

Firebrand 91

Chapter 91: Eat, Drink, and Be Merry

Eat, Drink, and Be Merry

Arriving at the apothecary the next day, Martel wondered a little to find Mistress Rana present. She rarely spent this much time in the workshop, though Nora had been absent for some days, going on her trip to visit the Stone of Archen, which did leave certain tasks unattended.

"What do you have for me today, mistress?"

She turned around to look at him. "Plenty. But there is something we should discuss first."

Martel swallowed. He thought everything had been resolved, leaving him in the clear, but now he suddenly feared that his clandestine actions would bear rotten fruit.

"I wondered at where you had obtained the materials for your little project in the copper lanes. I know you did not take anything from the apothecary."

"I would never," Martel impressed upon her. Besides knowing that Mistress Rana kept records of ingredients and remedies, the thought of stealing, violating the trust shown him, made the novice feel awful. "I pay for everything myself."

She nodded. "Master Jerome told me as much when I asked around. You have been busy doing chores for him."

"Yeah, it's not bad pay. And really the only option open to me." In general, the Lyceum frowned on its students doing any kind of work outside the school; it was not only undignified, but half-trained novices selling their magical skills presented a danger to everyone.

"When you first came here, we agreed that you would work one bell for free each morning. But the other day, preparing the mixtures for Master Kelsos, you worked an additional two bells in the afternoon, if not more." She put her hand into her pocket and withdrew something metallic that jangled. As she let it dump into Martel's palm, he saw four silver coins.

"This is so much!" Twice what he earned in the workshops with Master Jerome.

Mistress Rana gave one of her rare, thin smiles. "Skilled work pays better."

~

For his first lesson on this particular Manday, Martel knew exactly what to ask. Master Fenrick had told him not to investigate the matter further, but the novice trusted that his teacher would not deny any seeking knowledge. He never did before.

As soon as Master Fenrick entered the classroom, Martel ambushed him rather than let him get settled into another topic. "How do rituals work?"

Some of the novices rolled their eyes at the eager student in their midst, always asking questions.

The teacher gave Martel a scrutinising look. "I can guess the cause for your curiosity. That particular topic is not relevant for our lesson today."

"I was just wondering, as I heard we use them at the Lyceum too. Master Jerome uses rituals, doesn't he?" Martel hoped that his face wore the appropriate innocent expression, dangling a little more bait in front of the purple-robed man.

Master Fenrick grumbled a little before he nodded. "Roughly said, though plenty of exceptions exist, you can divide rituals into two different methods and two different purposes. A ritual may combine either method with either purpose. As for the former, we separate between those requiring any number of items, symbols, or even intonation, and those that are a pure expression of magical energy without any kind of aid from objects."

Martel thought about the basement in the copper lanes with its mark on the floor. "Why would someone need symbols, and others wouldn't?"

"Usually due to the origin, that is, which school of magic created the ritual in the first place. As you might have guessed, Tyrian rituals require singing, although I hesitate to consider their discordant noise as such." Master Fenrick smiled at his own jest. The novices just looked bewildered – the few paying attention, at least. "Enchanting, on the other hand, is done solely with magic, except for the item in question to be bespelled, of course."

"And what about the different purposes?"

"To put it crudely, rituals either seek to create an immediate or a permanent effect. The first would be done to a person, altering them somehow. The second to a place, such as the wards that protect the Lyceum – or enchanting objects, as mentioned."

Obviously, the maleficar had no intentions of laying any spells on the abandoned house in the slums. Perhaps he intended to enchant something like a weapon, but he had already claimed several victims. From what Master Jerome had told Martel, an item once bespelled could rarely if ever receive another enchantment; they would clash, usually causing one to ruin the other. Nor could it be strengthened by a second casting. It seemed most likely that the evil sorcerer intended for a ritual to be cast upon a person, such as poor Sparrow – or perhaps the warlock himself.

~

Passing through the common room on his way to his chamber, Martel noticed Maximilian sitting in the corner with a cup. The young viscount usually joined others for games of cards or chance, but he seemed subdued in mood. Late nights in the copper lanes had taken a toll not only on Martel, it seemed.

Martel had begun walking up the stairs when he became indecisive. He still felt slighted by Maximilian when the mageknight had humiliated him and thrown his poverty into his face. But it had been a while now, Martel missed his friend, and they had been through another experience together, which called for reconciliation. Turning back, he approached the acolyte.

"I was thinking we could go out tonight," Martel suggested. He withdrew his new hoard of silver from his pocket. "Beer is on me, at least while this lasts." It felt absolutely frivolous to suggest spending four birds simply on drink for himself and his friend, but Martel felt rich, which was a rare feeling for him, and he wanted to savour it.

Maximilian set his cup aside and slowly rose. He let a heavy hand fall down on Martel's shoulder. "Finally, Nordmark, you show initiative. The Golden Goose awaits!"

