

Firebrand 71

Chapter 71: The Source of Silver

The Source of Silver

When Martel arrived in the apothecary, only Nora was present. She gave him mortar and pestle along with instructions, and he began to make powders.

"How are you enjoying the infirmary?" She gave him a wry look. "I noticed you the other day, making the rounds. I don't miss doing all that menial work."

"It's not so bad." He gave a shrug to seem casual and conceal the fact that being around sick people still made him uneasy. "Not too different from helping out in the kitchens or assisting Master Jerome."

"Right, you still have meal duty. Sometimes I forget you're still a novice."

"Wait, acolytes don't have to work in the kitchens?"

She laughed. "No, they don't. You'll still have to help Master Jerome. I don't, since I'm the apprentice to Mistress Rana."

One more thing to look forward to, besides exchanging his dull, brown robe for one with colour and deserving of respect.

Mistress Rana appeared from the inner door to her laboratory. Without acknowledging either of her helpers, she began rummaging through one of the cupboards holding ingredients. "Where is my thistleroot?" She straightened up, sending Martel and Nora a demanding look.

"Here, mistress." The apprentice held out a bowl filled with dried plants. "I just finished these."

The alchemist grabbed the offering. "Add them to the market list, and make sure you go today. I shall need more soon."

"Yes, mistress."

Suddenly remembering his conversation yesterday with Eleanor, Martel ceased his work and hurried to pull the recipe with the new potion from his pocket. Before his teacher could return to her laboratory, Martel called out for her attention. "Mistress Rana! I have something for you to look at." He held out the parchment for her to take. His other hand played with the rune token inside his pocket, helping him to stay calm; he suddenly felt apprehensive about the whole thing.

The Sindhian woman frowned as her eyes glanced over the writing. "This is an elixir? Crystal phial, red clover... Where did you find this?"

Martel kept one finger at the top of the parchment, indicating a title in Archean letters. "It's from this book," he explained. "My friend discovered it." In the end, he did not feel comfortable taking the credit for the discovery, especially if Mistress Rana asked more questions about it; it would quickly come to light that Martel did not speak Archean, after all. "Some of these ingredients I recognise as useful for awakening the mind. Perhaps it can help the patient in the infirmary? The one who won't wake from sleep. Gerard something."

"Yes, I know the one. So far, it's all my potions can do to keep him from wasting away." Squinting her eyes at the parchment, Mistress Rana left the apothecary with the recipe in one hand, thistleroot in the other.

"I guess that's the end of the conversation," Martel remarked, a little perplexed. Nora simply laughed.

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Martel settled into a seat for what often proved to be his favourite class of the fiveday. Soon after, Master Fenrick strode into the room, and the novices became quiet. Each of his hands held an object. A golden chain in the right, a wand entwined with silver in the other. "What do you know of these metals? With regards to magic," he asked.

Martel had first-hand experience with the former. Besides the affair with the berserker, using gold to constrain him, Martel remembered when the thugs, the Broken Blades, had jumped him. It was all too easy to recall that dreadful sensation of being cut off from his abilities. "Gold kills magic," he said almost quietly.

"Yes, it does." Fenrick gave the chain to the nearest student. "Pass it around. You should all feel it. Like death." The novices did so, none of them holding the gold for long. "Reversely, silver amplifies our powers. This wand is typical for working the weather – notice the sapphire at the tip. Every weathermage working for the Empire will have one of these, helping them to control even tempests and the like. Seamages as well, though with a diamond instead."

Martel stared at the object. If he continued along his current path, he would one day hold such an item. Its value alone suggested more wealth than he had ever known, but more than that, it held a promise of power and the ability to do good.

"Now where do gold and silver come from?" asked their teacher.

"From the ground!" an enthusiastic novice exclaimed.

"Sure, but who placed it there? How did it end up in the ground?"

All the students looked at each other, ignorant to a man.

"The exact process is not known, of course, but it is commonly accepted that gold is caused by sunlight, just as silver is caused by moonlight," Fenrick explained. "Magic is stronger at night when the sun has set, and especially when the moon is up and full. Reversely, we may find our powers less strong in daytime."

His teacher continued down another avenue of thought, but Martel was reminded of inquisitors with the emblem of the Sun on their uniforms. Their dislike towards magic wielders did not come simply from their work hunting maleficars, he realised. It was more fundamental than that. The Sun, the recipient of their worship and his own as a faithful adherent of the Empire's religion, weakened magic; more than that, gold, the metal created by that object of reverence, killed magic altogether.

Martel had spent many a Solday in the temple at Engby, listening to Father Julius' sermons. He had never questioned the veracity of the Faith or failed to show obeisance. Now he wondered if all this time, that same Faith disdained him simply for being born with the ability to perform magic. Had this been why his father had told him to hide his abilities throughout his childhood?

Unable to find answers at present, Martel returned his attention to the lesson.

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Between classes, Martel rested in his room as he often did. Especially on Mandays, where he had his practical lesson in magical theory, meant to exert him as much as possible to train his spellpower, and kitchen duty for supper right after. As he heard the bell, he began to make his way towards the arena for the class. Passing through the common room, he saw Maximilian engaged in a card game against some of the other mageknights. Nobody played dice in a room full of mages who might manipulate the throw. A small stack of silver lay between them, and Martel stopped to watch how the hand played out.

One of the boys showed his cards. Martel did not know the rules, but he gathered a hand with kings and sorcerers was strong. That also proved the case; Maximilian jumped to his feet and threw his cards across the table followed by a string of curses while his opponent pulled his winnings towards himself with glee. Across the room, the other students watched with amusement.

"It's just a game," Martel told his friend. "You shouldn't play if it makes you so angry."

"Oh, shut up," the mageknight replied with anger. "I had good coin at stake!"

"Not much for you. I have seen you spend more on most nights out."

"Yeah, buying drinks for you! But what would a poor peasant know of money?" Maximilian stomped away, his shoulder deliberately pushing into Martel as he passed the novice. Laughter could be heard from the corners. Feeling hurt, Martel watched his friend leave, but he did not have time to say or do anything; he was already late for class. But as he reached the arena to practise maintaining magical effects, training his magical power to strengthen it, he found it hard to concentrate.

Chapter 72: Who Watches the Watch

Who Watches the Watch

Another fiveday nearing its end, Martel reported for duty in the workshop of Master Jerome. He smiled as always seeing the jovial artificer, whose many skills and supervision kept the Lyceum running. "Master Martel, it must be Solday! Did you see our new watch?"

"I did! It looks amazing! All the things it can predict and keep track of, it's a marvel."

The artificer smiled. "Indeed! Master Fenrick has been busy ensuring the astronomical calculations are correct, but even he is satisfied. And thanks to a little bit of enchanting in the cabinet, the pendulum inside will keep precise measurement for decades to come. Let those old hats in Aquila polish their meridian line all they want!"

Martel frowned. "What line?"

"Right, you've probably not been taught about it. In the great temple in Aquila, a meridian line runs across the floor. Every day, the sun shines to hit the line in one exact spot, which tells the date of the year. It's how we make sure our calendars keep track of the days right, though I suspect with these new Khivan clocks, that will never be an issue again."

Martel tried to imagine what kind of magic would be involved in such a meridian line, but it was beyond him. Maybe Master Fenrick could explain it at some point.

"Anyway, to work! I have an easy task for you today." Master Jerome led the novice deeper into the workshop, where the familiar work of scraping ink to reuse parchment awaited him.

