

Firebrand 61

Chapter 61: Cobbled Streets

Cobbled Streets

On Soliday, Martel reflected on the past fiveday. He had attended celebrations in two mansions and eaten more expensive food than he ever knew could be found together, he had proven his magic against more advanced students and in front of Morcaster's nobility, he had seen a play inspired by his own deeds, enjoying another party after that, and tonight he intended to repeat the experience with Shadi. It felt like five years of good fortune crammed into just five days.

Solstice celebrations did not provide Martel with any excuse for being derelict in his duties, however. Sindhu, being located further south with days of more even length, cared little for such events, and neither did Mistress Rana. She supervised Martel's work more often now, perhaps because she had deemed him worthy of the investment. While that was encouraging, her presence also led to a barrage of constant corrections on every detail of his work, which he found hard to swallow. But he bit his tongue and cut his roots, dried his herbs, cleaned his jars, pulverised his ingredients, cleaned his tools, and everything else she asked of him. And once he had finished, along with his duties assisting Master Jerome, Martel could finally leave the Lyceum for his recurring meeting.

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They met by the statue of the rider as usual, Shadi waving to him from across the square. "There you are! Let's dive in," she suggested, to which he agreed. They spent an hour strolling through the district to peruse its many stalls and offers of entertainment. Martel still felt uneasy whenever he saw a beggar approach, quickly looking them over for any signs of hidden weapons. But all they wanted were spare coins, and Martel simply pulled away from them. Once he had spent his last money buying food for Shadi and him, he could earnestly tell them he had nothing to give them.

Despite the crowds and the occasional encounter that left Martel uncomfortable, he enjoyed the solstice gathering. They saw all kinds of spectacles. A Sindhian woman who could bend and twist her body to move more like a snake than a human. A Khivan who swallowed fire only to breathe it out; Martel made his act a little exciting by strengthening the flames as they left his mouth, making the entertainer look startled and Shadi laughing. Jugglers wielding swords and acrobats, fortune tellers, a seier-wife who offered to inscribe a rune promising long-lasting life for just ten silvers.

As it became late afternoon, Martel led her towards the square with the theatre. "Look who is back!"

"Oh, your friends!"

"They're doing a performance in a little bit," Martel revealed. In part, the timing was a favour to him. "I thought we could watch it together. I promise, you won't be disappointed by the story."

"You've already seen it?"

"Yeah, it's a new play, and they couldn't wait to show it. Once you see it, you'll understand why."

"I don't know..." Shadi bit her lower lip. "It is going to be late once it finishes, and I should get back home before then."

"It'll just take an hour," Martel promised. "It won't be dark until late tonight, and I'll walk you home."

"Alright," she relented, and they moved towards the benches in front of the stage. "How much does it cost again?"

Martel looked at Ian, the young boy collecting payments from the audience. "Nothing for us to worry about."

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Shadi clapped her hands as the play ended. "That was great! I recognised a lot from what you told me. But I thought this happened in Morcaster, not some ruined castle?"

"They may have changed one or two details. But it is still very close to the truth," Martel maintained.

"Isn't Regnar much older than you? And you only met this spring? And you said Maximilian fights with a hammer, not a sword."

"A lot of details," he conceded.

She laughed. "I'm just making fun of you. The play was great," she reiterated. "I really should head home now, though. Before my dad started to wonder where I am."

"You don't want to meet the players?" Martel thought about last night, sharing their company and laughs as they played music and danced. Repeating the experience, but with Shadi this time, would be wonderful.

She shook her head. "It'll get too late."

"Alright." Martel tried to hide his disappointment. "I'll follow you home."

~

Even during the early evening, the crowds in the market district hemmed them in, forcing them to make uneven progress south-east towards the Khivan enclave. Eventually, escaping the worst of it, they could slow down and walk side-by-side, even talking a bit at the same time. Martel laughed on more than one occasion, enjoying his easy rapport with Shadi.

He briefly thought about how it contrasted with sharing the company of Maximilian and Eleanor. Sure, he could discuss magic and life at the Lyceum with them, and he had been through dangers with Maximilian that would always tie them together. But he had known from the start that they lived different lives from him, and attending their families' celebrations had only made it more obvious.

Shadi was like him. She knew how to make a meal or how it felt to worry about money. She grew up with wooden floors and dressed in wool. She had never looked down on him because of his origin, whether considering Nordmark or his distant Tyrian blood.

As they reached the edge of the Khivan quarter, Shadi stopped. "I can walk home from here, it's fine. You got a long way home."

"I don't mind." They had so little time together these days, Martel was happy to prolong it.

"No, really. It's fine."

Her tone of voice had become apprehensive, making Martel frown. "What's wrong?"

Shadi glanced down the street. Three young men stood, perhaps in their twenties. Khivans, by the look of it, and hardly a surprise given the location. They scowled.

"Are they giving you trouble?" Immediately, Martel evaluated the distance towards them and how far his magic would reach.

"No, they don't give me trouble." The way that Shadi stressed the second-last word made Martel look at her.

"I see. They don't like me."

"There's just been a lot of fights with Asterians, and these guys keep a watch out."

Martel gave them a second glance. They had bruises and a scar or two, suggesting they did more than watch. "But I'm not causing any trouble. I'm just walking in and out of the quarter."

"It doesn't matter." She stood uneasy, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

"I'm not scared of them." Almost to his own surprise, Martel realised it was true. He knew what his magic could do, and he would not be bullied.

"I know that. It's not about who's right," Shadi argued. "It's just best for everyone if we say farewell here. I'll see you next Solday." She gave him a mirthless smile, squeezing his arm before she began walking down the street.

Martel watched her, his happiness quietly dwindling away. As she entered the Khivan quarter, he could still see her, yet it felt like a door had slammed in his face. He was reminded of watching Maximilian dance with Eleanor, treading steps he did not even know, their union already being planned. Another world where he did not belong. Whether on cobbled streets or marbled floors, he stood alone.

Chapter 62: Looking for Group

Looking for Group

Martel woke feeling a little deflated. He had looked forward all five days to see Shadi, and his anticipation had only increased when he found out about the play. Now he felt separated from yet another important person in his life.

He did his work in the apothecary with a muted expression, following instructions from Mistress Rana as usual. "You are quiet," she remarked. "Good. I hope that means you are listening intently. Because with all the fools getting injured at these celebrations, we need more blood salve than I can be bothered to make."

It took him a moment to understand her meaning. "You will let me make some?"

"I will let you work with Nora to make some," she clarified. "But first under my careful supervision, of course. We cannot have you accidentally creating poison to rub into people's open wounds." Behind the alchemist's back, Nora winked at Martel.

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Master Alastair watched as Martel strained himself to command the air. He did not have much success, finding it impossible to grab the intangible element with his magical reach. Try as he

might, he could not conjure so much as a light breeze to disturb a single hair on his teacher's head. "I'm sorry, master."

"It's quite all right, my boy. You learn best by instinct. Unfortunately, it is hard to create the right situation in here that allows your magic to act purely on your immediate will." Master Alastair looked around the Hall of Elements. "Especially since, having gained control of the other elements, you will be less inclined to ever reach for air on instinct. So for now, let us keep trying with these exercises."

"Very well, master."

"There is something else..." Master Alastair scratched his neck. "I heard about your performances at not one, but two solstice celebrations among the nobles."

The way he spoke, it did not sound like a compliment in the making to Martel. "Yes?"

"Don't forget to be careful. Especially since your magic has a tendency to react before you can think. If your natural talent asserts itself in such a gathering, it cannot be explained away."

"I know, master. I didn't want to do it. It's hard to say no to these people."

"That it is." Master Alastair gave him half a smile. "For better or worse, your gifts are blossoming at a rapid rate. I doubt that the headmaster foresaw that."

"How do you mean?"

"Never mind. My point is, mages are rare. We may forget this, as we live in a place surrounded by wizards. But outside these walls, the gift of magic is exceedingly rare. It grants power, and those in power gravitate towards it. Either because they see its use – or they see it as a threat."

"I see."

Master Alastair smiled again, perhaps sensing that Martel did not in fact quite see his point. "Just be careful around these people."

"I will, master."

