

Firebrand 81

Chapter 81: Alliterative Argumentation

Alliterative Argumentation

Walking into the apothecary, Martel was pleased to find Nora there as well. Always a talker, she happily answered Martel's questions.

"What herb helps with colds and runny noses?"

"You'll want hound's tongue," Nora helpfully explained. "Just the roots, mind you, and best crushed into a pill. But just chewing them works as well. The leaves are good against bites from mad dogs, hence the name."

"What about if someone has lice?"

Nora cast him a glance and took a step away.

"Not me," Martel exclaimed indignantly while crushing a chicken's claw into powder.

She laughed. "Larkspur, also known as knight's spur. A tincture with that should kill lice and fleas, whether on dogs or humans. I better not catch you scratching yourself!"

"You won't," the novice declared irritably. "What about a fever?"

"Ash bark." She grinned. "This is fun! Hit me with another."

~

As soon as the fourth bell rang and his lesson ended, Martel bid Master Alastair farewell and hurried from the Hall of Elements into town. He paid a visit to his herbalist, acquiring as much as he could for his remaining coins, few as they were. Prize in hand, the novice raced back to the Lyceum just in time to catch the end of lunch. After stuffing his mouth with little dignity, Martel continued to the apothecary. He knew Nora had a lesson on most afternoons, providing him the opportunity to use the space without prying eyes.

Not that he did anything against the rules. But his presence in the apothecary in the afternoon would lead to awkward questions if found by Mistress Rana or her apprentice; easiest if he avoided those questions being raised in the first place. So he swiftly did his work, preparing a blood salve. As it would not be ready until tomorrow, he deposited his newly made version and grabbed an already finished jar from the cupboard.

This completed, he had another lesson with Master Alastair; after that, he ate a quick supper and could finally head towards the slums with all his spoils.

~

Wise from experience, Martel approached the derelict house from the back; his shoulder still smarted from yesterday. Some of the children spotted him from a distance, either because they had been expecting him or due to a general watch kept on the area. They ran up to him, making inquisitive glances and remarks at the bundle he carried in his hands. Brushing them off, Martel refused to divulge his remedies, laughing and teasing his small entourage.

"Right, time to boil some water! We'll need lots of it. Badger, can you get more? I'll start the fire," Martel told them, letting a flame appear at the tip of his finger. The children stared at his small display of magic with shrieks of delight before they finally hopped to, carrying out his commands.

Quickly, the room bustled with activity, and before long, Martel could distribute all his medicines. Half a dozen kids received tea with lungwort, easing their coughing. Several of the children, including Sparrow, had wounds well served by a good layer of blood salve and the remainder of Martel's sleeve for bandages. Martel wondered how much a bolt of linen would cost; a lot more expensive than herbs, he feared. But he would have a free afternoon to work for Master Jerome tomorrow, so the sleeve would only have to last until then. Good thing he had such long arms.

"Master wizard, can you help my arm?"

Sitting down on a stool, Martel cautiously examined the small boy's wrist. It had swollen, and the skin was red. "Does it hurt?" His fingertips barely touched the arm before the patient flinched.

"Yeah, I can't use it, or the pain gets bad."

"How did it happen?" Martel did his best to remember the questions asked by the nurses when someone came to the infirmary with an injury.

"I fell on the street, used it to break my fall, but it got bent."

"Is the pain sharp, or more like a dull throb?"

"Dull, I guess. Unless I touch it. Can you make it go away?" The boy looked up at Martel with pitiful eyes.

"I think you have a sprain." Martel really hoped that was the case; he had no idea how to treat a broken bone. "We will have to bind it to give it support, and then you let it rest."

"I was already doing that," he declared with a determined look, though his expression turned to discomfort and wincing as Martel wrapped cloth around the wrist.

"There we are. All right, who else needs help?" Martel looked around as other children pushed forward to get help. His eyes briefly crossed with Weasel's, as the latter sat on the stairs, watching the scene unfold. The young chief had a calculating look in his eyes, but before Martel could wonder at the reasons why, he had to help the next of his little patients.

~

The sun had long since set by the time Martel was done; it had already been evening when he first had arrived. The streets of the slums were empty for the most part after nightfall, as decent folk were asleep by now, and others went to the harbour or market district. The few characters outside in this part of the city seemed unsavoury, and Martel noticed that some of them eyed him. But he walked with empty hands, carrying nothing of value nor wearing clothes of particular expense, and he was generally left alone. And should someone accost him, the prospect did not frighten him; he felt confident in his magic to handle a thug or two.

Besides confidence, Martel also felt pleased. He could already tell the difference he had made for several of the children, and it had not cost him much in terms of coin or time. Much as he had hoped when he originally set out to join the Lyceum, he was gaining knowledge and skills that he could use to make a difference.

It did make him ponder Weasel's words from yesterday about how his motivation to help was not born out of empathy, but rather to satisfy his own need to feel good about himself. Did his current state of mind simply prove the young boy's verdict? Were all of Martel's good deeds actually selfish in nature? Could be. But at the same time, Martel had alleviated suffering for a handful of people, who had no other way of seeking amelioration for their afflictions. Perhaps that was all that mattered.

Chapter 82: Heal or Hurt

Heal or Hurt

Healing class meant plenty of different chores to carry out in the infirmary, though with each passing five day, the nurses were more inclined to teach Martel how to actually care for the ill and injured. He readily listened whenever they showed him something and would happily come running from across the hall to watch a procedure, however simple.

The fact that he was a few years older than other novices who took this course did not hurt either. They had come to learn magic at the Lyceum, not mundane tasks such as taking care of small injuries or cleaning sick from patients. Perhaps the mageknights had an interest in learning how to dress wounds, but being forced to perform chores, just like servants did, often cooled their enthusiasm for the infirmary, and quite a few skipped more than one lesson, the nurses confided in Martel. Given that they were destined for the legions, they never faced consequences for doing so.

In contrast, Martel proved as eager a student as they could want. His knowledge of the apothecary only increased his usefulness, and more than one nurse viewed him with matronly affection. When the other novices were still kept scrubbing, Martel increasingly received tasks that involved actual healing work, if still the mundane variety. Of Master Kelsos, he rarely saw anything.

"Sister Grace, how do you treat a sprain?"

"You bandage it, but not too tight, and give it rest until it's healed."

"Right, but anything to hasten the healing process?"

"Oil of mint may help soothe the irritation, though that is more for the patient's comfort." The nurse poured a liquid onto a rag and placed it against the hand of the mageknight she was treating.