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Besides being a simple task, Martel could also set his own pace, working alone. He knew it did not particularly matter how far he made it into the stack of used parchment; he could not imagine Master Jerome berating him. At the same time, he did not wish to abuse the artificer's goodwill, so he only took short breaks and otherwise worked at a steady pace. Even so, he could not help but pause each time to read the message he was about to erase.

Nearly always, it regarded something mundane or trivial, and most of the notes did not bear any names, preventing him from identifying the writing hand. He imagined that anything of importance, such as letters or private notes would not be disposed into the barrels collecting parchment for reuse. Certainly he would never let his letters from his mother suffer this fate.

Thus, he mostly came across various notes from class or written reminders to perform one or the other task. He learned who had been summoned to the overseer's office in the last few five days, and occasionally he recognised a list of simple herbs and plants to be bought at market, written in Nora's hand.

Halfway through the bell, Martel stumbled upon something that piqued his curiosity.

R, found the recipe. Translation looks accurate,

I'll go through it again just in case. You can

collect reagents, Perel is ascendant, so right

time for red clover. Looks worth a try.

Nothing else has worked. -F

At first, Martel wondered if the mention of a translated recipe was a coincidence, but given that this also called for red clover, there could not be any doubt. This had to be one of the countless little missives that members of the faculty sent each other. He could easily guess that R stood for Rana, and that she had consulted someone else about the recipe Martel had shown her. As for who might speak Archeon and know about the ascendancy of a star, Martel guessed that F stood for Fenrick.

Martel felt a small tinge of excitement. Besides the fact that this elixir might save someone's life – Martel did not particularly like the fellow lying in the infirmary, but he did not want for him to waste away until death – the youth would be an important witness. He would be able to explain who or what attacked him. This might solve a mystery and remove a dangerous threat from the streets of Morcaster. Smiling to himself, Martel began the process of erasing the message, leaving the parchment clean and ready to be used again.

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Although he could use the coin that working an extra bell or two for Master Jerome provided, it would have to be another day. Martel's afternoon was spoken for. So once he had finished his duty in the workshop and the apothecary, he ventured into town.

They met at their usual gathering spot underneath the statue of some legate. Martel had never bothered to read the inscription.

"What do you want to do?" Shadi asked him.

"I didn't bring any coin with me," Martel admitted. Not that he had any to bring in the first place.

"Let's just take a stroll down the harbour," she suggested. "Lots of ships coming in from Sindhu or the Western Isles at this time of year."

"Sounds good."

They walked at a leisurely pace, enjoying the pleasant weather. Summer not yet over, Morcaster was filled with life. Harvest was brought in from the surrounding farmlands, and ships filled the port bringing goods and people from across the seas.

"What's kept you busy? Does your dad have a lot of orders to make?"

"I wish," Shadi expressed. "The clock for your school is the only one in a while. But it's also been a big one, keeping him in work for months. No, I do work for the different tradesmen in the quarter. Delivering their work to customers and such."

"That sounds nice. Better than working inside some smelly workshop." Martel thought about the few times he had helped out in the tanneries, enduring a dreadful stench for the sake of one silver piece.

"Yeah. I just hope it's enough."

"Enough for what?"

Shadi bit her lower lip. "Our landlord keeps raising the rent. We have enough for this month, maybe next, but if dad doesn't get more orders soon, the roof over our heads will depend a lot on what I can bring home."

"If he can't sell clocks, isn't there other work your father could do?"

She shook her head. "He is too old for hard labour. Not used to it. He might be able to do some repair work on machinery and the like, but there's not much of that in Morcaster. Would be different if he were back in Khiva."

They reached the harbour and sat down next by a pier, feet dangling over the edge. "A ship from my home." Martel pointed at the small vessel gliding into port.

"How can you tell?"

"It's a cog. Used mostly for the rivers up in Nordmark and its shallow coast. It's come a long way," he considered. "Probably bringing furs and amber, maybe whale ivory."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Tell me more of Nordmark."

Chapter 73: Lucky Clovers

Lucky Clovers

Glunday passed without significance, and before Martel knew it, a fiveday had passed, leading him to his second lesson in the infirmary. If it could be called such, considering he did not seem to learn much, certainly not about magic; it felt more like his Solday duty of assisting Master Jerome.

Like last time, the nurses put Martel and the other novices to work with practical chores. Yet in between, the head nurse took the time to explain something about this or that patient, such as

showing the students how to clean and dress a wound before assigning them another chore. In this manner, Martel oscillated between changing sheets and learning the basics of treating those in need of medical help.

Working his way from bed to bed, Martel reached the unresponsive patient whom he had once shared classes with. Just as it had been the case for the last several months, Gerard of Islemont lay with closed eyes, breathing so faintly one might have mistaken him for dead.

"Dreadful what happened to him." Sister Grace shook her head as she uncorked a potion and began to drip its contents carefully into his mouth.

One of the younger nurses, Sister Grace was easy-going and never scolded Martel for doing something wrong, but simply showed him how to do it right. Martel liked her. "Do they know what happened to him?"

"Not a clue, except some kind of magical attack. That's why he is being kept here rather than returned to his family. Besides us supplying the potions needed to keep him alive, Master Kelsos is the only one with a chance to understand what has happened to him."

"How do they know it's a magical attack?" Martel had heard of people who hit their head so hard, even if it did not kill them, it sent them to sleep from which they never woke.

Done with administering the potion, Sister Grace pulled the covers away from Gerard and lifted his nightshirt up. Above the heart, a mark could be seen on the skin. It did not look painted, but rather branded or cut with a knife. Martel had never seen anything like it. It consisted of a circle with some kind of swirling pattern inside, though he could not deduce any meaning from it.

"That is the mark of evil, I tell you," the nurse declared solemnly before pulling the cover back over the unconscious Gerard.

~

For once, the apothecary was empty, and Martel had to lock himself in. He found a note on the table detailing his labours for the bell; simple tasks that did not require supervision. After washing his hands, he began.

He had been at work for a while, humming and singing the few songs he knew, when the door slammed open. Startled, he swung around with a chopping knife in his hand, but relaxed as he recognised Mistress Rana. She had bags under her eyes, and her hair looked frazzled. A strange sickle hung from her belt, and in one hand, she held a herbalist's pouch, which she emptied into a clean bowl. Craning his neck, Martel noticed several red clovers.

"You found them!"

"Of course I did."

"Do you want me to dry them out?"

"And have you ruin my hard work? Stick to your own tasks," she snapped. "These are far too delicate."

His head hanging low, Martel did as told. "Lucky that such a rare plant could be found so close to the school," he muttered.

Mistress Rana gave an unexpected laughter. "Yesterday, boy, these were ordinary, green clovers. Luck has nothing to do with it."

Arresting his chopping motion, Martel looked at the decidedly crimson-coloured clovers in the bowl. "So how do they become red?"

"You harvest them at night during the right conditions using a bronze sickle."

"When Perel is ascendant," Martel mumbled.

She ceased her work plucking the leaves from the stalks and gave him a scrutinising gaze. "That's right. But not enough. The herbalist must draw the magic from the plants in order for the effect to take hold. And not all clovers are equally useful for this. Took me half a night's walking to find some willing to cooperate."

"How do you draw magic from plants? And how do you know which ones are useful? Can you teach me?" he asked eagerly.

"I'll teach you when you are ready to be taught," she barked at him. "Now see to your work!"