~

Martel's second lesson in elemental magic fared much as the first with air proving elusive as ever. When it came time for supper, he ate together with the elemental acolytes, though he contributed little to their conversation. There was simply too much he still did not know about. He had been at the Lyceum for six months whereas they had been at the school for several years. They spoke of teachers and students unknown to him, subjects he had yet to take, events he had not been present for. So he ate his soup in silence.

Martel thought about who it might be nice to spend time with. Putting his hand in his pocket, his fingers idly played with the rune token he always kept there, and the answer came to him. A mage like himself yet also without ties to the Lyceum, not native to Morcaster but with the same northern touch that caused suspicion among some. Someone who had treated him with friendship and understanding since they first met. He did not know what the pebble in his pocket was meant to do, but if nothing else, it reminded him of Ragnar's intentions to keep him safe, not to mention their adventure together against the Tyrian berserker.

Leaving the school, Martel walked the familiar path towards the square hosting the temporary theatre. His mood slowly climbed upwards with each step, thinking about the other night of dancing and making merry with the actors. He thought about Regnar's offer to join them on the road, becoming a hedge mage of his own that used magic for entertainment. He did not seriously entertain the notion, but it was fun to imagine the travels and experiences they would have, presumably always with good company assured.

As he walked, his mind played with ideas for performing with magic. Fire was easy enough; he had already seen people juggling with flames or swallowing and breathing them. Given that he could conjure fire that barely burned, yet still shone brightly, Martel knew he could produce far more impressive spectacles than anyone else he had seen at the solstice festival. It might be harder to use the other elements; they did not look as flashy and dangerous as fire did, and his command of them was far worse.

Perhaps he could do something with water, making it flourish or create patterns that defied nature. Or if he practised earth, he might be able to create temporary sculptures of people for a good laugh. Smiling to himself at his ideas, Martel was so distracted that he barely noticed he had reached his destination. The square containing the theatre had plenty of people as usual, though they were scattered around the different stalls selling goods. He frowned; normally, they would be gathered around the stage in anticipation of the next performance.

Approaching, Martel saw no sign of the players preparing; the stage lay empty, devoid of both people and the different pieces of furniture and such used in the plays. Walking around, a curious sight met Martel. A few of the carts belonging to the travelling troupe stood without any contents. As for people or even just the draft animals, Martel could not find any signs.

Chapter 63: A Cunning Plan

A Cunning Plan

A few questions to the regular peddlers at the theatre square revealed the truth. The city guard had appeared and rounded up the actors, arresting them and confiscating most of their property. Beyond that, nobody knew anything. Martel went back towards the Lyceum unsure what to do. He had no influence personally, but maybe he could convince Maximilian or another of importance to intercede on their behalf. But once returned to the school, he discovered that his plan would have to wait. Both Maximilian and Eleanor were away, attending another solstice celebration with their peers. In the end, Martel went to sleep, hoping that the morrow would bring an opportunity to help his incarcerated friends.

As he woke, once he had washed and dressed, he noticed a small note pushed under his door. He quickly grabbed it to read the shaky letters written upon the small scrap of parchment.

I'm with our small
friends in their
house. Regnar

Martel frowned, trying to understand. Apparently, Regnar had avoided arrest, which was obviously good. The small friends had to be the street children, who had lent a hand back when Regnar was kidnapped by the berserker. He must have made contact with them again, seeking safe harbour. And

the house would be where the Broken Blades had been before, which the children now occupied. This was an invitation, but it would have to wait; first, his regular duties awaited.

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Mistress Rana stirred the jar with a wooden spoon three times before she examined the contents. "It runs thin. How much water did you use?" Her stern eyes turned on Martel.

"Two spoonfuls, filled to the edge," he quickly replied.

"Then you either did not add enough bark, or you did not grind the redbell sufficiently. Throw this out and start over. Nora, pay close attention this time to his work. His failure also reflects on you." After dropping the spoon back into the jar, Mistress Rana left the workshop through the backdoor, retreating to her own laboratory.

"Sorry," Martel mumbled. He disliked how Nora was made responsible for him; it only added to the pressure of having to succeed.

"It's fine," she reassured him. At least she was nice about it. "Nobody gets it right on the first try. And these are all simple, cheap ingredients. Mistress Rana would not risk wasting anything rare on your first attempts. Just be careful with the measurements. A little off, it will ruin the whole thing."

"Got it." Martel did not need the reminder, as Mistress Rana had told him this a dozen times, but he needed Nora's help. Not to mention, he had greater concerns on his mind. "I will start with grinding the redbell."

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Both empowerment lessons passed without Martel putting much effort into either; another three Maldays, and the course would be complete, to be replaced by another subject. It could only be an improvement.

As soon as the bell rang, announcing the end of his afternoon lesson, Martel left in haste. Maximilian and Eleanor shot him a glance or two as he strode out, but neither intercepted him; given his distaste for Reynard, which was reciprocated, none had reason to find it odd that Martel would depart so quickly.

Finally making his way into the city, Martel considered if he should still have tried to enlist the aid of his higher-born friends. He had abandoned the idea after reading Regnar's note, and after further contemplation, he stuck to his decision. Before he dragged anyone else into more trouble, Martel wanted to know the situation first. It would also be a lot easier to ask for help, should it be needed, once he knew what manner of help to ask for.

After a long walk, he reached the house in the slums taken over by Weasel and his gang. The front door was still missing after Maximilian turned it into splinters; a large piece of cloth hung on the inside of the frame in its place. Pushing it aside, Martel stepped into the building.

The main room looked about as derelict as before, with various rags serving as bedrolls along the wall. An empty pot rested on the unlit kitchen fire, and a few pieces of old furniture remained, having survived the fight those months ago. In particular, a table and some chairs, one of which was occupied by Weasel.

The young leader sat with his feet up, staring at Martel as the latter entered, clearly not surprised. "There you are. I had my doubts, but the old pipe-puffer insisted you'd show up."

Martel looked around. Besides recognising a few of the children, he saw the faint glow from a lit pipe in a dark corner of the room. "Knew you'd be here," Regnar declared through lips clenched around his favourite tool.

"Regnar, what happened? At the square, they said your troupe had been arrested."

"Aye, that's the short of it. That play we did last time in Morcaster – well, we should have waited a while longer before returning. One of the prefects sent his hounds on us," the hedge mage explained. "Took the others. I'm a bit wilier though."

"You did get captured by the berserker," Martel pointed out.

"Alright, no need to rub it in," Regnar replied. "What matters is that remaining free, I've been able to ask around a bit. I know what sort of pickle we're in."

"What kind?"

"Fortunately, the prefect who got us arrested isn't the zealous kind. If so, my poor troupe wouldn't see daylight anytime soon. No, this one is a worldly man who appreciates its pleasures."

Seeing Martel's confused look, Weasel snorted. "He wants a bribe." The other kids giggled; the novice noticed Mouse's head peeking out from under a blanket, laughing.

"Our young cutpurse is correct. He's made use of our little overstep to shake my friends for some coin. Failing that, a fate as galley slaves await them. Now, I had the clear mind to take the troupe's shared funds with me as I made my escape," Regnar revealed. "But it's not enough. I'll need more."

"I don't have any coin." Martel turned towards Weasel.

"Don't look at us. This ain't my minstrel to pay for," the little chief said.

"I have a cunning plan," Regnar declared.

"This won't involve fighting, will it?" Martel asked. "I'm done with that sort of trouble."

The hedge mage shook his head. "Perish the thought. No, we'll earn the needed coin the way that a travelling troupe does best." He glanced over Martel in his brown robe. "Do you have any other clothes besides that?"

Chapter 64: The Burning Gate

The Burning Gate

All through Glunday, Regnar's plan rumbled around Martel's head. It did not involve doing anything wrong or fighting, but he would almost have preferred that; instead, it depended on Martel participating in a performance. Having tried that a few times, Martel already knew he disliked having everyone's attention on him, waiting for him to fail. The pressure only increased knowing that if things went poorly, they could not expect to gather the money to get the troupe released.

