes lost friction and she slipped.

To the side, Cheval advanced on Eleanor, looking ready to slash his blade to wound her. Swiftly, Martel sent a small flame of his own against the mageknight. Rather than hot, he made it bright, guiding it right in front of Cheval's eyes. Blinded, the acolyte staggered backwards while trying to shield himself from the sudden light.

Seeing his distraction had worked, Martel dispelled the light immediately. Eleanor, less affected and swifter to react, leapt forward to kick Cheval on the knee. He fell to the ground, his dagger clattering against the floor, and Eleanor sent it over to Martel with another kick.

Meanwhile, the battlemage had recollected her wits. Placing her hands against the frost-covered floor, she poured heat through her fingers to melt the ice. This done, she got back on her feet – only for Martel to reach her side, raising Cheval's dagger against her chest.

A moment passed before the crowd cheered and applauded. "My daughter," Legate Fontaine declared, entering the space to grab her hand and raise it triumphantly.

~

The entertainment quickly continued with musicians, and Eleanor pulled Martel aside, returning his knife. "You were brilliant," she exclaimed. "But that should not be a surprise. I know what you can do."

"Thanks." He gave a relieved smile. "You fought well, given how everything was stacked against you. I don't understand why your father would do this."

She rolled her eyes. "He is always looking for some way for me to prove myself, especially in the eyes of his peers. I am so sorry you got dragged into this. I dislike how you were treated at Maximilian's." Her expression turned from impressed to one of sympathy.

That was not how Martel wanted her to look at him. "It doesn't matter. That was child's play. This, here, that was us fighting together, mage to mage."

"Yes, it was." Eleanor beamed with a smile that faded as she looked over his shoulder. "You should keep your distance to Cheval."

"I am not afraid of him," Martel declared. "I beat him before, and he didn't dare to do anything. Not to my face, anyway."

"Not the son. The father. Stay away from him for the rest of the evening."

Martel turned his head to follow her gaze. He saw Cheval, the acolyte, standing next to a nobleman. At first glance, he seemed like any other guest. His clothes looked to be of the finest cut and fabric. He wore gold jewellery set with large gems, and a black horse reared on his chest as his house insignia. But while others laughed and conversed, the duke of Cheval wore a blank expression on his face. His cold eyes surveyed the room without revealing anything of his thoughts, whether he was disappointed, angry, or indifferent. As those eyes fell upon Martel, the novice hurried to look away.

"Nordmark! I was worried for the briefest of moments, but I bet you have more combat experience than all the battlemages at school put together." Maximilian appeared with a cup in each hand. "To the victor go the spoils!" He handed one to Martel. "To the weathermage!" he called out as a toast.

Martel laughed, accepting the drink. As he raised the cup, he glanced over the hall. Whether by coincidence, Martel could not say, but his eyes met those of the duke's again, and it made the mirth of his company feel hollow.

Chapter 60: Stranger than Fiction

Stranger than Fiction

The bare stone walls of the Lyceum felt dull compared to the decorated marble halls where Martel had spent twice an evening this fiveday. Not only the ornaments, but the lack of music, rich foods, and any sign of festivities despite this being summer solstice. The Lyceum could only boast of one thing; it had magic. As he arrived in class, Martel found a seat and waited for Master Fenrick to begin this Manda's lesson.

"The fiends of the Nether." Their teacher glanced over the classroom. "A dreadful subject, which we shall not dwell upon, but at least one lesson must be devoted to them."

Martel thought again about the statue of Atreus and wondered at what kind of magic battle was entailed by fighting these monsters.

"We have no illustrations of how they might look, which is perhaps for the best. Our written descriptions of them are little better, often disagreeing with each other," Fenrick explained. "This may not be because they are wrong, but rather, because the fiends are far more diverse than our own kind."

"So how are they described?" asked a novice.