~

For the evening meal, Martel chose a solitary seat in the corner of the dining hall, just like at the other meals. He still felt unfairly treated by Maximilian the other day, and until the mageknight saw fit to rectify matters, Martel saw no reason for doing so either. And when he sensed someone approach, it was not the young viscount, but Martel's other friend.

Eleanor sat down with a smile, carrying her own meal. "Just curious, did you tell Mistress Rana about the recipe?"

"Oh yes! She's already begun preparations, she went out and got the rarer herbs last night, and I imagine she has everything else already."

"I am guessing everything's ready, then," she remarked.

"It should be ready in a couple of days. We could dry them faster with magic, of course, but Mistress Rana seemed reluctant to do so. I guess because it is such a rare ingredient, or maybe because it has magic in it already."

"I will be most curious to find out whether it works as we hope. There is something thrilling about discovering old magic and finding a way to bring it back to life, even if it is just an elixir."

"I wouldn't say 'just' about alchemy," Martel protested, feeling a need to defend what might be his chosen profession.

Eleanor raised both her hands to indicate defeat. "Far be it from me to disparage other forms of magic," she admitted. "Enlighten me. Tell me of what you have learned under Mistress Rana's tutelage."

Happily, Martel prattled on.

Chapter 74: Lightning from a Clear Sky

Lightning from a Clear Sky

Next day's alchemy work passed without much incident; once again, Martel worked alone, which he did not mind. By now, he knew every part of it well; the little workshop felt familiar with its cupboards full of ingredients and salves, tools on the tables, and plants hanging from the air.

He did his labours until the bell rang. Upon hearing it, Martel cleaned his tools and workspace, put aside the finished ingredients, and took out his key that he could lock up once he left.

The door to the laboratory flung open. Mistress Rana stepped through. She had soot in her face, but Martel did not dare to ask. "Good! You haven't left. Wait here."

She disappeared back into her sanctum; Martel heard the stairs creak as she walked up. Confused, he stood tripping in one place, mindful that he needed to get to his lesson.

A minute later, his teacher returned. She handed him a folded note, barely a scrap of paper. "Get this to Master Fenrick. Don't forget to lock on your way out." She retreated to her laboratory.

Martel stuck the note into his pocket. It would have to wait; for now, elemental magic waited for him.

~

Martel stared at his hands, holding water and fire respectively. He had no difficulty summoning each of the elements in sequence; he could even keep his focus to feed the flame in one hand while pulling water from the air into the other. But he could not initiate both at the same time. If he tried to think of fire and water, his mind inevitably summoned one after the other; if he tried to think directly of steam, nothing happened except a light breeze might pass between his hands.

"Don't worry, lad, don't get frustrated. If you can master all the basic elements, you can surely accomplish this. Just need more practice," Master Alastair assured him.

Martel nodded a little. While progress would be nice, in truth, he did not feel frustrated. This was not like in the beginning, where he feared that he did not have the talent at all to wield magic. In the past half year, he had learned each of the elements faster than any novice Master Alastair had taught, his teacher had confided. Evidently, being older had not held Martel back. He felt certain that he would get the hang of this sooner or later, and he could only wonder at the possibilities it would afford. Creating rainclouds was an obvious one, but no doubt, the applications were many.

"Master, what is the most advanced piece of elemental magic you can do?"

His teacher had a wry smile on his face. "It's not something I use often, since its only purpose is destructive. But I do believe even the most experienced weathermages cannot do the same." A small cloud appeared hovering above Alastair's hand, and Martel knew this was not simply steam, but the genuine kind that might float across the sky if released outside. "Any of them can create rainclouds, of course. " The wisp of white turned dark, and a few drops rained onto the mage's hand. "But they lack the skill in fire."

The cloud disappeared. Alastair pointed a finger at the ring of water that surrounded them, floating near the edge of the circular hall. Without a crackling sound, a bolt of lightning leapt from the wizard's finger to hurl through the air and strike the water.

Martel watched with fascination as the energy spread around the ring. Gesturing for the novice to stay back, Alastair twitched his hand slightly, and the lightning seemed to jump back up from the

water, returning to his hand. It crackled around his fingers for several rounds before dissipating. "Not very useful for watering crops," he said with a wink, "but it'll kill a locust or two."

~

After class, Martel was on his way back to his room when he stuck his hand into his pocket and remembered the note from Mistress Rana. Afraid to delay delivery any further, he turned around and headed for the western part of the castle, where the faculty had their living quarters.

He knocked on the door belonging to Master Fenrick's chamber. No answer. Wondering what to do, Martel tried the handle. It was not locked. The door creaked open. A strange sight met him.

Books lay everywhere, in stacks or open atop whatever surface seemed available. Clothes were scattered across the floor or hanging on furniture. A collection of odd items could be seen on a shelf. Martel identified the silver-wound wand, which Master Fenrick had shown in class. But he could not recognise the other objects.

He approached, frowning. One consisted of various metal rings within each other, with a tiny, red stone in the centre. Another was simply a rock, which had a dull, black-green hue. Some kind of odd, uneven tube, made from bronze, with pieces of glass in either end. A tiny figurine carved entirely in green stone, except it did not resemble any creature he knew. A small box cut from a white material, possibly ivory, whose content he could only guess at. As much as curiosity urged him ahead, Martel figured it best not to fumble around with the unexplained artefacts belonging to a wizard.

Yet nothing prevented him from reading the note. Feeling only a little guilty, Martel unfolded the strip of paper.

All ingredients ready. Will get to work. Takes a few days. -R

He could easily guess the context. It seemed like the potion would be made. Martel folded the note back together and looked around for a suitable place to leave it. The desk seemed the most likely candidate, assuming the scrap of paper would not get lost in between stacks of books, pieces of parchment, and writing utensils that littered the space.

In the end, he placed the note on the open pages of the book in the middle of the desk. Yet as he did, his eyes fell upon the content of the tome. One page was dominated by an illustration of a strange symbol. Completely circular, it had various patterns inside, which he could not trace. It only took him a moment to remember where he had seen it before; it adorned the skin of the comatose Gerard.

Martel tried to read the text, but it was all written in Archean. Same with the title on the cover, as he closed the book. Quickly, he grabbed a piece of charcoal and copied the letters of the title to a blank piece of parchment. Opening the book back to how he found it, Martel made his retreat.

Chapter 75: Starlight

Starlight

On Mandays, Martel had alchemy duty before his first class. He went there as soon as second bell rang, though Nora still arrived before him. Yet neither had time to begin their work before Mistress Rana appeared from within her laboratory. "When I prepared this the other morning," she said

sharply as she passed through the apothecary to grab the bowl of red clover leaves, "I had twelve. Now I have only nine. Would either of you care to explain?"

The novice and the apprentice looked at each other, both wearing expressions of ignorance.

"Did you take some?" came the sharp accusation. "Or ruin them?"

"I didn't go near them, Mistress," Nora defended herself.

"Me neither," Martel hurried to say. His heart beat a little faster, both from feeling uncomfortable at the accusation and out of fear if this would cost him his place in the workshop.

"If I find out later that you have lied to me, that will be the end of your time in my apothecary. I ask again if either of you has anything to confess?"

They both shook their heads.

"In that case, someone must have taken them. Martel, did you lock up the other day after you left?"

He eagerly nodded. "For certain!" He remembered vividly holding the key in his hand and checking that the door was correctly locked before leaving the infirmary.

"Nora, who came to the apothecary while you were here?"

"Lots of people, I guess. The nurses collecting medicine, one or two mageknights buying salves, a battlemage with a sore throat, uhm... Master Jerome delivering empty vials, probably others." She bit her lower lip. "Not sure I remember them all."