Martel was not keen on that part either; the thought of a prefect imprisoning someone simply to be paid in order to release them again felt very wrong. Surely someone appointed to hold an office of

justice would not abuse it in such a way, Martel had thought at first. But Regnar had been certain, and the novice did not feel confident enough to gainsay him. Still, it seemed prudent to check with someone else.

"Maximilian, do you know the prefects of the city?"

The acolyte looked up from his lunch. "Not much. I dealt with one of them when we handed over that berserker and got our reward. Why?"

"You remember Regnar and the actors? We just saw their play. Anyway, the troupe has been arrested by one of the prefects. Fellow named Cornelius, I think it was."

"I do not know him. Why the arrest?"

"The play they made last time, at the spring faire. Well, Regnar thinks it is just an excuse for the prefect to get a bribe before releasing them again." Martel looked at his friend. "Could that really happen?"

The mageknight shrugged. "I suppose. Life and careers in Morcaster are expensive. I would not be surprised if someone helped their earnings a little."

"But that's against the law! Why doesn't someone stop this prefect?"

"He is cracking down on a group of travelling actors, whose plays do not exactly paint the emperor in a pretty way. Why should anyone care? If you ask me, they should be grateful if the prefect gives them an easy way out rather than have them sentenced to the galleys."

Martel's eyes widened at the prospect. He had never thought much about crime and punishment before. Once, one of the neighbours in Engby had been discovered thieving, and the townspeople gave him a thrashing while taking money to cover the cost of the stolen goods, and that had been the end of it. Before now, Martel had never known about galleys or who sat at their oars. If he ever became a seamage, he sincerely hoped it would not be aboard such a vessel.

"Martel, you realise it is their own fault, right? Do not get pulled into any sort of trouble on their behalf," Maximilian warned him.

"I won't," Martel claimed, not really sure if he could keep such a promise.

"Good. Helping you out is one thing, mate, but we already stuck our necks out for that hedge mage. It is beneath us as wizards to run around risking our hides for a bunch of vagabonds and miscreants."

"Alright. I won't," Martel repeated. Not that he wanted Maximilian present for the performance later that day anyway; the less people, the better.

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Wearing his expensive doublet, though he had substituted the silk shirt for one made of coarser material, Martel made his way through the city. He felt even more uncomfortable moving through the crowd than usual; he knew his garments made him stand out, which was the whole idea. While he walked, he went through Regnar's plan in his mind, crucially his own involvement.

Once he reached the square with the theatre, he felt anxiety begin to knot itself in his stomach. He tried to calm himself by remembering that it could not be worse than performing in front of the

nobles at their celebrations. Taking a deep breath, Martel slipped around the stage unseen to find Regnar.

The hedge mage's eye twinkled upon seeing the novice, and he removed the pipe from his mouth. "Look at you! Far too respectable for the likes of me. Good. You remember your part? I can do the leaf, but I'm not good enough to do the whole door."

"Yes, it's simple enough to remember." Actually carrying it out was another matter. "You sure this will work? Are people really going to pay enough just for this trick?"

"Yes, yes," Regnar brushed him off. "Now get out there before anyone sees us. And be ready. Timing is everything."

~

Martel spent a while idly perusing the stalls at the square, pretending to be just another market-goer. When Regnar's voice boomed over the area, he felt both relief that the waiting was over and anxiety that their little performance was about to begin.

"Gather around, good folk of Morcaster! Prepare yourself to be amazed by a magic feat unrivalled even by the wizards of the Lyceum!" Regnar placed his pipe back in his mouth and released several puffs of smoke.

Martel knew that on the contrary, even if their performance had been real, more than one mage at the Lyceum could easily do the same. Yet he kept his mouth shut and gathered with the others in the crowd, looking up at Regnar on the stage. The only item occupying the raised platform was a doorway next to the hedge mage.

"You're not an actor," someone objected.

"I am far more," Regnar retorted, letting sparks fly around his head. "And today, you shall witness a brave soul pass through scorching flames, yet emerged unscathed in The Burning Gate!" The crowd seemed sufficiently intrigued by this to quell any further questions, and the hedge mage continued. "Watch this simple doorway, deceptively mundane, as it becomes engulfed in fire!"

That was Martel's cue. He summoned his magelight to wreath itself around the free-standing doorway on the stage, glowing brightly until it looked like a door of actual fire.

The audience gasped appropriately, watching intently. Only Martel remained quiet, his concentration on maintaining the spell.

Regnar pulled out a large oak leaf. "Watch," he commanded, still smoking merrily. He placed the plant against the flaming doorway. This in itself did nothing, the magelight being cold to the touch, but Regnar supplied some heat of his own to ignite the leaf. Timing it correctly, it looked to the audience as if the green piece of plant had caught on fire. "Now I shall need a volunteer, willing to place their faith in me and passed through The Burning Gate!"

Various hands flew into the air, including Martel's.

"Yes, the young, tall gentleman in the lovely blue and silver doublet," Regnar called out, pointing at Martel with his pipe. "Does he not look the very image of a bold hero? Please, young sir, join me on stage!"

With a little difficulty, straining to maintain the magic, Martel climbed onto the stage to stand next to Regnar.

"And what is your name, good sir?"

Martel had not considered that and went for the first thing. "Maximilian."

"Give our volunteer a hand!"

Martel felt sweat on his brow, not from heat but from exertion. "Hurry up," he whispered.

"In a moment, this brave young man shall pass through the door of fire with not a single hair on his head singed! But first, the magical protection." Regnar muttered various words and send a gust of wind to ruffle Martel's hair. "Done! Please, good sir, have no fear. Step through the door."

Relieved to be almost done, Martel swiftly passed through his own magelight. As he emerged unhurt, the audience gasped.

"Too fast," Regnar mumbled. "Do it again."

Martel did not get the chance. From the crowd, an apple flew through the air to pass through the door of fire. It landed on the stage, untouched by the supposedly flames. Martel stared at it with wide eyes, and his concentration broke, dispelling the magelight.

"Hey, it's not real fire!"

"Run," Regnar told Martel before he inhaled deeply on his pipe. As he exhaled, a cloud of smoke streamed out to envelop his body. As the crowd shouted in anger, the hedge mage disappeared into the conjured fog.

"Where's my coin?"

"Thieves, all of them!"

Unrest broke out as the audience turned into an angry mob. Several people stormed towards the stage. Martel looked at the smoke where Regnar had been; he could not perform the same feat of disappearance, but he could buy himself a head start. Summoning the wind, Martel pushed the smoke towards the audience, who coughed and halted in their tracks, rubbing their eyes. Meanwhile, the novice beat a swift retreat.

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Martel hurried through the streets towards the hideout of Weasel and his gang. Passing through the slums, he attracted more and more stares. It took him a while to understand why, as his immediate thought had been to escape the angry crowd; his clothing made him look rich, and unlike actual nobility, he did not carry any weapons to dissuade would-be muggers. Clenching his hands, Martel kept ready to unleash magic while sending what he felt were his toughest glares in every direction.

With relief, he reached the gang's house and hastened inside. He found only a few of the children, though both Weasel and Regnar were present. Martel frowned a little, realising the old hedge mage had beat him here; his expression only deepened seeing the pile of coins on the table between them.

"Where did that come from?"

"Martel, good to see you back. These are the spoils of our little venture, of course," Regnar explained.

"But it fell apart before we could get any payment," Martel objected. He realised that the table held far more coins than any such performance could feasibly have earned. "Wait, where did you get that? How?"

"Me and mine," Weasel exclaimed even as Badger arrived to pour the contents of a purse onto the table. "While you and the geezer had the eyes of the crowd, we cleared them out. Risky to do so many so quickly, but your distraction worked well to let us escape."

"You stole this," Martel protested.

"That is the crude term for it," Regnar admitted.

"Wait, this was your plan all along? To have the performance fail and escape with people's money in the confusion?" The novice stared at the young boy and the old man.

"We were never going to get sufficient coin otherwise," the hedge mage argued. "A pitiful performance like ours? We'd be lucky to scrape together enough silver to satisfy a penny harlot."

"Why would you keep this from me? You could have warned me we'd have to run!"