"Alright, hold this." She left the acolyte to keep the cloth in place with his uninjured hand.

"What did you use for that?" Martel asked, nodding towards the mageknight's now hidden fingers.

"Just olive oil. Good for burns." The nurse left, attending to her next task.

"What happened?" This time, the novice directed his question at the acolyte.

"Just training. Sometimes, the battlemages get a bit carried away," he explained with a sudden grin.

"And you, you're the next nurse?" He laughed, and Martel could not tell if it were meant derisively. He found that he did not care.

"Why not?" The novice shrugged. "I would rather heal people than hurt them."

~

The next bell Martel spent in the apothecary, and then his tasks for the day were over. The mandatory ones, at least. He had to make the most of his spare afternoons, so once he had eaten lunch, stashing a few extra loaves of bread to take with him to the slums, Martel went to the workshops.

Master Jerome raised an eyebrow seeing the tall novice. "Again? Lad, how many letters do you send to your mother?"

"Just the one," Martel clarified, as he turned the rune token around inside his pocket as an idle gesture. "But I do have other things I'd like to buy."

"I wonder what's the cause our young man to have such need of coin," the artificer mused. "If I were to hazard a guess, I have always found that female company is the swiftest way to empty your purse."

Martel was tempted to admit the truth. He did not imagine it would get him into trouble; Master Jerome did not seem the type to chastise him for helping others. But he might reproach the novice for staying in the slums after dark. Martel did not like lying to the artificer, who had shown him such kindness, but his dishonesty only brought discomfort to himself; if for any reason Master Jerome prevented him from continuing his work, it would hurt others. However much Martel wanted to be recognised for his good work, he realised that was a selfish impulse. "Spot on, master. Gifts aren't cheap." The best lie was the one already believed.

The big man laughed heartily. "Come on. You can wash bottles from the infirmary. You'll probably be handling half of them again in the apothecary, so it feels fitting."

"Gladly, master."

~

His newly earned silver quickly converted into supplies, along with the scraps of food he had scrounged from lunch and supper, Martel returned to the slums. He took the fastest route through the market district to save some time, enduring the crowds. Last night had gotten late, so if getting there faster meant he might get home sooner, that would be best.

The children greeted him with their usual clamour and excitement, accompanying him down the alley to the house. Once inside, Martel handed over the bread, which the urchins eagerly seized, divided, and consumed. Meanwhile, their young healer-in-training took out his botanical supplies and added them to the small apothecary he had built over the last few days. As the last, he added his newest prize, which consisted of a bolt of linen that could supply a decent number of bandages.

Finally, Martel could set to work. Besides his existing patients, more had shown up. The latecomers looked older, perhaps approaching fourteen or fifteen in age, which surprised Martel a little; he did not know any in Weasel's band was older than the chief himself.

"Sliced my arm on some glass."

Martel regarded the youngster in front of him; the wound ran long and looked more like the work of a knife. But he applied the ointment and a bandage before turning to the next.

"I fell and scraped my hand. Hurts a bit. Itches."

"Don't scratch it. Here." Martel put a layer of skin salve on the knuckles.

The last of the new patients approached. He coughed, almost into Martel's face, making the novice raised his arm to shield himself. "I can't get rid of this cough."

Martel grabbed some lungwort from the table next to him. "Boil some water and put one of these herbs in. Let it soak for a good while and drink it. Just the water, mind you." Yesterday, one of the children had eaten the herb as well. The gangly kid accepted the plants and moved along. "Where is Sparrow? She should get fresh bindings."

Still munching on her piece of bread, having savoured every morsel, the small girl approached Martel and stuck out her arm. Quickly and efficiently, he gave it balm and bandage.

Smiling, Sparrow regarded his handiwork. Hesitating for a moment, she gave Martel a hug around his waist before running off, leaving the novice melting on the inside.

Chapter 83: The Wiles of Weasel

The Wiles of Weasel

Martel yawned his way through his morning duties. Going to the slums after the evening meal and returning late at night left precious little time for sleeping. Several rounds of this had begun to take its toll. Fearful of making a mistake in the apothecary, Martel worked very slowly, so his brain had a chance to keep up with everything his hands did. Mistress Rana chided him several times, making him nervous and thereby giving him further reason to work slowly. Fortunately, she eventually retreated to her laboratory. While Nora also made remarks, they were of a jesting nature, and Martel survived the two hours without further issues.

Elemental magic was another matter. He could not rely on muscle memory like when chopping roots or grinding powders. He still had yet to produce even the simplest effect combining two elements, and giving his difficulty in focusing, today did not promise to be any different. What he needed to learn was combining water with air to create clouds capable of raining, but given his innate nature, Master Alastair had him start by producing steam from water and fire. Not even the tiniest wisp of wet air appeared between his hands; when he pushed himself, he either just made drops appear on one hand or fire burst out around the other.

"I'm sorry, master, I'll get it eventually."

"I'm not concerned," his teacher told him. "You've picked up the basics faster than I expected. But I think rather than a deficit of practice, your current lack of progress stems from a deficit of sleep."

The combination of that very issue along with the complex wording meant Martel spent a few moments catching up. "Oh, right. I had some trouble sleeping last night." After all, it was hard to rest when walking on the streets.

"Well, you have some spare time between this and your next lesson, I suggest you catch up on sleep when you get the chance."

"Yes, master." Not wanting to linger on this topic, Martel seized the first question he could think of. "I've been taking the healing class for a few fivedays now, but I still don't understand what it has to do with magic."

His teacher gave half a smile. "Nothing so far, if I remember right. At the end, Master Kelsos will do a small test. It'll take a moment only, and he'll know if you got the talent for healing."

"It's rather rare, I gather?"

"More than anything. Us fire-touched may not be common, but you'll find one or two of us every generation or so. Healers, on the other hand – several decades may pass without any."

"A shame, given how useful their power is."

"Certainly. Alright, no more! Don't think I can't recognise an attempt to get your teacher talking." Master Alastair crossed his arms, but his expression was benevolent. "Get back to your exercise."

~

By now, the route to the children's house had become familiar to Martel. He did not plan a long stay, though, as he had dealt with most of what required attention on previous evenings. Mostly, he just intended to check whether his remedies had provided improvement for those in need thereof, and how much was left of the herbal supplies he had given them.