"Perhaps – perhaps they fell on the floor? Or behind the table?" Martel suggested.

Mistress Rana gave him a withering look before she grudgingly checked the table where she had prepared the leaves the other day. Meanwhile, Martel looked around the room on the ground. No luck.

"This better not repeat itself," the alchemist impressed upon her apprentice and helper before she stalked out of the apothecary. The two people left behind looked at each other, shrugged, and resumed their work.

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"Obviously, for our purposes, gold and silver are the most important metals. Then there are gems, of course, but we'll save those for another lesson." Master Fenrick let his eyes sweep over the classroom, encouraging the novices to pay attention. "While the baser metals may not have the same powerful effect on magic, they can still serve certain purposes for a mage. That purpose is defined by the origin of the metal, same as how the properties of gold are determined by its creation from sunlight and silver from moonlight."

Martel sat with his chin cupped by his hands, wondering at the process of how something as intangible as light could create something as heavy as metals. He considered if the process could be copied with magic; probably not with gold, given its ability to kill all magical effect. Silver, perhaps, though he imagined if any mage had discovered the method, they would hardly share it.

"While there may be more types of metal with magic properties, rarer ones we know little of, there are three common types to be aware of," their teacher continued. "Iron, copper, and tin. Anyone care to guess what light gave birth to them?"

The number three in connection with astronomy pointed to the obvious culprits, and Martel raised his hand. "The Triumvirate of the Heavens?"

"Very good. And which star yields which metal?"

One seemed obvious. "Malac gives iron." Weapons came from the warrior. As the other two, Martel had a harder time seeing any connection. He thought back on his trip to the Stone of Archen, where his affinity for Glund was revealed with a white light. "Glund gives tin, and Perel gives copper?"

"Correct. When it comes to artefacts, wards, or magical weapons and armour, clever use of these metals may strengthen intended effects. Same goes for their alloys."

"Such as using bronze for collecting herbs?" He thought about seeing the strange sickle in Mistress Rana's belt.

Master Fenrick gave a sly smile. "For instance. But that is beyond the reach of this particular course. Come see me when you are a herbalist, and I can teach you more."

Martel made a mental note to do just that.

~

Once class had ended, Master Fenrick gestured for Martel to stay a moment while the other novices filed out. "I hear you brought the recipe of a rare potion to Mistress Rana. Did you find it yourself?"

"No, master. I just brought it to her since I work in the apothecary," Martel explained.

"I thought as much. Else you'd have to explain how you gained access to a book on the restricted floor. But I suspected a boy from a small town in Nordmark would not be able to accurately translate Archean," the teacher explained with a glint in his eye.

"Oh no. I would never," Martel insisted. As much as the upper floor of the library intrigued him, he was not going to risk expulsion when he could simply wait until he became an acolyte.

"Good. While there should not be any truly dangerous books anywhere in the library, some of them may still cause harm if read by students yet to finish their basic courses here at the Lyceum. All right, I just wanted to be sure. Off with you."

Leaving the classroom, the conversation reminded Martel of the book title in Archean he saw in Master Fenrick's chamber. Obviously, he could not ask this particular teacher for a translation; in fact, asking any member of the faculty might lead to awkward questions and a reprimand for snooping. Luckily, he did have a friend who seemed skilled in the Archean language.

Yet when he tried to find Eleanor at the meals, he had no luck; when he knocked on the door to her chamber at different hours, none responded.

Chapter 76: Tempers Flaring

Tempers Flaring

Not every Solday working for Master Jerome could be as simple and easy as last time; instead of removing ink from parchment, Martel was needed in the laundry. He worked his bell in silence, distracting himself from the tedium of the task by thinking about magic and his progress.

When his two hours were done, he approached the artificer. "I was wondering if I could do any work for you? Even if just a bell. So I can send a letter to my mother," Martel explained.

"Far be it from me to keep someone from fulfilling his filial duty. In fact, hold one moment. I have a task that fits." Raising one finger to indicate for the boy to wait, Master Jerome disappeared into his private study and emerged soon after. "I have a letter to Master Andrew, a glass blower. Do you know where the glassmakers' street is?"

"No, but I'm sure I can find him."

"No doubt. It lies in the bottom end of the market district, not far from the harbour. But if you reach the cobblers' street, you've gone too far." The artificer placed the letter in Martel's one hand and dropped five copper coins into the other. "All yours if you deliver it today."

"Right away, master!"

~

Despite his claim, Martel had to finish his shift in the apothecary first. Once the bell rang, releasing him from alchemical duties, he went into town. It took Martel more than an hour to reach and traverse most of the market district. He was so focused trying to find his destination that he did not notice the change in mood at first. The further he went, the more people on the street. And they had not gathered to trade or barter goods.

"No more!"

"We've had enough!"

"Get rid of them!"

Martel finally noticed the shouts that rose above the general clamour. People were angry, but he did not know why. He looked around until he saw an old woman by the side of the street, packing her wares away. "What's happening?" He asked even as he stayed close to the house wall, trying to keep a gap between him and the crowd.

"Khivans launched an attack at Savena! Fighting for days, they say, and still not done. The first wounded have already come home with stories of many fallen." The woman grabbed her bundle of belongings and disappeared into the nearest building.

His heart beating faster, Martel tried to keep cool. There was no reason for him to get involved. If he just waited it out, surely the crowds would disperse or move elsewhere, and he could hurry home.

He listened to the angry shouts, in an attempt to deduce what would happen next. People were mad about the war, and their rage was aimed at the two targets held responsible. Some called for the crowd to go against the emperor's palace and the High Council. Others, whether seeking easier targets or having other grudges, yelled for violence against the local Khivans. The latter won out.

Watching the throng move south-east, wielding torches and clubs, tools and other improvised weapons, Martel felt panic overtake him. He felt powerless against the mob before him, yet he could not imagine doing nothing either. Steeling himself, he abandoned his safe spot and let himself be swept into the crowd.

~

Hundreds of people descended upon the Khivan quarter. Any they met was swallowed by the horde and chewed out, left beaten and bloodied on the ground, not always breathing. Stones were thrown,

doors and shutters kicked or attacked, and still the rioters pressed on, spilling down the street like a river following the path of least resistance.

Finally, they reached the open space that served like a town square with the Khivan temple to the south side. The path became blocked. Numerous Khivan stood, similarly armed with whatever was at hand. The Asterians did not even pause but charged in. A vicious brawl erupted.

Hitherto trapped inside the crowd, Martel was finally able to extricate himself as the fighting started. He dove to the side of the square, trying to find sanctuary and assess the situation. He was caught on the south-west side, while Master Farhad's workshop lay further down the street to the east of the square. Which meant he stood on the wrong side of the riot.

Wondering if he could sneak around along the edges of the open area, Martel's eyes ran down the south side to reach the temple. His pulse quickened recognising Shadi on the top stair, throwing stones with a strong aim. He thanked the Stars for this small blessing, making it far easier for him to reach her than if she had been at her home.

Someone hurled a torch past Martel and through an open window of the nearest building. Something, at least, he was not powerless over. Closing his eyes, he let his magic sense the heat surrounding him. He felt the countless bodies of angry brawlers, but the torches burned hotter. One after the other, he extinguished them.

Something struck Martel on his temple, and he fell to the ground. Besides the explosion of pain, he felt something warm and wet on the side of his head. He looked up, squinting his eyes as the light made the agony worse, to see a Khivan holding a round piece of wood improvised as a club. He raised the weapon to strike again.