"Because you are a decent sort, lad, unlike me, and you would have objected," Regnar claimed. "I'm sorry, but time did not permit the luxury of morality. Ian is nine years old," he added, speaking of the boy who typically collected payment from the audience before a play. "The dungeons of Morcaster are no place for him."

"Your fellow vagrants weren't as concerned for you when you were in trouble," Martel pointed out, crossing his arms. "While they did nothing, I risked my life to help you. I thought I deserved the truth from you."

"You did. You do. But we rarely get what we deserve in this life, boy."

"Does this mean you don't want your cut?" Weasel raised an eyebrow at Martel.

"Keep it." With a disappointed look around the room, Martel left.

"Twice my age and half my wits," Weasel remarked with a mocking tone. "Imagine leaving money on the table like that because you're offended."

"Enough." An edge in Regnar's voice served as a reminder that he was not a harmless old man.

"You have your share," the hedge mage said coldly. "Leave it at that."

Chapter 65: Cordial Communications

Cordial Communications

Going to his class on Manday, Martel reaffirmed his conviction to stay out of trouble. He had barely been involved in anything since spring, and the last few days had been a temporary lapse in judgement. For Martel, it was back to focusing on his studies.

This was made all the easier with school becoming more interesting in the next month. Master Alastair had promised that once he grasped the basics of elemental magic, they would continue to more advanced spells. The dreadfully tedious lessons in empowerment under Reynard were almost at an end, to be replaced by far more interesting subjects. He had finally been able to make a satisfactory blood salve, which Mistress Rana had given the high praise of being 'adequate', hinting that he might be allowed to learn more.

As for theory of magic, Martel enjoyed every one of these classes. Sure, at times Master Fenrick spoke of very complicated matters, appearing more interested in discussing the topic with himself rather than ensuring his students could keep up, but delving into the very nature of magic fascinated Martel.

"Solstice is upon us," Master Fenrick declared. He gave his students a look halfway over the edge of his spectacles, halfway under, which usually meant he was building up to a question. "The longest day of the year, with early sunrise and late sunset. What does this mean for magic?"

The novices looked at each other, none of them having a clue.

"Most mages will not notice any difference, but then again, nor are they particularly aware of the fluctuations in magic. Let me ask another question. What are the common traits of such creatures as the living dead?"

Once again, the students exchanged looks, none of them eager to seem a fool. Being the oldest, Martel had begun to take it upon himself to be the first novice through the breach. "They are all cold. No body heat," he suggested.

"True, though not what I was thinking of in this context."

A few others dared to make suggestions, emboldened by Martel's example. "They are all monsters?"

"They are all magical?"

"Yes," their teacher exclaimed. "Or more correctly, the product of such. Whether by intent, such as the vampire, or by accident, such as the banshee. And when are you most likely to encounter such creatures, assuming any could be found within the bounds of our Empire?"

"At night," one novice replied.

"When the sun is absent," Martel elaborated, realising how this pertained to the subject.

"Indeed!" Master Fenrick gave Martel a look directly through his spectacles. "Sunlight seems to weaken if not outright harm these creatures. From this, clerics from the Faith of the Sun have inferred many a thing about the nature of magic and the sun, though most of it seems speculative at best. Except in one regard."

"What's that?" Martel asked.

"We will return to that another time in the lesson on metals," Fenrick said with a smug expression.

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Martel's newfound desire to stay out of trouble lasted until lunch when trouble found him. "Any post for me?"

Henry the airmage looked up from his desk. "There is, actually. I noticed it because it looks so fancy." He rummaged around until he located an envelope and gave it to Martel.

The novice turned it over. It had his name on one side and the emblem of a horse on the other. Breaking the seal, he took out the message.

To Martel of Engby,

You are cordially invited to the summer solstice celebration at the house of Duke Leonard of Cheval on tomorrow's eve, this coming Soliday.

The only signature was the same emblem as upon the envelope. Martel wondered if this was a jest of some sort, set up to make him look the fool. He certainly would not put it past Cheval – the son, to be precise. He would be surprised if the father even knew his name let alone would consider inviting him to his feast, and he could not think of any benign reasons for it. He needed advice.

He stood at the edge of the dining hall, tripping in place until he finally saw Eleanor moving to leave. She spotted him quickly, along with his restless manner and apprehensive expression.

"Martel, what is it?"

He handed her the invitation. "What does this mean?"

Her eyes moved over the text. "It means you have been cordially invited to a celebration." She looked up at him. "But that is not your question, I take it."

"Why am I invited?"

She shrugged in ignorance. "I cannot say. Perhaps the duke was impressed when you took down a battlemage and his son in a duel. Perhaps he is furious. Maybe he wants a closer look at you, or maybe someone simply thought you promise to be a great mage and it would be wise to cultivate relations."

Martel stared at her, trying to process. "So – which one is it?"

"I have no clue. Could be a mixture of all."

"But should I attend?"

"Well, if the duke wanted to harm you, given his resources, he does not need you to appear at his home," Eleanor speculated. "And rejecting his invitation would be seen as a slight."

Martel's breath escaped his lips in a sigh. "So you're saying I should attend."

"I am as well. You can stay by my side the whole evening, and I will see you unharmed through the meals, music, and other forms of entertainment."

"My brave protector." Martel's smile and tone was only partly sarcastic.

"But you need new garments."

"I have a suit of fine clothes."

Eleanor gave him a withering look. "You have worn it twice. A third time, at the house of the richest man in the Empire bar the emperor himself? No."

Martel cleared his throat. He could barely afford a new pair of socks. "Nobody will care. I certainly don't."

"I do," she replied curtly. "When is your next lesson?"

"At sixth bell."

"Good. Follow me."

~

As they entered the city, Eleanor walking swiftly with Martel trying to keep up, he made a few more attempts to protest. "Look, I'm fine. I don't need anything."

"Do not argue. If I am to shepherd you through tomorrow night, this is the price for my aid. We are going to the tailor."

As she continued to dismiss his objections, he finally gave in to the truth. "Eleanor, I cannot afford it. I have barely two pennies on me." And none elsewhere, he added in his mind.

She glanced over her shoulder. The crowd made it hard for them to walk side by side. "We are putting it on my father's account. You made his daughter look good at his own celebration. Trust me, he would pay for ten tailors in gratitude."

"One is enough," Martel mumbled. "I don't like charity."

"As I believe I just explained, it is compensation for a valued service you provided, under quite some duress." Eleanor stopped to turn around and face him. "Martel, my father had no right to put you under such pressure. I would like to do this for you in return."

"Fine," he assented. "If that's what you want."

"It is. Come along, we are nearly there."

~

Eleanor finally stopped outside a door, above which hung a sign showing a threaded needle. She went inside with Martel following her. The workshop looked as one would expect. Fabric everywhere, either in rolls or cut out into various sizes. Several wooden dummies held garments in different stages of completion. An old man and two younger all looked at them as they entered, ceasing their work cutting and stitching cloth.

"Lady Fontaine, always a pleasure." The tailor quickly rose to greet her with a bow. The two apprentices likewise got on their feet, lowering their heads. Hearing her addressed so formally sounded strange in Martel's ears.

"Master Abelard, my companion requires a new doublet for tomorrow evening. I know the notice is short, but I have faith in you," she explained.

The tailor glanced up and down at Martel. "It can be done. Assuming I have the fabrics. We may be limited in choice and colour, milady." He dug out a ribbon for measurement. "Good sir, if you would remove that – I suppose robe is the technical term."

A little hesitant, Martel did as commanded, standing in his shirt and trousers. As one apprentice resumed his work, though his attention strayed to the lady in their midst, the other took down measurements as called by the tailor, who all the while kept a conversation going with Eleanor. "If milady wants velvet, it will have to be red, I fear. But I can stitch it with a lovely green thread, and make the sleeves the same colour."

"Green will work perfectly, as I have some ideas for the insignia."

"Marvellous." He stretched out one of Martel's arms. "Good thing we don't have to worry about sleeve length."

This continued for a while with Martel feeling like a doll being controlled by a puppeteer as one might see at the market. Finally, the tailor was satisfied.

"I shall begin at once, milady. Delivery to your home?"

"My room at the Lyceum. And on my father's account, naturally."

"Naturally."

Martel donned his robe once more to follow Eleanor and her satisfied smile outside.