He was still a few streets away when a man raised his arm to get Martel's attention. The fellow in question wore rather ragged clothes like most in the slums, with a dirty brown cloak over his shoulders. He had a scraggly beard and greasy skin. Martel did not feel inclined to speak with him and kept going.

"Hey, you!" The man did not give up but hurried to cross the street and catch up to Martel. "You're the healer, right?"

"I don't know what you mean." Martel quickened his pace.

"Sure you do." He kept up. "Over at Weasel's gang. I've seen you come in and out of their house. You're the apothecary he's been talking about."

"Leave me alone."

"What's the split? Bet that Weasel is sticking ya. You work with me and my boys, we'll give you seven out of ten."

Martel stopped in his tracks as he finally understood. The other man grinned, probably mistaking the novice's intentions, which only made him angrier. He placed his hand against the greasy fellow's chest and sent him to the ground with an empowered push. "Don't ever approach me again." He stalked away.

~

As before, the children quickly spotted Martel to surround him even before he reached the house. Unlike before, he walked with a stern expression, tight-lipped. As soon as he entered, his eyes searched the room until he found Weasel. He walked over to stare down at the ten-year-old. "Are you charging people money for my help?"

"I knew it was a bad idea," mumbled Badger from elsewhere in the room.

"Shut up." Weasel turned his eyes from his compatriot towards Martel. "What does it matter to you? You wanted to help people. I brought you people in need of help."

"First, my teacher has forbidden me from selling my services. You made me break my promise to her. Second, I came here to help your people because nobody else will. Everything I brought you, I paid for with my own coin. If people can afford to pay you, they can afford to go somewhere else." Martel stared at the little chief, feeling betrayed.

"You're making this too complicated. What's the harm in earning a few coins? It pays for food, something we need even more than all your medicine."

"I have other duties. I can't spend my entire nights making you money," Martel argued forcefully. He gave the boy a harsh look. "I'm here to help the residents of this house, and only this house. If I find out you've charged a single penny from someone again, I'll never be back. Understood?"

Several of the children gasped. "Don't make him mad, Weasel!" Mouse implored.

Faced with unrest in his own ranks, Weasel relented. "Fine. It's over and done with."

A girl, older than the rest and not part of the gang, raised her hand. "What – what about me? I already paid."

Martel sighed. Despite his stated intention to only help the small inhabitants of this particular home, he found it hard to reject someone in obvious need of aid. He walked over and sat down next to the table. "Alright. I'll have a look."

Chapter 84: A Hidden Gem

A Hidden Gem

Although he managed to catch more sleep, Martel still found it hard to concentrate next morning. Fortunately, his morning lessons in theory of magic were always interesting; as they did not involve practical magic, they were also less demanding.

Today, Master Fenrick had brought a wand to class. He had done so earlier, the same one, from what Martel could tell. Wood entwined with silver thread and a small gem sitting at the tip. "When I last showed this to you, I remarked upon the silver and how it amplifies magic. But I did not speak of this." The teacher touched the precious stone embedded into the wood. "A sapphire. It makes the wand particularly suited for water magic, hence why it is used by weathermages. Anyone care to guess who might make use of a ruby?"

One of the novices raised her hand. "Battlemages."

"Correct. And diamonds for windmages working the air, and emeralds for stonemages working the earth. Each of the elements is attuned to a particular gemstone," their teacher explained.

Martel raised his hand. "Are there other kinds of gems that affect other kinds of magic?"

Master Fenrick nodded. "Yes, in theory. The Archeans used topaz, a yellow stone, to help with magic of the mind such as illusions. Maleficars use onyx or malachite, but the less said about them, the better." He raised the wand in his hand. "Do well in your studies, and a wand like this will be yours when you complete your education."

~

After supper, Martel trod the familiar path south-west. Like yesterday, he did not intend to stay long; getting a full night's sleep had done him a lot of good, but not enough given that he still felt tired this morning, so he aimed for another. At this point, the children had learned how to handle superficial injuries and how to make use of the herbs he had left them. He mostly went to check on their progress, just in case any of the children did not seem to improve. If so, Martel would have to make a note of all their symptoms and ask the nurses in the infirmary for guidance.

Reaching the slums, he took a slightly different road than usual for the remainder of the journey. He was not keen to have another run-in with the greasy fellow from yesterday. Experiencing no trouble, Martel reached the house.

As usual, the children crowded around Martel, eager to explain how they had followed his instructions or show off their scrapes and bruises. Enjoying their exuberance, Martel sat down and did some quick examinations, usually confirming that their healing progressed nicely.

"Hey, Sparrow. Let's get a new bandage on you."

"If the coughing still troubles you, Squirrel, take the lungwort tea three times a day instead of two. I'll bring some more with me tomorrow, so don't worry about using it up, all right?"

"Yes, Badger, your bruise does look like a bell, but it doesn't need ointment. It's almost healed now, anyway."

When he had finished with all the questions, Martel performed a few spells, much to their delight. After pulling flames out of the ears and tickling their noses with air, he went home.

~

Last bell had yet to strike, signalling the hours by which all decent folk should be going home; tonight, Martel would be among their number. He walked up the broad avenue that went from the market district to coil itself like a snake around the Lyceum before continuing east and north. Ahead, he saw the castle with its open doors welcoming him as always.

Passing through the entrance hall, Martel heard a voice call out to him. Turning to look, he saw Eleanor approach, which made him frown. "Were you waiting for me?" He glanced around the otherwise empty hall.

"Do not flatter yourself. I was in the library and saw you coming up the street, through the window."

They had not spoken for the fiveday or longer; not since he confronted her about her alchemy. As they had no classes together anymore, they would only talk if one person sought the other out, and Martel had not felt confident enough to do that. Now he wondered what had made Eleanor do it.

"Well, you caught me."

"I did, and I have noticed how both you and Maximilian snuck off after meals. What are you up to?"

"I haven't spoken to Maximilian in a couple of fivedays," Martel replied confused. Not since the mageknight had behaved poorly towards him in the common room. Not to mention, Martel had barely had any spare time lately.

"Oh, I see. I thought – maybe you were in trouble of some kind."

Martel could not help but smile. "Eleanor Fontaine, were you planning to come to my rescue?"

She almost looked bashful as she glanced away. "You were right about the potion. It was reckless of me. I just badly wanted to believe it could work, and I needed someone to remind me of what I knew deep down. I thought, if you were in a similar situation now, it was my turn to remind you."

"No, everything is fine."

"Alright then." She began to move past him, towards her dormitory tower.