Someone planted a foot against the back of the attacker's knee, who collapsed down next to Martel, revealing Shadi standing behind. She reached down to grab Martel's hand, pulling him up. He mumbled his thanks, lost in the cacophony of shouts, screams, fists landing blows, and worse. She dragged him with her back towards the temple, up the stairs, and inside.

Martel blinked, feeling almost blind. The interior of the building was dark compared to the outside, thereby highlighting the flames burning in the bowl at the centre of the room. Along the edges sat the old and the children, along with a few mothers, seeking refuge. A man wearing dark-red robes with strange patterns approached them, a question on his face.

"He's not with them," Shadi hastily explained. "He helps us. And he's hurt."

The priest nodded a little. "A sanctuary turns none away in need." Outside, the sounds of fighting continued.

"I'll find something to clean your face," Shadi promised and walked away. Martel watched her, feeling dazed, and his head still hurt like the Nether. Thus, he did not react in time at what happened next.

Three Asterians came rushing through the entrance. One of them shoved Martel to the ground, kicking him in the side before continuing to another victim. Another went straight for the sacred fire, smashing the bowl. As Shadi came against them, shrieking like the furies, the third grabbed her and threw her against the wall. Around them, the Khivans screamed in terror and pressed further back into the room.

Martel's temper flared up, but he managed to control it. Setting the thugs on fire inside this closed space with many others around was not prudent. Instead, as he rose to stand, so did he raise the wind. A howling gale blew through the temple as Martel's eyes glowed flaming red in the dark. Staggering against the wind, and suddenly confronted with a wrathful wizard, the Asterians fled. Once they had gone, Martel created a line of fire across the threshold and raised the flames to cover the entrance. The temple thus protected, he sank to the floor, exhausted.

~

Martel's spell did not last long, but the temple suffered no further attacks, though the fighting continued to rage outside. It felt like forever until the sounds from outside subsided. The silence, however welcome, felt eerie. Someone climbed the small belltower on the temple to confirm and soon returned with the news that the fighting had ended. The Asterians had pulled back, and the Khivans had gone home, all of them licking their wounds.

Martel walked outside, accompanied by Shadi. A dreadful sight met them. Numerous bodies lay scattered across the square, and many more stains of blood marred the place. Some whimpers could be heard from those wounded; here and there, someone got up and limped away, sometimes finding another to help or be helped by.

"I must get home. I need to see my father." Grabbing Martel's arm, whether for emotional or physical support, Shadi dragged him with her at a hurried pace.

It was a short trip to Master Farhad's workshop, yet it felt dreadfully long. What if something had happened to the old man? He could not be expected to defend himself. What if Shadi blamed Martel for sealing off the temple, keeping her inside while her father was hurt?

He breathed a little easier seeing the house standing untouched. As for the door, it was bolted from the inside, and Shadi knocked repeatedly while making herself known. They heard the sound of the bolt, and the door open to reveal Master Farhad.

"Child, you are safe," he said, embracing his daughter on the doorstep while adding another sentence in Khivan. Still holding her, he turned his eyes on Martel. "Go home, boy. There is nothing for you here."

Shadi took a step back. "He helped us, dad!"

"And we should be grateful? We protect ourselves. This isn't your fight, boy."

"Today they came for the Khivans." Martel tenderly touched the wound on his temple. Although it had been cleaned, it's still felt raw and bleeding. "Tomorrow they come for the half-bloods."

"This was one day for you. To us, it is every day."

Shadi gave Martel a hug. "I appreciate what you did. If you want to stay, we'll find a place for you." She sent her father a defiant look.

"It's alright. I have classes tomorrow morning. I'll go home." Getting back to the Lyceum felt like the smart choice.

With a final squeeze of Shadi's hand, he left. Behind him, he heard her enter the house and the door close.

It was a strange journey home on abandoned streets, with his head pounding and his mouth completely dry. He felt the slow trickle of blood down his cheek from the wound on his temple and wiped it away. As he reached the more affluent parts of the city with streetlamps, he looked at the red colour on his fingertips.

Reaching the Lyceum, the empty hallways felt foreboding. As if he dared to walk where he did not belong. The final steps up the staircase felt the longest until he could finally go inside his room. Forgetting all about cleaning his face or changing out of his clothes, Martel laid down on his bed and fell asleep.

Chapter 77: The Scent of Jasmine

The Scent of Jasmine

Martel woke, feeling all sorts of uncomfortable. His body was too hot from sleeping in his clothes. His face felt weird and stiff with a sharp pain as a reminder when he touched his wound. Lastly, his head pounded like a blacksmith's hammer against the anvil. Changing out of his robe, he tried his best to clean the blood from his temple without causing himself too much hurt. Washing the rest of his body, he put on something clean and made his way to the dining hall in the hopes that food would relieve some of his discomfort.

~

Sustenance proved no aid. Squinting and flinching, Martel went to the apothecary. Nora was absent, so he locked himself in and set to work according to the instructions laid out for him. He worked for a miserable half hour before Mistress Rana appeared from her laboratory. She cast one look on his injured face and sighed. "Not again, boy."

"I swear, it wasn't my fault. I was delivering a letter for Master Jerome in town, and I got caught by the crowds. Someone knocked me to the ground." Martel tried to look at her straight, eyes open despite the bright light in the room. It took all his effort not to wince or otherwise admit to his unpleasant state.

She stared at him for a moment until she went and opened a cupboard. She took out a small flacon and a jar of blood salve. She handed both to him. "Get a nurse to stitch you up. Drink that for the pain, and use the balm on your wound."

"Thank you, mistress."

~

Martel had to field awkward questions from Master Alastair as well during his next lesson; predictably, he did not make any progress with his attempts on advanced elemental magic. At least the small vial from Mistress Rana went a long way to alleviate his pain. He would have to learn the recipe for that next; if not too complicated, Martel could see a lot of use for it.

Noticing the occasional stare from others accompanied by jests at his expense, Martel did not mind sitting at an empty table for the midday meal. While his feelings of grievance towards Maximilian had lessened, and in part been superseded by yesterday's events, Martel did not feel up for dealing with the mageknight's sanguine outbursts.

Yet sitting on his own, Eleanor noticed him on her way out and approached. "Are you alright? That looks unpleasant."

"Yeah, it's fine." Seeing the unspoken question on her face he continued, "I got caught in the riots yesterday."

"Same happened to Maximilian. He was in the copper lanes, doing Stars know what."

Martel was not in the mood to hear about that, but he did have one conversational topic that might distract him from his current state. He pulled out the scrap of paper, on which he had written the title of the tome in Master Fenrick's chamber. "Can you read this? It's a book."

Eleanor accepted the strip and frowned. "I should be able to. This is Archean, but that middle word... The rest says something about markings, but I've never seen that word before."

"Could it be a name?"

"That might be. If so, it means 'Markings of Phoenik' or something like that." She offered him the paper back.

"Thanks." As he accepted it, a scent reached him. "You've changed your perfume."

"What?"

"You normally smell like lilies, but today it's jasmine." Until he said it, Martel had not even been conscious that he knew this; he wondered when he had first taken notice, and if working in the apothecary had made him more sensitive. Although they did not make perfume there, scents played a part in knowing which plants were healthy enough to be used as reagents.

"Perceptive even when injured. I will see you later." She gave a little wave of her fingers and left.