~

When the day had reached its end, classes and excursions over, Martel returned to his room and found a note on the floor. A small scrap of parchment with shaky scribbles.

We are free. Took
ship to Sindhu. See
you next year. -R

Martel's eyes moved over this short message. He was unsure what to think about Regnar and the other travellers. His annoyance at the hedge mage stood in contrast to his affection for the troupe as a whole. While he understood why they were gone, and he knew it was their nature to move on from place to place regardless, he still felt left behind.

Chapter 66: The Right Touch

The Right Touch

Solday, usually Martel's easiest day of the five, proved busy. After working in the apothecary and assisting Master Jerome, he had to get a message to Shadi that he would not be able to meet. It cost him a trip into town and one of his few pennies to Badger, who happened to be the first of the street children that he met. His message dispatched, Martel returned to the Lyceum where Eleanor waited for him in the entrance hall.

"Good, you are back. Did you handle your errand?"

He nodded. He had not seen any reason to explain the specific nature of the errand. He gestured towards the bundle in her hands. "That for me?"

"Indeed." She handed it over. "But first things first. Head to the baths and get a good scrub in. Get dressed afterwards. I will stop by your room in an hour, maybe a little later. My father's horses should be here by then to take us to our destination. Understood?"

"Aye, commander," Martel grinned, to which she only rolled her eyes.

~

The novice lowered himself until the hot water reached his chin, enjoying the sensation of the heat relaxing his muscles. Back home, bathing happened maybe once a fiveday in the local stream, usually before going to the temple. And that was only in summer, where the cool water was a relief. In winter, they dragged water from the brook inside and heated it over the kitchen fire. With six children to wash, the water quickly turned dirty.

In comparison, having a large pool of heated water constantly available felt like the greatest luxury Martel had discovered at the Lyceum, and he made use of it nearly daily. He wondered if Master Ogion had something like this in his house back in Engby.

When he had washed, Martel quickly cooled off in the cold pool of water and dried himself before he returned to his room. Finally, he unpacked the bundle from the tailor. Adding the new doublet to his other clothes from Maximilian, he found it a perfect fit. More than that, a beautiful tree in green spread across his chest on a red background.

He quickly got dressed and wished he had a large enough bowl of water to act as a mirror. He did not know why Eleanor had chosen the tree for him, but he liked the image, and he wished he could see himself wearing the new doublet.

A knock on the door. Martel had spent longer in the bath than he had realised. He walked over to unbolt and open it. Outside, Eleanor greeted him with a smile. She wore a dress in red and green he had not seen before, along with a few pieces of jewellery. As always, all of it complimented her well. In her hand, she held a small jar. "Go sit down. Facing the other way." She pointed past him and his chair inside the room.

He followed orders, wondering what she intended. As sweet fragrance filled the air as she opened the jar in her hand. "That smells good!"

"That is its sole purpose." He could hear the smile in her voice as she stood behind him and poured oil into his hair. With deft, quick movements, she administered the scent, her fingers massaging his head.

It struck Martel how intimate her touch felt, even if it was simply a practical process to her. Nobody had really touched him with kindness since he had arrived in Morcaster, her fingers moving through his hair almost like a caress. Suddenly, he wished the moment would never end.

Yet it did. "There we are. This is yours to keep." Eleanor tapped the jar against his drawer, leaving it there.

"No, that's yours," he protested.

"Martel, that scent would not work for me at all. I have no use for it. Now come along, our carriage awaits."

~

After two celebrations among the nobility, Martel thought he had a sense of their wealth and extravagance. Arriving at the estate belonging to the house of Cheval, he had to revise that opinion. Driving into the courtyard, nothing less than a grand palace appeared before him, fit even for the emperor. Beyond that, it was decorated with such ostentation, Martel felt overwhelmed. The walls and ceilings were covered with elaborate frescoes, and exquisite statues flanked their approach every ten feet towards the grand hall. The beauty and craftsmanship on display, which in itself signalled a wealth beyond his imagination, left him speechless. Smiling to herself, Eleanor took Martel by the arm and led him forward after announcing their names to the majordomo.

The feast hall only reinforced the initial impression. Alcoves filled the walls, each holding another finely sculpted statue. The ceiling boasted painting after painting, showing elaborate figures in all sorts of scenarios from gruesome war to peaceful idyll. Martel stared until his neck began to hurt.

"You may want to close your mouth at some point," Eleanor laughed.

"I've never seen anything like this," Martel confessed. "It's like a whole different kind of magic. It's so beautiful."

"Yes. Yes, it is," she said softly.

"What the blazes are you doing here?" With a face as angry as his voice, young Cheval stalked over to stand in front of them. "How dare you foul the halls of my home, half-breed!"

Eleanor took a small step forward to stand between the other mageknight and Martel. "He was invited. And you are not the master of these halls."

"You made a mistake," Cheval fumed. "I will have the guards flog you for trespassing!"

A servant in livery appeared. "Master Martel? His lordship the duke wishes to see you immediately."

The novice looked from the servant to Eleanor. Refusal did not seem an option. "You are his guest," she told him quietly. "And a ward of the Lyceum and therefore the Empire. You have nothing to fear."

Martel wished he could share her confidence, but regardless, he nodded at the servant and followed.

~

While Martel disappeared deeper into the palace, more and more guests arrived. The greatest noble houses of Aster, whether hailing from Morcaster or Aquila originally, all came rather than spurn the invitation from the powerful ruler of Cheval. Dukes, counts, barons, their spouses, children, various other relatives, or even simple courtiers came along, everyone clad in a wealth of garments and jewellery that would make a Tyrian raider salivate at the sight. Another solstice celebration, second only to that of the Imperial palace, was underway.

Chapter 67: An Offer to Refuse

An Offer to Refuse

Martel was led through corridors winding around the palace until he had lost his bearings. He did notice that they ascended to one of the upper floors before the servant knocked on a door. "Wait here," he bade the novice and entered the room. Martel stood a brief while, looking at his surroundings. They were less ostentatious, with portrait paintings filling the walls rather than frescoes. Martel guessed they were ancestors or relatives of the duke, all of them stern-looking men and women in garish clothes.

The servant returned and beckoned for Martel to enter the room, which he did. He found himself in a chamber similar to those of his teachers at the Lyceum, except this clearly only served as a study, not a bedroom. Bookshelves took up space along one wall. A bronze statue of a warrior filled one corner. A constant ticking sound alerted him to the presence of the Khivan clock, taller than him and thrice his width, keeping time. And opposite the door stood a desk, behind which he recognised the duke of Cheval.

The nobleman sat jotting down a few scribbles on parchment before he placed his quill in its house. He blew gently on the ink to help it dry before depositing the document in a drawer, which he

locked. Finally, he looked up at his visitor, one hand stroking his perfectly trimmed beard that framed his mouth. "Master Martel, I take it."

"Yes, my lord." Martel gave a short bow, unsure how to act.

The duke rose from his seat. "I am glad you accepted my invitation. Since that evening at Legate Fontaine's, I made a few enquiries. You are new at the Lyceum, yet you show great promise. You outwitted a battlemage with years' more training, not to mention my inept son." Martel relaxed upon hearing this while feeling an unfamiliar sense of warmth. He could not quite fathom that one of the most powerful men in the Empire was praising him.

The sound of a small hammer striking an anvil interrupted their conversation. Mystified, Martel looked towards the source of the disturbance. It came from the Khivan clock, where a small figurine had emerged holding a hammer.

"Eight o'clock. We better make our way to the feast. Follow me." The duke left his study, Martel in tow. "I have also been told you are apprenticed to the apothecary at the Lyceum." He locked the door behind them.

"Apprenticed may be overstating it," Martel admitted. "Currently, I am more of a helper. But I hope to advance and learn all I can."

"See, that is what caught my interest," the duke revealed as he let Martel through the labyrinthine passages of his palace. "I have had dealings with your mistress, the Sindhian woman. Her elixirs are good, but at a high price, and I suspect she refuses to sell her best creations. I already have a court wizard, but a court alchemist trained in Sindhian knowledge would be a boon." He glanced over his shoulder at Martel.