"I opened an apothecary in the copper lanes," it burst from Martel. He did not know why he felt the urge to tell her; it came from reasons deeper than he could or cared to examine. "Well, not a real one," he hurried to elaborate. "I'm not charging anyone. And my only patients are a bunch of children. But that's where I've been going every night for the last five days or so."

She gave a little smile. "That does seem like something you would do."

"What – would you like to see it? I'm going there tomorrow night. I think the children would be excited to meet someone like you." Meeting not one, but two mages would make their tiny hearts burst, he expected. And a small part of him was happy for others to see that he had an accomplished and graceful friend such as Eleanor.

She stood quiet for a moment. "Why not?" she finally said. "It sounds like a novel experience."

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With a touch of moonlight coming through the cracks of the roof, Weasel sat by a table and counted coins. All pennies except one, a little bigger and reflecting the same colour as the moonlight. Grabbing the silver piece, Weasel opened the seam of his trousers, placed the coin inside, and tied it back together.

"Why aren't you asleep?" he asked, looking at the pennies in front of him rather than anybody else.

"It aches," Sparrow replied, rubbing her new bandage.

"Touching it will only make it worse," Weasel chastised her as he finally glanced towards the stairs to look at the small girl. "How's your movement?"

"It's fine. Hasn't changed."

"Your – skill with open locks?"

Sparrow shrugged. "I can do that with either hand anyway."

"Good. I have a mark for us tomorrow night," Weasel told her.

"Alright. When I come back from the harbour, we can go," the small girl declared.

"Good. Get some sleep. Go on, go to bed."

Slumping her shoulders, Sparrow walked back up the stairs.

Chapter 85: Sparrowhawk

Sparrowhawk

With Soliday came another free afternoon Martel had to take advantage of. He had spent all his coin – an easy feat, since he never had more than a few silvers at a time – and promised the children more supplies, leaving him to his only recourse. After the lunch bell, he went to the workshops.

Master Jerome raised an eyebrow seeing him. "Again? Boy, you better not be gambling."

Martel quickly shook his head. "Not at all. I just need to buy something, not for me."

"Still? Got plans tonight with a special someone, do we?" His eyes twinkled with mirth.

In a way, Martel did, just not how the artificer thought. "I guess."

"I was young once too, I suppose. Come along, I have some materials for ink that needs grinding. Should be a familiar task for an alchemist such as yourself."

~

One bell's work meant one silver piece in hand. Not much, but sufficient for Martel's needs. He only needed a few herbs for his primitive apothecary, as most of the supplies still remained. He could even spare the coppers to mail the letter for his mother by Imperial post, finally.

This accomplished, he went to see his supplier of all things green. "Just a bundle of lungwort, please."

The herbalist raised an eyebrow as he prepared the plants. "More? You have all but cleaned me out now. You must be coughing enough to wake the dead."

As if saying it summoned the disease, Martel felt the rising urge to cough. He did not want to give the old man the satisfaction, not to mention, people looked with suspicion at apothecaries exhibiting even the mildest symptoms, so he suppressed the need and simply handed over payment for the herbs. Only once he had gone down the street and turned a corner did he dare to cough until his lungs felt twisted into a knot.

~

Once they had eaten supper, Martel and Eleanor left the Lyceum together. They took the straight path, directly through the crowds at the market district and past the point where Martel had been accosted the other day by the greasy-looking fellow. He did not feel any need for detours out of safety concerns, with Eleanor's magic and combat prowess added to his own skills. Along the way, she asked many a question about his work, giving him the chance to elaborate on his labours and accomplishments as an apothecary, however simple those might be.

This time, as Martel neared the house with his companion, the children were muted in their response. They did not approach nor raise their voices with a multitude of remarks and questions. Instead, they stared at the young woman who wore expensive clothes, more suitable for a man than a woman, and with a long dagger in her belt.

Martel could not help but laugh a little. After having shown them various remedies and medicines, not to mention different little magic tricks, he had finally brought something to impress them into silence.

~

While Martel replenished the supplies of herbs and did his examinations of the small patients, Eleanor cast a look around the small dwelling, which was quickly done. "Well. It is dry and – nice in here."

Mouse stared up at her. "Are you a messenger of Sol?"

"What?"

"Nah, she's just rich," remarked another kid. "Easy to look good when you can afford fine clothes and never have to work."

"You smell nice. Like the flowers at market, not the kind that grows here," Mouse clarified.

"Oh, thank you. In a way, you are right. It is perfume I buy at the market," Eleanor explained.

The small girl looked as if the wonders of the world were being revealed to her. She inhaled deeply through her nose. "What flower smells like that?"

"Those are lilies," Martel remarked with an absent mind, probing a fresh bruise on an arm belonging to a boy named Rabbit. "But on some days, she wears lavender."

Mouse looked from the apothecary to the acolyte, seeking verification. Eleanor nodded. "He is right, though one might wonder why he takes note of such things."

"He's smart," Mouse said with authority. "He knows all sorts of things."

The two girls, one about ten years older than the other, looked at Martel, who sat with his ear against Squirrel's chest to listen how the boy breathed.

"Keep drinking the tea," Martel encouraged the urchin, mostly because he had no other advice. He would have to ask the nurses for guidance, or perhaps he could find a way to question Mistress Rana for a solution without revealing his reasons.

The consultation done, Martel delighted the children with a few summoned flames and other tricks.

After a while, the door burst open to reveal Weasel. He glanced from Martel to Eleanor. "If you won't charge to see people, fine. But if you are going to bring people here to gawk at us like we are a travelling show, you can bet I will be charging them."

"Eleanor is my friend. I assumed she would be welcome here, as I am."

The mageknight looked down at the young boy. "And you, you are the – proprietor of this place?"

Something between a sneer and a smile played at Weasel's mouth. "You could say that. Anyway, I need a favour."

Martel crossed his arms. "You have the strangest way of softening someone up before you ask them for a favour."

"Yeah, I'm not too fussed. This is exactly the kind of thing you'll want to do."

The novice was tempted not to ask, but he could not help himself. "What is it?"

The little chief looked at the two mages. "Your magic, can it be used to find a person?"

Martel and Eleanor exchanged glances, and they both shook their heads. "No, not the kind we learn. Why?"

Weasel's clenched expression softened a bit. "Sparrow left this morning, and nobody has seen her since. We checked with the guards, and they didn't nick her. She has nowhere else to go but here. I think – I think someone took her."