~

Passing through the entrance hall on the way back to his room for further recuperation, Martel stopped as someone called out his name. It was Henry the airmage, who handled the letters going to and from the Lyceum.

"What is it? Anything for me?" Martel asked.

Henry shook his head. "Master Jerome was looking for you yesterday. Both afternoon and evening. It seemed important. He asked us to keep an eye out for you. You better go see him."

Right. In all the confusion, Martel had forgotten about his task. Might as well explain his failure and get it over with. Making a turn, Martel went to the workshop.

He found the artificer in the outer chamber, directing underlings along the strands of his great web that supplied the Lyceum with everything needed. Martel cleared his throat. "Master Jerome, I'm sorry. I didn't deliver your letter as promised." From his inner pocket, he withdrew the missive and the copper coins given to him as payment.

"Lad, there you are!" The big man, always physically imposing, looked almost childlike in his relief. "When I heard what was happening on the streets, I searched the market district for hours trying to find you. I feel awful that I sent you out there."

"But you couldn't have known," Martel pointed out, a little confused.

"Still, as a student, you are my responsibility. Especially when doing an errand for me. Oh, keep those measly coins!" He waved at the pennies in Martel's hand. "You needed them to mail a letter, right? Your mother will be glad to hear from you, no doubt. Ow, and you hit your head!"

"It's nothing. Mistress Rana gave me something."

Martel must have struck a pitiful figure, because Jerome put his arms around him in a bear hug. "You know those thugs weren't after you, right? And you are safe here."

The novice stood, feeling limp like a dead fish. Perhaps that was true, but he could not stay inside the castle forever. And between rioters on the streets and bandits kidnapping him, not to mention berserkers, Martel knew it was folly to rely on the people at the Lyceum to keep him safe. Whenever he stepped beyond these walls, only his own power might. He would have to grow that power as he could.

Chapter 78: Homebrew

Homebrew

A decent night's sleep helped alleviate some of Martel's discomfort, whether physical or emotional. Besides that, as he arrived at the infirmary to do his stint for the fiveday, the sight of the sick patients reminded him that matters could be much worse. Only those suffering from strange and unusual maladies stayed at the infirmary; all others were sent home with a bandage, potion, or Master Kelsos' healing, depending on the nature of their need and the size of their purse. Thus, Martel surveyed a sorry lot of sick people scattered among the beds of the infirmary, and perhaps none as pitiful a case as the unconscious Gerard.

Yet near the end of the bell, where Martel had cleaned the ward and later helped a mageknight acolyte with a swollen eye, help arrived in the form of a small crystal phial held in the hands of Mistress Rana.

She approached Gerard's bed, but waited until Master Kelsos arrived. Despite how often Martel had passed through the infirmary on his way to the apothecary, not to mention his lessons here, he had almost never seen the Master of Healing. Tall and lean with a thin beard, Master Kelsos wore a dark blue robe with a variety of symbols unfamiliar to Martel. As such, the healer looked ordinary enough, at least among the many other mages of the Lyceum, but Martel knew he was unique.

Nobody else in the castle had the talent for magical healing; Master Alastair had once related that by his estimate, no more than a handful of such people existed throughout the entire Empire. It was the rarest of gifts, even compared to fire-touched wizards.

"Ready?" The alchemist looked towards the healer, who nodded. Opening the small bottle, Mistress Rana leaned forward and carefully let drop after drop pass through Gerard's lips until half the small amount had been consumed. She straightened back up and waited.

The reaction came after mere moments. The young man began convulsing. Foam appeared around his mouth. From his vantage point a few beds away, Martel wondered if this was part of the process.

"It's not working," Master Kelsos declared. He grabbed Gerard by the nightshirt and pulled him up to sit, placing his other hand on the patient's neck. A blue light appeared around Master Kelsos' fingers as Martel watched in wonder. Suddenly, Gerard vomited, though only liquid came up. His trembling ceased, and the healer lowered him back into bed. His eyes remained closed as before.

"Clean the boy up," Master Kelsos told one of the nurses. The potion had failed.

~

Working alone in the apothecary, Martel had the solitude to contemplate what he had seen. He could not begin to understand why the potion had made Gerard react that way, or what it had been expected to do in the first place. Clearly Mistress Rana had considered it worthwhile to go through all the trouble of making the tincture, even though it turned out to be nothing.

Of greater interest was Master Kelsos. Watching him heal seemed a rare event, and the novice wondered why he did not use his ability more often. If Martel had been given such a gift, he would use it on everybody who needed it. But perhaps it was exhausting, just like casting other forms of magic tired Martel. He could not help but imagine if it turned out he had the gift as well. Forget weather, fire, alchemy – his future and fortunes would be secured.

The bell was nearly at an end and Martel had begun cleaning up when Nora arrived. She raised a basket in her hand. "New supplies, fresh from market. Oh, you're leaving? Guess I'll have to handle it all."

"Sorry to disappoint." A familiar scent reached him as Nora passed by, unpacking the bundles from her basket. "You wearing jasmine too? Funny."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. You're just the second person I've noticed wearing perfume with this scent."

She laughed. "With all the herbs and plants I'm surrounded by, perfume would be a waste. It's not jasmine you can smell, but bride's flower." She pulled other bundle. "Mistress Rana used the last of it, so I had to get more."

"Huh. It looks familiar, but I've never heard of bride's flower before," Martel remarked as he finished cleaning his mortar and pestle.

"You may know it as waxflower. Petals are all funny to touch, and they leave a scent for hours."

"Right, I've seen those before." As Martel dried his hands, a thought began to nag him. Where had he just recently seen that plant? Or rather, read its name. One by one, it began to connect in his mind.

Waxflower smelled like jasmine. Mistress Rana had just used some for an elixir. The last one she made had been for Gerard. Martel had seen the recipe, which included waxflower. He had received the recipe from Eleanor. She had smelled like jasmine.

This could not be a coincidence.

Too preoccupied to hear what else Nora had said or bid her farewell, Martel hastened away from the apothecary.

~

Martel quickly made his way across the north-eastern part of the castle to reach the girls' dormitory tower. He could not quite believe it; Eleanor, so sensible and intelligent, would never do something so reckless as this. Still, he hurried up the stairs until he stood outside her room. He knocked a few times without receiving an answer. "Eleanor, I know you're inside. I can feel the heat from a person inside." A lie, as the sturdy door blocked Martel's sense completely, but he assumed a mageknight would not know this.

He heard the lock open from within, and the door opened to stand ajar. Half of Eleanor's face appeared. "What is it?" she asked impatiently.

Something met Martel's magical senses. Through the opening, inside Eleanor's room Martel felt a strong source of heat. It did not flicker and move like fire, but felt round and solid in shape. "Are you doing alchemy?"

"Ridiculous question," she scoffed. "Students are not allowed that."

"I can sense it in your room. Round and hot, like the heating stones in the warm baths. I'm guessing you used wax flower and red clover. Three leaves were missing from the apothecary." Martel stared at her. "But only a few people knew about the clover. And only someone intent on making a certain recipe would have any use for it."

Moments passed in silence.

"Nobody has been hurt," Eleanor said softly.

So it was true. "You used me. Why involve me in the first place?"

"I did not want to draw attention to myself from Mistress Rana. I thought I might seem suspicious, that she would guess who took the clover. But I had no way of getting it myself. I needed a skilled herbalist."

"Did you finish it? Do you know what happened to the boy they used it on?"