"That sounds intriguing," the novice replied, mostly because he was unsure of the duke's meaning.

"Of course, you would be better compensated than any post in the Empire. And once my current court wizard retires, those duties would be yours as well."

Alright, so it was an offer of employment. And from the sound of it, an enticing one. "I am honoured, but I am also limited in my choices. Once I graduate, my next twenty years must be given to the Empire."

The duke waved his hand about. "With my wealth and connections in the Imperial administration, that is hardly an issue. As long as you acquire the skills I seek. If Aster is to thrive, we must learn all we can from our neighbours, whether Sindhu, Khiva, Tyria, the Western Isles, or even as far as Cathai."

"Such as the clock in your chamber."

The duke gave a little smile. "Correct. I was among the first to buy one, and I have several more. Now, my servants know to serve me breakfast at precisely seven o'clock, my stable hand has my horse saddled at eight, and my weapons master is ready to spar at nine." He stopped and gestured down the stairway. "Follow down to your left. We shall speak again when the time comes, I'm sure."

Martel gave a bow and took the path as instructed, returning to the grand hall.

~

Back at the celebration, Martel found the space filled with people. Locating Eleanor or just any friendly face would be a challenge. As he looked, his mind went over the duke's proposal. When he first heard it, Martel had been dazzled by the opportunity. Half a year ago, he would never have expected such a powerful nobleman to take notice of him, let alone offer him employment even long before his schooling was done.

Of course, it clashed with his original plan to return to Nordmark; then again, even if he became a weathermage, his placement for the next twenty years relied upon the Imperial administration, where he had little influence. Training as an alchemist would not fulfil his originally intended purpose, but perhaps the people at home could benefit even more from such skills. His mind briefly wandered to his father, contemplating if the right potion or salve could have saved him.

On a balcony in the middle of the hall, visible to all, the duke appeared. A herald stomped his staff into the ground to command silence. "My honoured guests," Cheval began to speak. "I welcome you to this solstice celebration. Food, drink, and entertainment to satisfy everyone shall flow without limit in but a moment, yet first I would ask you all to spare a thought for our brave legions guarding the borders of our blessed Empire."

The guests did so, with varying degrees of silence and reverence.

"We must never forget that our celebrations are only possible while our valiant soldiers hold the enemy at bay, whether they be the barbarians of the far north or the malicious Khivans, who even now dwell in our midst. As the legionaries defend our borders, we likewise must safeguard our cities, so they may know their families are protected just as they protect us."

Different shouts of agreement rose into the air.

"With that said, tonight is a night for celebration! Enjoy!" The duke extended his hands in every direction, inviting his guests to partake in the many delights on offer. As perhaps the only one, Martel stood immobile, stunned by what he had heard. He knew now that he had no desire to work for the duke of Cheval, and he would have to find a way to refuse one of the most powerful men in the realm without making him an enemy.

Chapter 68: Elemental Power

Elemental Power

The celebration at the estate of Cheval had taken an unexpected turn for Martel, but none accosted him, and he spent the evening mostly to himself – despite her promise to stick by him, Eleanor had to spend her time on the dance floor. It allowed him to ruminate on his situation, whether he could stomach working for someone like the duke of Cheval, and if not, how to refuse. Upon his return to the Lyceum, he had yet to find any answer.

At least Pelday provided him with one comfort as he entered the Hall of Elements. Martel smiled even before he spoke. "Master Alastair, I have something to show you."

His teacher did not reply, but simply swept his arm out in a gesture inviting Martel to continue.

The novice opened his palm towards Master Alastair. Focusing his magic, he pushed his hand forward to send a small gust of wind against the other person.

A smile was the reward. "What was the incident this time?"

"How do you mean?"

"Your breakthroughs happen when something makes you act on instinct. What was it this time?"

Martel scrambled to think of a suitable reply. "There was some commotion at the market. Some people getting rowdy. So I blew some smoke into their faces to get them to stop." Close enough to the truth.

"Very good. We will spend a fiveday or two refining your skill with air, and then I think you might be ready for more advanced learning."

Martel's eyes shone. "Like what?"

Master Alastair extended both hands in front of him, open palms up. "Controlling fire or water separately is simple enough." As he spoke of each element, they both appeared; a flame in one hand, drops of water in the other. "What happens when you control both at the same time?" His palms became empty, and instead, a tiny cloud of steam appeared between them.

All sorts of ideas filled Martel's mind on how this could be used, but he seized his first thought and acted upon it. With a small puff of air, he blew the steam into his teacher's face.

Taken aback, Master Alastair laughed.

~

"What happened yesterday? You were rather mute," Maximilian asked.

"Yes, you never told us what the duke said to you," Eleanor chimed in.

Martel ran his spoon through his lunch stew. "He offered me employment."

His companions looked at him with surprise. "Are you sure? He is hunting early for a new court mage if so," Maximilian muttered.

"He knows I study alchemy under Mistress Rana. He isn't looking for a court mage, but an alchemist."

"He is well-informed," Eleanor remarked. "But that is a wonderful opportunity for you! Payment and conditions are certain to be far better than working the weather for the Empire."

"You both heard his speech. You really think he wants someone to work for him with my eye colour?"

"He meant nothing of that." Maximilian made a dismissive gesture. "Those were simply idle words of the sort that people expect to hear."

"He would not have offered you work unless he meant it sincerely," Eleanor considered. "An alchemist trained by Mistress Rana would be a valuable addition to any court. I think the duke has a good eye for seeing opportunities."

"He would not be on the High Council otherwise," Maximilian pointed out.

Martel looked at his friends. They did not understand. Nobody had ever yelled disparaging remarks at them or threatened them simply because of their appearance, their background. There seemed no point in explaining.

"Well, I say this is cause for celebration. Our friend, but a novice, already attracts the gaze of those on high. Tonight, we are going out!" Maximilian raised his spoon into the air, holding it like a banner.

"You were at a feast just last night," Martel protested.

"Knowing our dear Maximilian, I suspect something else is afoot." Eleanor sent him a piercing look.

"As it happens, The Golden Goose has finished renovations some days ago," he remarked casually. "Tonight is my first night without engagements in a fiveday or longer, and I am itching to see what they have done with the place."

"Look, I don't have the time. Or the coin," Martel protested. He glanced from one mageknight to the other, crossing his arms. "If you are going, you'll have to go without me."

~

With a loud thud, Maximilian slammed three tankards down on the table. Defeated, Martel took his. At least the place had become more interesting. The Golden Goose now had a stage, where a bard currently played – it was a bit of a token effort, as the tavern was packed, and the clamour threatened at all times to deafen the musician's efforts.

More rooms had been added on the upper floors with richer furnishings, Maximilian had claimed, though Martel had never needed lodgings here and did not imagine he ever would. Tables had been added to the common room for gambling under the supervision of a burly fellow, ensuring games of coin did not escalate into arguments and drawn weapons.

"Cheers!" shouted the mageknight supplying their drink. Martel took a deep draught from his mug. Lastly, the quality of the brew had improved. Perhaps going out was not such a bad thing after all.

Eleanor glanced around. "They have removed the area for knife-throwing. Pity."

"I doubt there was anyone left unwise to your ways," scoffed Maximilian.

Martel smiled into his mug as he took another sip. With her magic, Eleanor was certain to beat any of the patrons in a contest involving weapons. More than one night, they had paid for their drinks with other men's coins until word had finally spread of the innocent-looking girl with the perfect aim.

"You are just relieved I will no longer be able to best you in front of this crowd," she teased.

"I bring you ale, and for my troubles, I am insulted," Maximilian muttered sourly.

"Good friends tell each other the truth," she retorted. "Have you not seen me correct Martel at combat lessons? I only do it out of friendship."

"Is that what you call it, corrections?" Martel gently touched his upper arm, slightly bruised despite his leather armour doing its best to soften Eleanor's empowered blows.

"Failure, and especially the consequences thereof, is the best teacher." Serenely, she took a sip of her drink.

"Your face said otherwise that one time you struggled to light a candle in the common room, and I had to do it for you," Martel shot back.

"You are still thinking about that? That was ages ago."

He raised an eyebrow. "It was last fiveday."