Chapter 86: Chasing Fortune

Chasing Fortune

Martel thought about Sparrow, the little girl with wheat-coloured hair, dirt on her face, and her arm wrapped in a bandage made from his shirt. "Do you know where she went? Where she was last seen?"

Weasel nodded. "Yeah, I've had Badger and Mole track her steps, but they lost the trail. And I can't send my younger ones out searching after dark, especially not with a child-snatcher on the loose."

"I will go look for her," Martel declared.

"I thought you said your magic can't help."

"I got eyes. And I imagine time is of the essence here."

"I will help," came Eleanor's soft voice. "There is a full moon tonight. Plenty of light. We should make the most of it and go now."

The little chief looked at the two mages. "Alright, I'll take you. Badger is still out there anyway, keeping an eye on the area, and I don't want him walking home alone." He turned towards his flock. "Bolt the doors after we've gone, and don't open up for anyone but me."

~

A strange trio walked through the slums on moonlit streets. A noble woman wearing tunic and trousers, a young man in a robe much like a scribe's apprentice, and an urchin in rags. None of them spoke, the mood suppressed by the severity of the situation. They moved with such speed, Weasel almost had to run to keep up.

"Down here, from what Mole told me." Weasel let them down an alley and gave a shrieking howl like a wounded cat, startling both of his companions. Shortly after, Badger appeared. His chief gave him a nod. "What's the situation?"

"We tracked Sparrow to here." Badger pointed with his thumb at the broad avenue next to them, which served as one of the larger routes of traffic through the slums. "We think she went down one of the alleys here, but there's dozens. Too many doors for us to check what's behind all of them."

"So what do we do?" Martel asked. It felt ridiculous asking a small child, but this was their home ground, and he had no ideas himself. Suddenly, his magic felt useless. If they found the person who took Sparrow, he would happily set the culprit on fire, but Martel had never heard of any magic to locate someone in need.

"I've been keeping an eye on a suspicious character while Mole fetched you," Badger revealed, sticking his head out of the alley to look down the street. A handful of people could be seen, ambling this way or that, quite a few in inebriated state. "He wears rich clothes, like you." He nodded at Eleanor.

"That is not suspicious," she protested.

"Rich fellow, walking alone in the copper lanes, making a mark of himself? Only entertainment found here and not elsewhere is the illegal kind," Weasel considered. "Definitely suspicious. Where is he now?"

Badger cast another look down the street. "He went inside that house, five doors down. That was maybe half a bell ago."

"So what should we do?" Martel asked. "If he has Sparrow in there, we have to charge in, right?"

Badger shook his head. "He went in alone, and other people have been going in and out. I don't think Sparrow is in there."

"So we wait until he leaves and follow him," Weasel said.

"And if he leaves the copper lanes to go home? We have no reason to assume he will return to where Sparrow is, if he is indeed the guilty party, which is also doubtful," Eleanor pointed out.

Martel took a deep breath. "Then we'll have to confront him."

~

They waited for over an hour in the alley, taking turns to watch the street. They spoke little; as before, none felt inclined. While the full moon rose higher and higher, they saw people stumble in and out of the location also playing host to their suspect. Finally, he emerged.

Walking along the shadows of the houses, his face was hidden at first, even as he approached in their direction. Anxious to avoid discovery, the small group pressed into the darkness of the alley. The two children disappeared entirely, while Eleanor's dark tunic helped her hide as well. Martel, in his brown robe, ducked beneath a half-broken crate. Yet curiosity got the best of him; he could not help but watch as the mysterious character passed the opening of the alley.

As the fellows staggered by, fully illuminated by the moon, Martel jumped up in surprise. "Max!"

The mageknight turned around, balancing somewhat precariously on his feet, with a wineskin dangling in one hand. "Martel, my boy! Of all the people I would run into, in all the places!"

The others emerged from their hiding spots. "You don't really understand how following someone works, do you," Weasel snorted.

"This is Maximilian of Marche," Eleanor explained, sounding annoyed. "He's not your villain."

"I most certainly am not! I resent any such accusation."

"But Max, what are you doing here, and at this time of night?" Martel asked.

"Playing dice, my friend, and being scorned by Fortuna herself."

"But you could do that anywhere."

"No he cannot, as all legitimate gambling establishments forbid mages from playing. So you come here," Eleanor spoke with a hint of contempt.

"The Golden Goose found me out," Maximilian related sadly. "I can never play there again. But what about you? Are you also out trying your luck?"

"A little girl is missing," Martel explained, feeling exasperated both with his friend's drunken behaviour, but also because they had wasted all this time and had no further trails to follow. "We are trying to find her."

"That is dreadful. Well, I hope you succeed!" Maximilian waved a hand in a poor attempt at a salute and turned to walk away.

"You're not going to help us?" The novice asked in disbelief.

The mageknight gestured towards the city at large. "Where do you suggest we look? I gather you have searched that particular alley, which still leaves quite a few."

Mole appeared. "Sparrow is back," the boy gasped, causing a shock.

"What? When, how? Does she know all the time we spent looking for her?" Weasel asked with anger.

"Someone did take her, but she managed to escape. She's back at the house, scared out of her wits. He's still out there," Mole explained.

Maximilian gestured with his wineskin. "I will admit, I am intrigued. Lead the way to this songbird, and let us hear the tale."

Chapter 87: Dealings in the Dark

Dealings in the Dark

Back at the derelict house, the three mages and their younger companions found the scene as described by Mole. Sparrow, crying and shivering, jumped at Weasel and clung to him as soon as she saw him. It took a while to calm the girl down and get her to relate her story.

"I was going to the harbour to get into the fruit crates when I passed this house with an old man in the door," Sparrow began to say, her breath appearing in hefty gasps. "He promised me apples if I would carry some firewood for him inside. Said he was too old to carry it himself. And he did look all wrinkly, his back bent, so I didn't think him dangerous. But once I went inside, he closed the door and grabbed me. He was too strong." A fresh wave of tears appeared in her face.

"He must have been in disguise," Eleanor mumbled. "This was carefully planned out."

"How did you get away?" Martel asked. At least the girl did not show signs of injury, and he prayed to both Sol and all the Stars that this were the case.

"He tied me up in his basement, I don't know how long, it was dark," Sparrow sniffed. "Finally, he came back and untied me. I bit his hand, so he let go of me, just like Weasel taught us to do with guards, and then I ran all the way here."

"Sparrow, can you find your way back?" Weasel asked darkly.

"Don't make me go back!" the little girl all but screamed.