"Of course. It was valuable to know, especially if it cured him. But he is ill from some magical malady, which makes it unpredictable. I will only use mine in a safe way, I promise." Her eyes, hitherto flickering about, finally rose to meet his. "You do not have to do anything except keep quiet. I will leave and be back soon, no harm done."

Hesitation appeared on Martel's face. "You have the potion here? You're ready to leave?"

She nodded and disappeared behind her door for a moment. When she returned, she had a small flacon in her hand. "I will go now, and you will not have to think anymore on it."

Rather than reply, Martel placed his left hand around the back of her neck with a tender gesture.

"What – what are you doing?" It almost looked like she was blushing.

The distraction worked. With his right hand, Martel grabbed the small crystal container and took a step back.

"Give it back!"

Martel knew that despite her smaller stature, the mageknight could easily knock him to the ground and take the phial by force, but he trusted Eleanor would not do such a thing to her friend. "That boy in the infirmary would probably have died without Master Kelsos present." He removed the stopper from the flacon. "We should test this first on a healthy person. I'll drink half."

"Martel, I have spent so long on this, do not ruin it!"

He locked her gaze with his own. "You are the smartest student I know. If you tell me that you are completely convinced this is absolutely safe for me to drink, I'll do it."

He saw the conflict within her expressed as a variety of emotions on her face. In the end, she said nothing, but simply looked away.

Slowly, Martel walked over to the communal tap in the hallway and tipped the phial downwards over the grate. She made no move to stop him.

He returned and placed the empty flacon in her hand. "Why? You're the most sensible person I know. What would drive you to such a risk?"

She gave him a look that seemed hurt or perhaps angry. Without any words, she closed the door between them.

Alone, Martel turned around to leave the tower. As he descended, he continued to wonder for whom Eleanor's potion had been intended; he had a feeling she would not confide in him any time soon.

Chapter 79: Not Quite an Alchemist Yet

Not Quite an Alchemist Yet

Martel spent most of Glunday digesting the events of the previous day. Without more red clover, Eleanor would not be able to make another attempt at the elixir, and he saw no reason to reveal her attempts to anyone. He had been involved in a few troublesome matters himself, which others had overlooked; he certainly was not going to tell on one of his only friends. .com

But Eleanor's illicit labours made him think. He had acquired some basic understanding of alchemy and the works of an apothecary by now, and he greatly enjoyed the act of creating even the simplest of salves; there was satisfaction in making something, especially when it would help others.

Yet while Eleanor had put her mind to work creating something as complex as the strange potion, Martel had not used his skills in alchemy except as instructed by Mistress Rana. He was not allowed to create anything to sell it, but people existed in Morcaster who would never have the coin to afford even the smallest of remedies; did they not deserve any? If Martel did not charge any payment, he could not be considered in breach of the rules. At least, so he assumed.

With these thoughts churning in his head, Martel went to sleep.

~

Malday offered an opportunity that Martel was unsure whether to grasp. He was dreadfully curious about the strange name 'Phoenik' from the title of Master Fenrick's book. The only obstacle was that for all such questions concerning arcane knowledge, he would always go to Master Fenrick. The teacher might not take kindly to Martel's intrusion into his private chambers, should he guess where Martel had encountered the name. On the other hand, Martel had not done anything he could be punished for, and surely the odd name appeared in other connections and places as well.

So, when his lesson in magical theory began, the novice decided to chance it and raised his hand.

"Yes? You have a question?"

"Master Fenrick, what is Phoenik?" Martel put on his most innocent expression.

The teacher narrowed his eyes. "Where did you learn that name?"

"I came across it in a book, but it did not explain further." All true, just a few key details omitted.

"Hm. Phoenik was an ancient civilisation, already little more than folklore by the time of the Aquilan Empire," Master Fenrick began to explain. Regardless of any suspicions or misgivings about the reason for Martel's inquiry, it was clear he enjoyed sharing his knowledge too much to be tight-lipped. "Supposedly they possessed magic that would make even Archeans envious. But such is always the claim for the wizards of old. Easy to make such claims when they can never be disproven."

"Where did they live?"

"Apparently all across the continent. Remnants from the civilisation have been found in the strangest places. On the other hand, nobody has ever located anything that could resemble a capital or just a major city of theirs. Too long ago, I suppose. We have a sparse knowledge of the language thanks to a few fragmented pieces of writing, and a few artefacts have also been discovered, all of them potent and dangerous." Master Fenrick gave Martel a piercing look. "Anyone who ever comes across anything to do with Phoenik would be well advised to run in the other direction."

~

Afterwards, Martel considered his ethical conundrum from yesterday. The more he thought about it, the more he leaned towards feeling obligated to help. Even if only in a small way. His mind made up, Martel did not waste any further time, since he had class later in the afternoon. In his pocket, he had his entire hoard, consisting of five pennies. His letter to his mother would have to wait a day or two; for now, it was time to visit the market.

Morcaster had its share of herbalists and alchemists, the latter of dubious quality; any old man or woman with warts could set up shop and claim to sell cures for every ailment, Martel assumed, but who knew the contents of their offered bottles? The situation was better when trading with herbalists, at least for customers who knew what they were doing. One could inspect the herbs, ensure you had the right ones, and that the quality was good.

Fortunately, Martel knew where to go. Mistress Rana had once sent him to market for herbs. Even better, this particular peddler had his stall in a small alley rather than the crowded squares; after last Soliday, Martel was not keen on entering crowds.

"Ah, it's the young alchemist!" The herbalist was an old man with tufts of white hair above his ears and hands with brown spots all over them.

"Not quite yet," Martel corrected him, though he knew the old man spoke in good nature. "Not even an apprentice yet, just a helper."

"Mistress Rana need anything special?"

Martel did not see a reason to correct the man about his teacher's involvement or lack thereof; it gave him a little more authority to haggle with. "Nothing special, some ordinary items." He rattled off the list of ingredients for skin salve.

"Not a problem." The herbalist began gathering the items. "Though, just one of each? The good mistress usually buys them by the bundle. In fact, I could have sworn I sold some of these just the other day to her apprentice."

"Oh, I, err, ruined some of them. Didn't dry them properly." Martel gave an anxious smile. In his experience, people did not question your story if it made you look a fool.

"Not quite an alchemist indeed. That'll be nine pennies." Herbs in one hand, the old man extended the other in anticipation of payment.

Martel made a show of rummaging through his pockets before withdrawing his five coppers.

"That's all my teacher gave me. Can I owe you the rest?"

The herbalist squinted. "I suppose your school's good for it. I'll get it next time your mistress buys something from me." They exchanged plants for pennies, bid each other a fair day, and Martel left.

Returning to the Lyceum, he quickly stashed his purchases in the apothecary and hurried to his lesson on practical magic in the gymnasium.

~

In terms of his interest, Martel's two lessons on Mandays were at opposing ends. The early class dealing with pure knowledge fascinated him every time; he felt completely the opposite practising how to keep spell effects lasting. There were only so many ways he could raise the earth into strange shapes and force it to stay that way before he ran out of ideas. Yet it yielded results; little by little, Martel felt the strain less, and he maintained his magic longer and longer. He had a long way to go still, from what Master Fenrick told him, but every fiveday, he took another step forward.

~

Setting aside thoughts of magic, Martel returned to the apothecary for more practical work. A few of the nurses glanced at him as he passed through the infirmary at this unusual hour, but nobody questioned him; since he had a key, obviously Martel had permission to enter the small workshop. He gathered his ingredients newly purchased. A few of them could be used straight away, some of them needed a little processing, and the remainder required to be dried out for days; Martel solved that problem by exchanging his fresh specimens for their equivalents from the apothecary's storages. Everything ready, Martel went to work using the first recipe he had ever learned.