"I think he is cheating." Maximilian's interruption made them look in the same direction towards the table where the patrons played dice. "That loud fellow. Twice now, he has rolled the dice off the table. I think he switches them when he picks them up again." A man sat, laughing and drinking with a small stack of silver and copper in front of him.

"Wouldn't he get caught?"

"He only does it when there is enough at stake to make it worthwhile." Maximilian frowned and turned to look at Martel. "How about we teach him a lesson?"

The novice waved his hands in front in a deflecting gesture. "I don't want to fight!"

"Nothing so crude. I will go play against him. When he tries to do his trick, you just keep the dice on the table. Prevent him from cheating. Understood?"

"I guess I do... Warm up the dice. That'll make it easier for me to feel them," Martel suggested.

"Got it." Maximilian got up and approached the gamblers.

Eleanor turned her chair around. "This I have to see."

At the table, the players looked with interest at the young man joining them, whose boots, belt, and jewelled dagger hilt all spoke of wealth. "I want to play." He hefted his bag of silver.

The suspected cheat wiped greasy long hair from his face with a grin. "Take a seat. Standard rules. Emperor is high, fool is low, pairs beat singles. What's your wager?" He took a swig from his ale.

Maximilian emptied his purse onto the table and made a quick count. "Twelve birds." He let himself fall into an empty seat, pushing the silver coins towards the large fellow keeping an eye on the games. Martel marvelled that his friend would bet an amount equal to twelve hours of labour, but then again, to Maximilian, it did not represent any labour at all.

His counterpart took out an equal amount and deposited it as well before pushing a pair of dice towards the mageknight. "You go first." He revealed a row of yellow teeth.

Maximilian grabbed the dice and rubbed them between his hands, blowing on them as well, ostensibly for good luck. Finally, he let them roll.

Martel craned his neck to see the outcome. One die showed a crown, the other showed the symbol for earth. Emperor and element, a solid throw.

The other player grabbed the dice. His flushed expression suggested he had been drinking, and even from a distance, Martel could feel the heat in his hands, transferring to the square pieces of clay held by him.

As the gambler flung the dice through the air, Martel sensed them as two motes of warmth. They struck the board of the table, rolling towards the edge. Closing his fingers to a fist, the novice stopped their movement. They came to an abrupt halt.

The greasy-haired player looked shocked, while Maximilian wore satisfaction. Their expressions flipped as they noticed the result of the throw. Both dice showed a wisp of air. A pair of elementals beat a single emperor. Howling with delight, the gambler raked his silver towards him.

Maximilian leapt to his feet, looking incensed, but the burly guard slapped a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Alright, no trouble now. Go back to your friends, young man."

Despite his magic giving him the advantage in any physical fight, the mageknight kept himself in check. With a sneer, resting his shoulder free, he returned to his companions. "What. Was. That?" He stared at Martel.

The novice shrugged. "You told me to stop his dice, and I did. Not my fault his luck was better than yours."

"Well, I hope you're happy. That was all my coin for the evening." He sat down with a sour look on his face.

Eleanor regarded him with barely concealed amusement. "I guess next round is on me."

Chapter 69: New Times

New Times

For two fivedays, Martel's life was peaceful. His skills with air progressed to Master Alastair's satisfaction, paving the way to continue with more advanced studies. Even better, he had his last class in empowerment magic. Reynard allowed the occasion to pass without ceremony, and Martel was only happy to avoid any attention from his ill-spirited teacher.

His enthusiasm waned a little, as he learned he would instead have a class on healing to fill the slot on Maldays. Not that he thought the subject lacking in interest or importance; rather, the thought of spending two hours surrounded by sick people did not sit well with him. Even though by now, he had walked many times through the infirmary to reach the apothecary, he still felt uneasy at the sight, sound, and above all smell of disease. It immediately evoked the image of his father dying in his sickbed. At least he only had the one lesson a day instead of two, leaving his afternoons on Maldays open.

Regardless, his misgivings were of no consequence; all students at the Lyceum had to pass this course. Thus, when the second bell had rung, Martel and two other novices reported in the infirmary. He did not know them, as they had not attended the same classes as him; coincidence had made their progress align with his. But they were clearly several years younger than him and seemed even more uncertain of themselves in these surroundings.

A nurse appeared, dressed in their red-robed uniform. She crossed her arms, glancing at each of them. "You must be our fresh hands. I don't know what they teach you in those other classes, but here, expect purely practical. You will change sheets and chamber pots, clean and bandage wounds, help to feed the patients, and maybe learn a little about tending to the sick and injured."

Martel cautiously raised a hand.

"This ain't a classroom. Just spit it out," the nurse told him.

"What about magical healing?"

She laughed. "Full of high thoughts, aren't we? That is for Master Kelsos to determine. But not until you been here a month. Now look lively and help me with this." The nurse directed the students to grab water, small basins, and washcloth. They spent an hour cleaning those patients too sick to do

so themselves before undertaking other chores, all under the watchful gaze of the nurses. As for Master Kelsos, Martel did not see even a hint of him.

~

All in all, while the work was mundane and did not teach Martel anything about magic, it was also simple and easy. The nurses did not drive the students particularly hard, as they talked and jested among themselves merrily, leaving plenty of opportunities to catch one's breath when needed. And once the bell rang, it was a short trip for Martel from the infirmary to his next duty in the apothecary.

Here, his work was of a similar practical nature, but this did not bother Martel. As he worked to turn herbs and stranger items like animal claws or other parts into ingredients for elixirs, Mistress Rana or her apprentice explained their properties and what use would come of Martel's efforts. Even if so far Martel had only learned to make skin salve and blood salve, his knowledge of alchemical reagents grew day by day.

~

Once finished in the apothecary, Martel relaxed in his room after four hours of work. When he felt ready for lunch, he made his way towards the dining hall; before he made it that far, a surprising sight met him in the entrance hall. A group of people stood in a circle to watch the assembly of a large, wooden cabinet filled with all manner of mechanical objects. Martel spotted Master Jerome engaged in discussion with a middle-aged Khivan man. Even if he only saw the latter from behind, Martel recognised him as Master Farhad.

"There you are!" The voice was followed by a slap on his shoulder, making Martel turn in the direction of both.

"Shadi!" He looked from the girl towards the cabinet and back. "Your father's watch! It's done!"

"It is!" She laughed. "Finally. I think this is the biggest clock my father has ever made."

Martel observed the ongoing construction once more. From the looks of it, it would be twice the height of a man, with a large clockface visible from anywhere in the hall. Rather than showing a number of bells, it displayed time divided into twenty-four hours according to Khivan custom. More than that, he noticed various astronomical symbols, displaying such information like sunrise and sunset. It was a marvel to imagine.

"Now you got a reminder of me in your big, fancy school," Shadi remarked with a wry smile. "In case you need one." She bumped her shoulder against his.

Martel did not, but nearly a month had passed since he last saw her. It seemed every Solday, either he or she had been unable to meet. "Never hurts. School keeps me busy. You've not had much time to spare either, I take it."

"I haven't, but with this work complete, my dad won't need me around the workshop as much. For a while, at least. Hopefully, he will be busy again soon." A flash of concern passed over her face before it disappeared again. "What about you? Got time to meet on Solday?"

Martel felt he had been a good student for a long while now, doing well in his classes, whether elemental magic, or magical theory, or extra work like the apothecary. He deserved an afternoon with his friend, relaxing, laughing, and talking. "I do." He smiled. "Usual place?"

"You got yourself a deal."

"Now tell me about this clock your father's made." Martel looked towards the craftsmen carefully joining one piece after another under anxious supervision by Masters Jerome and Farhad. Built by careful machinery, it appeared to have every conceivable feature to not only count hours and minutes, but also many details about the sun, moon, stars, and more; and all of this clever ingenuity was surrounded by a wooden shell enchanted by Asterian magic.

"You magic lot like the moon, right?" Shadi began to explain. "Well, that hand right there, once it's attached, will tell you when it rises and sets, including its current phase..."

Chapter 70: Recipe for Trouble

Recipe for Trouble

Martel ended up spending most of his free bell that same afternoon with Shadi, falling back into the easy ways of their friendship. He took her to the statue of Atreus in the western courtyard and the arena in the eastern, recounting his duel with Cheval to her great amusement. When she left the Lyceum with her father, he already looked forward to seeing her again on Solday.