"You don't have to," he hurried to say. "Just help us find where it is." The small chief looked at the three mages. "And then you can do the rest."

"Yeah." Martel looked at the two mageknights. "We can."

~

In yet another alley, the trio of young spellcasters stared at a house across the street. Weasel had pointed it out to them, following a detailed description by Sparrow, and retreated to another alley to watch from a distance; apparently, he preferred not to be seen in the company of three mages about to commit violence.

"Nothing to it, is there?" Maximilian had yet to sober up, judging by his mannerisms, though at least his gait seemed steady, indicating he could fight. "The girl did not mention any others. Just this one pitiful man, who will soon regret his actions."

"There will be a backdoor leading out to an alley on the other side of the house," Eleanor considered. "We do not want him to escape."

"Maybe you go around the back? We'll wait until you're in position and go through the front at the same time," Martel suggested to her.

"Right." Maximilian emptied the last of his wineskin and threw it aside. "Let us do this." He drew his dagger and strode across the street, attracting stares from the few people out at this late hour.

Exchanging exasperated looks, Martel and Eleanor hurried after him. Reaching the door, Maximilian gave it a powerful kick to send it flying off its hinges, and it landed several feet within the room. The noise served as an efficient announcement to any residents of their arrival.

The mageknights entered first, blades drawn. Only darkness met them, so Martel ignited a flame and sent it floating across the space. It illuminated nothing but debris and a few pieces of broken furniture. Clearly, nobody lived here. All three of them relaxed their posture.

"I guess he fled once Sparrow escaped, rather than wait for the mob with torches," Martel considered. The building had no second floor, only the single room at ground level. "There's nobody here."

"Wait. She said he tied her up in the basement," Eleanor pointed out. They exchanged looks and began examining the floor in the sparse light provided by Martel, until they found a rusty hatch.

Maximilian groaned. "If a berserker waits for me down there, I will let him have you," he told Martel.

Eleanor gave the novice a quizzical look, to which he simply shrugged. "If you open it, I'll send the light down. No reason we go down blind," he suggested to the mageknights.

Maximilian grabbed the hatch and pulled it off, casting it aside. "Be my guest."

Martel floated his light down the stairs into the foreboding darkness, even as they themselves were swallowed by the black left behind. The flame revealed nothing. No monsters in the dark or men standing in ambush with knives drawn. Shrugging, Maximilian went down as the first.

Eleanor and Martel followed suit, and moments later, they stood in the cellar of the dilapidated house. It was empty as above, giving the same impression of a dwelling long since abandoned. Their search found nothing but the pieces of a smashed barrel and other trash beyond identification.

"Rather a disappointment," Maximilian declared. "I could have been home and sleeping hours ago, but instead, I wasted my time on this." He kicked one of the pieces of debris.

"A pity. Not only will he escape justice, but we have learned nothing of his identity. He wore a disguise and used this location without any possible links for us to trace." Disappointment in her voice, Eleanor sheathed her dagger. "We do not know the slightest thing about him."

"Wait." Martel's eyes had swept over the refuse, none of it interesting, but something on the floor itself caught his attention. Carved into the stamped dirt, he saw lines that looked clearly intentional rather than made by accident. He knelt down and brought his light closer to examine it, brushing aside the piece of debris that Maximilian had kicked over. The lines made a circle with complicated patterns inside, and he immediately recognised it, once it all came into sight. The same mark could

be seen etched into the skin of the unconscious boy in the infirmary, back at the Lyceum. "We know one thing." Martel looked up at the other two. "He is a maleficar."

Chapter 88: Specks of Red

Specks of Red

A muted band trotted the weary steps through the city from the slums towards the centre. Martel coughed, feeling cold and tired to the bone. All in all, they had walked for hours crossing the slums first in search of Sparrow and afterwards her captor. With little to show for it.

"Do we tell someone?" Martel hoped that at least something could be salvaged from this. Perhaps if they related the story to the right authority, it would lead somewhere.

"And tell them what? That we failed to catch a man, whose description we do not know, nor where he may be found, or what his future intentions are?" Maximilian stretched his neck.

"We know he is a maleficar," Martel retorted. "Should we tell the inquisitors?"

"No!" Maximilian's reply came forcefully. "If you tell them, the mere fact you could recognise a maleficar's work makes you suspicious in their eyes. And when they fail to find him, they will turn their attention on you. Never tell an inquisitor anything."

"He is right," Eleanor chimed in.

"What about a teacher? Master Fenrick is already looking into this." At least, Martel assumed that was the reason the old scholar had a book with the same symbol in it. "There can be no harm in telling him."

"Are you sure?" she questioned. "Three students spending the night in the copper lanes, chasing a maleficar. Not to mention, Maximilian has been gambling and you have your apothecary. Add to that, your previous misadventures, getting into fights. How long do you think the school can turn a blind eye?"

Their arguments made sense, but at the same time, Martel wondered if they were simply content to let the matter slide because this unknown maleficar now plied his wicked trade in the slums instead of going after other students at the Lyceum. To members of the nobility, perhaps that seemed an acceptable bargain.

The horizon brightened. The sun would rise soon. Ahead, the Lyceum rose to greet them, though unlike other nights, the sight did not fill Martel with comfort. The events of tonight felt like a defeat, and there would not even be any rest waiting for him; first bell would soon ring.

~

The morning turned out as dreadful as Martel had feared. He struggled to keep awake and perform even the most basic of tasks, leading Mistress Rana to repeatedly scold him. Master Alastair made pointed remarks on the schedule he kept and implied Martel should consider his priorities. The novice could do nothing but apologise, keep his head down, and continue. They were right, after all. Martel had freely chosen to spend his time in the slums, evening after evening, foregoing sleep night after night. Things had been going so well, he could not imagine failing his examinations to become an acolyte. Suddenly, the threat of failure and all the gold he would owe for his tuition hung over his head.

Martel found it difficult to forget about this. The Imperial administration would demand he paid back all the expenses for his schooling, should he fail to complete it. Being thrown out of the Lyceum would enslave him with debt for years if not decades or longer, perhaps for the rest of his life.

At the same time, the thought of doing nothing almost made Martel feel physically ill. He knew what the maleficar could do to someone with magical training, albeit limited, like an acolyte of the Lyceum. Now he had discovered that this malignant sorcerer kidnapped children for use in his rituals. And since they had accomplished nothing to stop him, he would surely continue. The slums were filled with easy targets that few or none would miss. Reaching a decision, Martel went towards Master Fenrick's chamber. Once there, he knocked and entered when given permission.