Chapter 80: A Man of Means

A Man of Means

When Solday came around, it meant a fiveday had passed since the riots. News arrived that the tenth legion defending the Savena delta, the famed Legio Astra, had held back the Khivans; it helped to calm the mood in the ensuing days, though brawls still broke out, and few people left or entered the Khivan enclave.

Arriving in the workshops, Martel found Master Jerome acting more subdued than his usual jovial self. He did not make jests, and he gave Martel the easy task of scraping ink from parchment, even if not much had accumulated; although working at a leisurely pace, Martel would still be finished before the bell rang. He got the feeling that the artificer felt guilty about sending Martel into town last Solday, even if he could not possibly have known what would happen. Regardless, the novice saw no reason to complain about his light labour and set to work.

~

In the apothecary, in between doing his actual task, Martel checked on the progress of his skin salve. He had left it overnight to thicken and become viscous, as it should be. With satisfaction, he found that it had progressed nicely and should be finished when he needed it.

As for when that would be, Martel had to postpone his next plans. He only had afternoons free on Soldays and Mandays, so if he wanted to make some coin, for instance to mail a letter to his mother or pay the herbalist, today was the best day for it. Hence, once finished at the apothecary and with lunch out of the way, he trotted all the way back across the castle to the workshops and approached the artificer.

"Martel? Something the matter?"

The novice cleared his throat. "Any tasks I can do?"

Master Jerome, for the first time that Martel had noticed, looked apprehensive. "Well, nothing outside the castle, that's for sure." He scratched his head. "Did you ever work making ink?"

"Yes, master."

"Do you remember the process?"

"I do. Not much different from the apothecary."

"Right, I guess it's a kind of alchemy too. Alright, I got a silver piece for you if you work the ink for one bell."

"Great, thank you." Martel gave him a smile, mostly to try and reassure the big man; not being entirely sincere, it ended up feeling hollow rather than cheerful on his face.

"Go and set up. I'll come by in a little while and check that you got everything."

After one bell, Master Jerome let Martel continue for another, until he could leave the workshop with two silvers in hand. Leaving the money in his room and taking his newly made salve with him instead, Martel went into Morcaster.

As he approached the market district, he felt his heart rate slowly increase. He had never felt at ease among the crowds in the capital; compared to his home, it just felt like too many people in the same place. Plenty of the angry people last fiveday had been veterans also, judging by their scars and old injuries; remembering the Broken Blades, their presence only made Martel more nervous. Despite adding an hour of travel time, the novice decided to circumvent the bustling market district, and he headed west. This also took him past the herbalist's stall. After clearing his small debt, Martel continued on his way, turning straight south to reach the slums.

~

Approaching the unassuming, derelict house, Martel felt a sudden spike of panic. He immediately chastised himself for having this reaction. It had been months since the Broken Blades had captured him. He stood in broad daylight with no dangers around. He knew rationally that he had nothing to fear if he stepped inside that building. Its only occupants were his friends, a group of orphan children who posed no threat to him.

Taking a deep breath, Martel crossed the street. A new front door had been added, which he opened to step across the threshold. Immediately a heavy rock fell from above to strike him on the shoulder, knocking him to the ground.

"It's Martel!"

"Oh hey, it's the wizard!"

"Martel is here!"

A chorus of excited children's voices rose up as they gathered around two stared down at the fallen novice, groaning against the floor.

"You should never go in the front door, that's where the trap is. Always go through the backdoor," a girl pointed out with an impossibly sensible tone of voice.

"Yeah, thanks," Martel grumbled, getting back on his feet. "I made this for you." He pulled out the jar of skin salve. "Guess I'll be the first one to need it." He carefully tried to move his shoulder and immediately winced.

"Is that the magic fat?" asked Mouse.

"It's not animal fat, and strictly speaking, not magic either, but yes, it's the same stuff as last time." Martel looked around. The place looked the same as before. A table and shoddy chairs, a cooking fire in the middle of the room with a rusted pot on top, and the stairs leading up. He placed the balm on the table and took his robe off. Dipping his fingers into the ointment, he carefully smeared it on to his damaged skin underneath his shirt. "Alright, who else?"

Quite a lot, as it turned out. Martel knew how the children made their living, even if he did not ask questions. Running through the streets, often chased by angry vendors or people suddenly a purse lighter, provided plenty of opportunities to amass bruises, scraped knees, and the like.

"Will it help with this?" A small girl called Sparrow held out her arm, which had a long gash. At least Martel assumed so underneath the dried blood that lay in cakes on her skin. She looked no older than six, though malnutrition made the children appear younger than they often were, as Nora had once explained to him.

"I'm sorry, child. You need blood salve and a bandage, and I have neither."

"What are you doing here?" Weasel, the small leader of his equally small compatriots, appeared down the stairs.

"I brought this, that's all." Martel knew that the hard-boiled boy held little trust for others, but even he could not complain that Martel came bearing gifts.

"Does it work against coughs? Sometimes it hurts to breathe," another boy explained, pushing through the others to stand in front of the young mage.

"Sorry, it only helps with the skin. Nothing underneath it."

"Looks like you're done here," Weasel declared. "Nothing more you can do."

"Are you eager to get rid of me? I'm just here to help."

"You've done so. This ain't a place for you." A few of the children made complaining sounds, and Weasel sent them a harsh look. "We don't need you."

"I'm offering knowledge of healing you can't get elsewhere, certainly not for free," Martel protested.

"Yeah, you feel sorry for us, so you come around once every other month with a trinket or two to ease your conscience. And then you go home to your bed and three meals between sunup and sundown. But for me, this is every day," Weasel retorted. He looked at the gathered children, all of them severely underfed, dressed in rags. "I'm responsible for getting them food, clothes for when it gets cold, and get them out of the guards' hands when they chase us." He turned his eyes back on Martel. "But you don't want to hear that. You just want our gratitude, and you'll throw us a bone every now and then to get it."

Martel stood, trying to wrap his head around how a ten-year-old had just brutally eviscerated him with words. Even worse, it reminded him of Master Farhad giving a similar litany, pointing out what Khivans struggled with every day. Just by having a bed in a dry room, clothes for winter, enough food to eat every day, and the ability to walk down the street unaccosted, Martel was a rich man. Not only that, he was born with a gift and would learn skills and a trade to make him welcome anywhere in the Empire.

Martel looked at Sparrow with her injured arm. None of the children's filthy rags would do as bandages. Feeling almost too embarrassed to even look at Weasel, Martel removed his shirt and ripped the sleeve into strips. He would just have to pay to have the sleeve replaced by the quartermaster when he could afford it. He had another shirt to wear until then. Several of the urchins gave audible gasps at seeing the destruction of a perfectly good piece of clothing.

"Let's get your wound washed," the novice told Sparrow, "and then we'll bind it. And you, Squirrel, you had a cough. Anyone else feeling sick?"

Quite a lot of them did, and he made a mental note of each.

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Martel's visit ended up taking far longer than intended, and Weasel remained a scowling presence throughout, but he did not interfere. When the young mage had done what he could, given his lack of supplies, he left, through the backdoor. Wearing his robe directly against his skin, the wool itched, especially against his battered shoulder, but Martel tried not to feel annoyed by it. He had more clothes in his drawer, not to mention a comfortable bed in his own room, which made him more fortunate than many in Morcaster.