But it would be a while before they reached the end of the fiveday. Waking up on Glunday, Martel went to the Hall of Elements for his first lesson in the more advanced types of magic.

Master Alastair greeted him cordially as always. "Ready to do more than move a few drops of water around?"

"Definitely!"

"That's the spirit, lad. Now, combining the elements for more advanced results isn't as hard as you might think," his teacher began to explain while Martel dutifully listened. "As long as you got the requisite basic skills, it's really just a question of imagination and a bit of practice."

As he had done when first introducing the topic, Master Alastair made a cloud of steam appear between his hands.

"I know fire, and I know water. I simply make them both appear at the same time."

Like last time, Martel could not help but push the steam into his teacher's face. However, his attempt was immediately rebuffed by a far more powerful gust, turning his trick back on him. Master Alastair laughed seeing the surprise on the novice's face, and after a moment, Martel joined in.

The air blowing into his face made the novice think of something else. "Master Alastair, why is it that magic can't directly affect someone? If I want to push someone back, I have to use air to do it. I can't just grab them with magic the way I can move a rock."

"Master Fenrick could explain in better detail, but I believe it's a limit to our form of magic. Besides the body, a human consists of mind and soul, which our spells cannot touch. You can only use physical magic on the purely physical. Believe me, I've tried setting people directly on fire, and it never worked." He smiled wryly.

"I see." Perhaps for the best; the thought of another mage being able to affect Martel's mind made a shiver run down his spine.

"Alright, enough delay. Think of steam, lad. Imagine it forming in the air between your hands, like your breath on a cold morning. Focus, and it'll come to you."

Raising his hands in front of him, Martel focused.

~

"Are you still working in the apothecary?"

Martel looked up from his meal at Eleanor's question. She usually took her meals with the other girls of her age, but she had joined him for lunch today. "Yeah, for about three months now. Longer, even. Why?"

She pulled out a sheet of parchment from her tunic, unfolded it, and handed it over. "I found this recipe for an elixir in the library."

"The library has books on alchemy?" interjected Martel. He felt foolish as he asked the question. Of course it would have books on the topic. It had tomes on all sorts of magic. Certainly any currently in use at the Lyceum. Martel had just never considered going there, content with learning from Mistress Rana.

She gave a wry smile. "On the upper floor." Naturally. Where novices did not have access. "Anyway, I only did the usual one month course in the apothecary, so I thought you might know more about this than me."

His eyes ran over the recipe, both list of ingredients and instructions. "Most of these are simple enough reagents – crystal phial, huh, maybe not so simple after all. I've never heard of red clover before either. What does this potion do?"

"I cannot be sure. I had to translate this from Archean. While the recipe was straightforward to understand, being entirely practical, the description of the effect was shrouded in strange language."

Martel raised his eyes from the parchment to look at her. "You can read Archean?"

"My father ensured I never lacked for tutors." She gave an almost apologetic shrug. "But my teacher in the Archean language was not a wizard herself, and the potion description uses words I was never taught, most likely dealing with magic."

Martel thought about Father Julius back in Engby, who taught the letters and what else he knew of scholarly pursuits and the world to a boy with unending curiosity. Back then, the priest had seemed the most knowledgeable man possible. Now Martel imagined how much he could have learned, how far he would have progressed as a mage, if given the same opportunities as the child of a nobleman. "It looks intriguing, but I have no idea either. Waxflowers are mostly used for perfume. I know crow's feather is used in a concoction to stay awake or stimulate the mind, for instance, but it could have a completely different purpose here."

"From what I gather, the potion is used for something like that. I just cannot be certain. But it occurred to me – Gerard is still in the infirmary, right? Trapped in some kind of permanent sleep. Perhaps a more skilled alchemist than me could use this to help him." Eleanor gestured at the recipe.

It took Martel a moment to remember the name. The acolyte who had been attacked by a mysterious threat, leaving the boy unresponsive. Breathing, but in all other respects he might as well be dead.

Indeed, he still lay in the infirmary; Martel had noticed him yesterday, but quickly moved on. He did not need the reminder of what terrible danger lurked somewhere in the unknown. "If anyone can make this, it would be Mistress Rana. I don't know if she would trust some recipe I brought to her without knowing where it came from."

"I wrote the title of the book at the top. She can look into it herself."

"Oh, right. Sure, I'll bring this to her. It can't hurt."

She smiled. "Great. And if it will earn you goodwill with your teacher, you can say it was your idea. I remember Mistress Rana from my brief time in the apothecary. She is a hard woman to please."

Before Martel could think further on it, she stood up, her meal finished. With a quick wave of her fingers in goodbye, she left. Watching her leave, Martel wondered what she had been studying in the library to stumble upon this elixir in the first place.

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Doing his daily check for mail, Martel was rewarded with a letter from home. Quickly going to his room, he eagerly opened the envelope to read the message from his mother.

My dearest boy,

We all missed you at the solstice celebration. Your younger brothers especially, but also your sisters. Even Keith as well, even if he did not say so outright. You know he is not one to say much, but I could tell. We had our first taste of Juliet's brew, and it was even better than we could have expected. It was strange to celebrate without your father. Some might say hard to celebrate at all. Day to day, I think we are so busy, there is not much time to miss him. But when we all gathered around the bonfire, I think we all felt his absence.

We have had good wool this year. William sheared this year, and I was ever so frightful he would end up shearing his own skin off. You know how frightfully wild his movements are. But he did well, and I will be making a nice tunic for John. He grows so much, he is going to need it. Also he has a cough, and if he is coughing in summer, he will definitely need warm clothes for winter. I will make one for you as well, if I can trust someone to take it south. I do not think the Imperial post will carry clothes.

Are you still doing well in school? I often ask John to read your last letter, or Mira. I cannot believe the things you describe, but we all love to hear about them. And about you.

With love,

Your mother

Once he had finished it, Martel read the letter a second time. He assumed the lettering was done by Father Julius, but the scattered thoughts jumping from one topic to the next definitely sounded like his mother. He could practically hear her voice as he read the words. He decided to write her back immediately rather than put it off and possibly forget.

Dear mum,

I'm sorry I couldn't spend the solstice with you. But you'll never guess what I did. I was invited to no less than three different celebrations among the noble people. Two of them are my friends, that is, they are from noble families, and I joined them for their feasts. I even performed magic in front

of their guests. There was more food and drink than you could imagine. Enough to feed all of Engby easily for days.

My studies are going well. My teacher, Master Alastair, is very satisfied with my progress. I have finished learning the basic things and have moved on to more advanced magic. Hopefully when I am done – I think I forgot to mention in my last letter, I will only require two years, not four years, so I'll be done two years sooner than expected – I can't wait to come home and show you all the things I can do.

My studies in alchemy are also proceeding. I have learned useful things, such as making salves to treat bruises or wounds, and even made some without supervision. I'll soon be able to call myself a proper apothecary, if not an alchemist yet.

You should gather some lungwort and dry the leaves. Make a tea from them and give it to John morning and evening. More often than that if his cough does not go away. Keep up with it until he no longer has any cough at all. My teacher says that lungwort is the best remedy for a simple cough.

Martel

He smiled to himself as he finished the letter. First Eleanor and now his mother. Alchemy was starting to look the most useful of everything he was learning. Would being an alchemist prove a better choice in the end than a weathermage? Perhaps he could be both. Fulfil his obligations to the Empire as the latter, while earning a pretty penny for himself doing the former. Not to mention, how satisfying it would be to have the remedies for all the little ills and pains that troubled everyone, especially as they grew older. Although she never complained, Martel knew that his mother still had trouble with her left arm ever since she broke it years ago, even though the bone had long since healed.

He rummaged through his pockets and purse to make a tally of his wealth. A few copper coins met his scrutinising gaze. Not even enough to send a letter by Imperial post. Practising his magic, he had not found many opportunities to earn money lately, but he would have to do so if he wanted to post this message.

The bell rang, and Martel leapt up, hurrying to his second lesson of the day with Master Alastair.