Inside, he found his teacher at his desk, closing a tome. "Martel? What is it?"

Coughing to clear his throat, the novice took a deep breath. "There's something I should tell you."

It took Martel a quarter of an hour to relate the key events of last night. He left out a few details such as the reason for Maximilian's presence, but admitted his work as an apothecary, as any other explanation for his visit to the slums seemed worse. When he had finished explaining about the mark and how he recognised it from the infirmary, he fell silent under Master Fenrick's heavy gaze.

"And you learned nothing concerning his identity?" the teacher asked.

"No," Martel admitted. "We don't know what he looks like or where he lives. I'm sorry, master, I know it doesn't help, but I thought I should tell you even so."

"You did right," Master Fenrick assured him. "Now we know for certain we are dealing with a maleficar, and he uses rituals. Not to mention, last night was a full moon. An auspicious time of the month for magical activities."

"You think he needs the full moon to do his rituals?"

"I do. But this should not concern you. Whoever this warlock is, a novice is no match for him. Avoid the copper lanes, and keep your wits about you if you must leave the school. As we know, he will gladly target students at this school as well as the unfortunate denizens of Morcaster's poorer districts."

"That's one thing I don't understand," Martel admitted. "Going after a child in the copper lanes makes sense, to avoid detection. But why go after a student at the Lyceum? That is bound to draw attention from inquisitors and mages alike."

"A good question, but not one for you to ponder. You should go sleep. You had a long night, and you look to be exhausted."

His teacher was right. Martel got on his feet, bade Master Fenrick farewell, and left.

Once out in the hallway, his mind no longer focused on the strange events of last night, he fully felt the physical toll. He was cold, nearly shivering, and absolutely worn out to the point that his body ached with every step. Having no appetite, he saw no point in lunch and headed straight for his room. Halfway there, a coughing fit overtook him, and he thrust his arm against his mouth until it

finally passed, and he could continue. In his tired state, he did not notice the specks of red that stained the brown sleeve of his robe.

Chapter 89: A Little Knowledge

A Little Knowledge

When Martel woke on Malday, he did not feel better. Even though he had both slept yesterday afternoon and now through the night, he still felt tired. And despite the mild weather of late summer, he was cold the moment he pushed his blankets away. He really wished he could simply lie back into his bed, but he had breakfast duty and needed to report to the kitchen. He dragged himself there only for the matron in charge to cast one look at him and command him to leave, lest he got everyone sick. In a haze, Martel did not respond or think much, but simply turned around. Yet despite this reprieve, moving around had woken him up, and he could not return to slumber. So when second bell rang, he got out of bed to attend his healing class. Perhaps something in the apothecary could liven him up as well.

Once he arrived with the other novices, they gave him a few glances and stepped away. "Martel? What's the matter with you, boy?" asked Sister Grace.

"I don't feel well." As if to underline this, Martel had to cough. "I could use some tea or something."

She turned her eyes upwards. "You're supposed to learn the signs of illness by working here, you daft boy. Tea won't help. Come along, let's get you into bed," she fussed.

Moments later, Martel found himself lying down again. This time, he managed to drift in and out of a feverish sleep, no longer aware of what took place around him.

~

A hand shook Martel awake. He blinked, confused about his surroundings. His room was not this big, nor did it contain all these people. He had also suffered from strange dreams, leaving him further bewildered.

"Boy? Do you know who I am?"

Martel turned his head towards the speaker. He found a blue robe to his right, and as his eyes travelled upwards, they reached the face of a man who looked vaguely familiar. He strained his mind to overcome its feverish haze until it finally gave him the answer. "Master Kelsos," he croaked.

"Yes. Your symptoms seem to be a fever and fatigue. The nurses tell me that you cough up blood. Any other symptoms?"

Martel looked at the small table next to his bed, on which lay a rag with red stains. He did not even remember that. "I'm not sure."

"Appetite? When did you last eat?"

Martel did his best to recall. "Yesterday. Breakfast, I think."

The healer frowned briefly. "Those symptoms suggest consumption. Certainly something in your lungs."

Even through his delirious state, Martel knew this was a dangerous disease. His own town had always been spared, but he had heard tales of other places where it killed with impunity. He wanted to ask for help, for medicine, but he could not form the words.

"Well, we can't have you infecting others." Abruptly, Master Kelsos placed his hand on Martel's sweaty forehead. A blue glow appeared around the healer's fingers.

To Martel, it felt like being lowered into a warm bath. The ache and weariness faded away, as did the feverish sensation of being too hot and too cold at the same time. The haze left his mind, and he could breathe freely again.

"There we are." Master Kelsos' hand shook slightly as he withdrew it. "Don't get infected again." And with that, as if they had finished a simple conversation about the weather, the healer walked away, looking only slightly strained.

~

The nurses insisted that Martel remained in bed, even if he felt fine and saw no reason for it. He was mindful that Mistress Rana did not accept excuses for missing his work in the apothecary. While being sick with consumption might have proved an exception, he was no longer sick. He waited until the nurses were occupied with other patients and made his escape, quickly getting into the workshop.

"It has already been a while since the bell rang." The Mistress of Alchemy stood in the apothecary, going through cupboards. "Did you come from a distant part of the castle?"

"No, mistress. Today, I assist in the infirmary, so it is a short walk. But the nurses would not let me leave before now."

"I did not realise that the assistance of novices was so integral to the running of the infirmary." His teacher straightened up and sent him a sharp look.

The door between the sick ward and the apothecary burst open, and Sister Grace barged in. "Martel, you return right now – forgive me, Mistress Rana."

The stern alchemist looked at the nurse. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Martel has been sick. He's supposed to be resting."

The teacher looked at the novice. "He seems fine to me."

"Master Kelsos healed him," the nurse explained.

Mistress Rana gave him a scrutinising look. "Leave us." Once the sister had gone, closing the door behind her, she spoke again. "Explain."

"Master Kelsos thinks I had consumption. But I feel fine now!" Martel hurried to add.

"How, and more pertinently where, did you manage to contract consumption?"

"In the copper lanes." Martel was tempted to say nothing more, but it finally occurred to him that if this disease had come from any of the children, they were in danger too. And none of them would be brought to the infirmary to be healed at the touch. "Can something be done? For others with this illness, I mean. Those who got me sick... They need help too."

"And why was a respectable student of the Lyceum in the copper lanes?" She locked eyes with him.