"In all manners you might imagine. Some have many arms, others slither like snakes. One eye or countless. Hairless skin or fur of any colour. Teeth sharp as a predator's, or a slit where a mouth should be." Fenrick looked from student to student, smirking at their uncomfortable expressions. "This would suggest that either the fiends of the Nether are as diverse as the animals of our world, or perhaps that they do not have physical forms as we understand it."

"But master, they're not here anymore, right?"

"No. None have been sighted since the Archeans disappeared. We don't know the connection between the Nether and the wizards of Archen, and I hope we'll never have to find out."

~

In the evening, a trio of mages moved across the market district. One wore the novice's robe, the other two the black tunic of a mageknight. Maximilian in front, pushing a path through the crowd, they reached the square hosting the travelling theatre. Arriving early, they had no trouble finding decent seats; as for the boy in bright garbs collecting payment from the audience, he simply grinned at them and continued.

"At least risking our lives against that Tyrian oaf has earned us some good will with the entertainment profession," Maximilian remarked.

"Any idea what the play is about?" asked Eleanor.

Martel strained his neck looking at the stage, but he could not catch a glimpse of the actors that might give away a clue about the performance. "No idea. Regnar said it was something new, so it could be anything."

They chatted for a while longer as the square filled up, and finally, the troupe began their play. The storyteller arrived on stage, commanding silence. "Good folk of Morcaster, we bring you a tale plucked from the ranks of your own people and the streets of your own city. If anything should seem too fanciful, let me assure you, that every word, gesture, and action happened as shown. For there is no greater story than the truth."

To Martel's astonishment, he saw a figure enter smoking a familiar-looking pipe, and for a moment, he thought Regnar had joined the ranks of the actors. Yet this hedge mage moved spryly rather than as an old man, and it had to be simply another player dressed up. Martel's amazement only grew seeing the next actor appear, clad in furs and with painted markings on his face. Although he did not exactly resemble the real thing, the implication was clear; he was meant to be a Tyrian berserker. Over the next hour, a story played out never seen on stage before, unknown to all in the audience except a few, who knew it intimately.

Familiarity with the tale did not impede Martel's enjoyment. His heart was in his throat as the intrepid mageknight and battlemage snuck into the derelict castle to save their childhood friend, whom they had not seen since that fateful day when the Tyrian raiders attacked the village. Martel audibly gasped as the berserker revealed himself, interrupting their rescue attempt with his vicious-looking axe. Relief filled him as the Tyrians were defeated and the childhood friends reunited at last. His opinion seemed shared by the audience; as the play came to an end, the spectators showered them with applause.

"That was incredible!" Martel turned to his companions. *freeweeknovel.com*

"I looked good. Heroism suits me." Maximilian crossed his arms with a smile.

"A few details seemed inconsistent," Eleanor argued. "Three children born with magical talent in the same village? Close in age? Impossible."

"What matters is that they captured my dashing stride. Though I do not recall having that much trouble fighting the berserker," Maximilian grumbled.

Martel looked at him. "He was about to kill you when I threw that golden chain around his neck."

"Maybe. We will never know now, will we?" Maximilian looked around with a superior expression.

"Come on," Eleanor said to the others. "We should thank the players for performing your story and compliment them on the acting feat of making Maximilian almost likeable."

~

The actors were in high spirits, which only climbed higher seeing the trio of mages. "Our heroes," Regnar exclaimed, puffing on his pipe. They sat in a small courtyard created between the stage on one side and their carts and wagons on the other.

"What do you think of our tale?" The storyteller practically beamed.

"It captured my likeness well enough," Maximilian considered.

"I have a few notes concerning your attention to detail," Eleanor remarked.

"It was perfect!" Martel's wide eyes underlined his enthusiasm.

The actors raised cups with cheers upon hearing the final assessment. More wine was brought out to supply each of the guests, paving the way for further merriment and revelry. Ian, the boy in bright clothes who collected payment from the audience, showed himself as an adept juggler with a knife from each belt of the three mages. The storyteller played a harp while others sang, giving Martel the opportunity to pull Eleanor to her feet and whirl her around. In this manner, the small group spent the evening with a solstice celebration of their own.