"Some of them are sick. The children, orphans. I just wanted to help." The words stumbled out of his mouth. "So I brought them some herbs and salves. But I made and paid for everything myself, I didn't steal anything!"

"Did you charge them for your services?" she asked sharply.

"No, I gave it all to them for free."

"At least your intentions were good. But I hope you see how a little knowledge can be more dangerous than none," she impressed upon him. "You contracted a dangerous disease. Be thankful you are at the Lyceum, one of the few places with the skills and knowledge to help you."

"I am," Martel mumbled. "What about the kids? Some of them need a cure just like me."

She gave him a long look. "We'll see. If I know Master Kelsos right, he is preparing to test others at the school who might have been exposed to this illness by you. He'll be around any moment, I suspect, asking for certain alchemical items to aid in this. So get to work, boy, and undo the harm you might have caused."

His mood low, Martel quietly followed her instructions to help prepare the tools for Master Kelsos.

Chapter 90: Good Things Come in Small Sizes

Good Things Come in Small Sizes

Martel ended up spending his afternoon in the apothecary as well, churning out the strange alchemical liquid that Master Kelsos needed. It was not a potion, rather the reverse; a person spat into the liquid, and if they were ill, it changed colour. Martel did not observe that part of the process, though, busy grinding ingredients and preparing reagents.

Next day in the morning, when he returned to the workshop, he found Mistress Rana already present and working. He stood, waiting for his assignment, until she turned around to look at him.

"You may be pleased to know that so far, Master Kelsos have not found any others who are sick. Though he will continue testing tomorrow, in case anyone was infected too soon for it to show. So you may continue with the same work as yesterday," she told him.

Nodding, Martel grabbed tools and material.

"Fortunately, the lack of more patients means that we have no immediate need for the elixirs I made last night."

"There is a potion that heals consumption?"

"Of sorts. Specifically, it strengthens the body that it might survive the disease. Not quite as impressive as Master Kelsos' performance, but it does leave the recipient with immunity, having beaten the infection via more natural means. Alchemy has its advantages." It almost looked as if the usually stern alchemist had a wry smile playing around her lips.

A potion to cure diseases. Exactly the kind of remedy Martel had hoped to learn when he first began working in the apothecary. "Can you teach me how to make it?"

"All in good time. It is not merely apothecary work, but involves actual alchemy, so it requires magic unlike our more mundane recipes. But you mentioned the children that infected you. How many of them suffer from the consumption?"

Martel did a quick count. "Three of them have persistent coughs, including mild symptoms of fever or chills."

Mistress Rana opened a drawer and took out three vials. "You may deliver these to your little friends."

If Martel had not been so intimidated by her, he could have hugged his teacher. "Thank you!"

"But Martel, this is the end of your work in the copper lanes. Besides the danger it poses, which I hope is now obvious to you, it is also against the law to run an apothecary without licence from the guild. You don't want that kind of trouble. If you wish to continue studying under me, you're done with this venture."

He had forgotten about that. His hometown had no guilds of any kind, being too small. "I promise." Tonight would be his last act as apothecary to Weasel and his gang.

~

As Martel walked towards the slums, he did not carry any bundles of plants or jars of salve in his hands or pockets; this time, instead, he had a bag slung over his shoulder, made from good leather. Inside it had been lined with soft wool, protecting the precious glass bottles carried within.

There was a light drizzle of rare summer rain, and Martel hurried on his way to his young friends. In his haste, he did not notice as three men emerged from an alley ahead. He only realised something was amiss as they fanned out in front of him, clearly blocking his path. Two of them held small knives. The third, in the middle, had greasy skin and a permanent sneer on his face. Martel finally recognised him as the man who had accosted him before, wanting to take over the apothecary.

"What you got in that bag, boy?"

"Nothing that concerns you. Get out of my way."

The leader of the thugs stretched his neck. "I told ya to work with us. Hand it over and come along. We'll be taking over Weasel's work, starting with you."

Under different circumstances, perhaps Martel would have been scared. But out on the open street, his enemies all in front of him, and none of them wielding magic, he had no reason to fear. He quickly glanced over his shoulder just to check nobody would ambush him from behind. Nothing but cobblestone met his eyes; the locals, smelling trouble, had scattered.

Martel stood with the elements within easy reach. Air and water surrounded him, he felt the earth beneath his feet, and he could draw on fire from within himself. "Get out of my way, or I'll crush all of you."

The bandits laughed. "What are you going to do, make us tea? Bandage us to death?"

Martel slowly extended his arms. As he did so, he raised the wind behind him until the thugs began to stagger backwards. "I will burn you to a crisp and scatter your ashes across the copper lanes."

They turned to flee. Quickly stamping his foot into the ground, Martel pushed one of the cobblestones up to make the greasy man stumble and fall down. He turned around and tried to crawl backwards, fear evident on his face.

"If I ever see you again, or if you ever harm Weasel and his people, you shall feel the full wrath of a wizard."

The thug finally got on his feet again and ran for his life.

~

The children greeted Martel as usual, accompanying him the rest of the way. They stared with wide eyes at the bag hanging by his waist and inundated him with questions. Laughing, he bade them tame their curiosity just a few moments longer and also to gather everyone.

"I have sad news," he told them. "I can't keep visiting here." Outbursts of disappointment met his words. "I need to finish my studies, so I can be a proper alchemist and mage. Also, my teacher doesn't want me doing this, at least not until I know more. So I have to stop."

"But we do what we want! Why can't you?"

"You do what Weasel tells you, don't you? It's the same for me," Martel explained. "But I did bring something. Where is Squirrel, Fox, and Beetle?"

Two of the small boys and one girl eagerly stepped forward, coughing.

Martel pulled out the vials from his bag and handed one to each. "Go ahead, drink them. It will do you good," he assured them.

Trusting in the apothecary, the children did so. They immediately made faces, much like biting into a lemon. "It's bitter," one of them complained.

Martel smiled. "That's how you know it works."

Weasel approached, jumping down from his spot on the stairs. "That's it, then? I guess you stuck around longer than I thought."

"Sorry it's not longer. I'm not in the Apothecary Guild, so it's against the law for me to do this work." Martel pulled out a piece of parchment. "But I imagine that wouldn't stop you. After all, you do what you want."

A few of the children laughed and made noises of agreement.

"This is everything I know of herbs and what they can help with. Maybe it will be useful for you." Martel frowned. "Wait, can any of you read?"

"Give it here," Weasel growled, snatching the parchment from Martel's hands.