The novice frowned. "Didn't they ban you?"

"Only from gambling. They still want my coin. Or in this case, yours."

Martel shrugged. "The Golden Goose it is."

Chapter 92: A Cake to Cry on

A Cake to Cry on

Wiser from experience, if only a little, Martel did not stay out late with Maximilian. At an almost decent time, they returned to the Lyceum, one of them singing songs that seemed incongruent with his refined upbringing. Lacking the courage to correct Maximilian on his misplaced confidence as a minstrel, Martel was happy to bid him good night and get some sleep.

With his life returned to a state of normality, Martel attended to his usual Solday tasks. In fact, a tiny part of him almost regretted the fact that his sojourns to the slums had come to an end. Besides being rewarding work, it had kept him focused. His morning work in the apothecary had prepared him for helping the children, and labouring for Master Jerome in the afternoon had provided the coin for it.

He could still work a few bells in the workshops, of course, and one might think that since he would now keep all his silver, he would be even more motivated. But Martel felt the opposite. With no urgent need for money, he saw no reason to spend the afternoons like he spent the mornings. For once, he would enjoy having time to spare.

As if fate agreed with his decision, Martel found a note waiting for him at the entrance hall. It had not arrived by Imperial post, but rather been delivered to the Lyceum directly. Recognising the handwriting, he quickly unfurled the message to find an invitation from Shadi to join her this afternoon.

~

Strolling along, Martel crossed the market district, moving from one square to the next. In the height of summer, it was a warm afternoon, and plenty of people had their own errands in town. He still felt a bit wary of crowds, but nothing around him suggested anything other than a busy day at the market.

He only became apprehensive as he approached one of the streets linking the larger, open areas. Seated against a wall, a man sat of indeterminable age, with dirty long hair and a wild beard. A crutch rested against the wall next to him, and he wore a tattered surcoat of the legions. The man caught Martel's eye, and the novice quickly looked away and moved forward to hurry past.

A hand shot out in front of him from the beggar on the ground. "Spare a coin for a veteran, good master? A Khivan cannon took my leg, Sol curse the bastards."

Already anxious, Martel became befuddled at the request. He had been ready for some kind of trick or attack, just like his last experience with the discarded legionaries that could be seen on many of Morcaster's streets these days. He glanced down to find that the man indeed missed his leg below the knee. Not knowing what else to do, Martel fumbled in his pocket until he could withdraw a copper coin and placed it in the beggar's hand, before he hastened onwards.

~

Shadi waited for him at their usual spot. She smiled and gave a little wave as he approached. They had not met or spoken since the disturbing events on that day, and he was relieved to find that she looked and seemed her usual self.

"Hey."

"Hey you. Any place you want to go?" Shadi asked. "I didn't bring any money."

"I did, for once." Martel took out four pennies, all that remained of his payment from Mistress Rana. "How about a pair of sweetcakes?"

She smiled. "That sounds great." They set into motion towards their favourite baker.

"I'm sorry I haven't visited you," he said. "I have not really had an hour to myself for a while now."

"It's fine. It took a while for things to calm down, anyway."

"How are things now?"

She shrugged. "Nothing has happened since – that day. But people are tense. Few leave the quarter, and outsiders don't enter."

"I'm glad if things are quiet now. It's right where you live, after all."

"Yeah, I guess we do for now, anyway."

"What, you're thinking of leaving the neighbourhood?"

A guilty look flashed across her face. "Oh. I shouldn't have mentioned that. Yeah, we might."

Although the scent of freshly baked bread and other delicacies lured Martel forward, he stopped nonetheless. "What's going on?"

To Martel's surprise, Shadi's lips quivered before she spoke. "Our landlord keeps raising our rent. It takes dad a long time to finish a commission, so he doesn't get paid often. We've only just managed this month, and even if we barely eat, we can't scrape together fifty pieces of silver for next month."

"That's terrible!" Martel knew what hunger felt like, but he had never experienced the fear of losing his home.

"I tried to find some work where I can, but inside the quarter, there's barely any shops or trade going on, and outside, nobody wants to hire a Khivan. Even if they don't have anything against me, they're afraid of how others will treat them if they hire me." A few tears threatened to escape from her eyes. "Dad needs a lot of space for his work, so if we get kicked out, he doesn't think we can find anywhere else that'll do. He's talked about selling his tools and taking us back to Khiva, to some distant family."

Martel stood, overwhelmed both by the information and this sudden threat that he might never see Shadi again. Having no clue what to say, he simply hugged her.

It took a little while before she pulled back. "Sorry. I didn't mean for it all to spill out. I'm sure we'll think of something." She turned away from him a little, discreetly drying her eyes.

"Well, first things first." He stepped over to the baker's stall and exchanged coppers for cakes. Returning, he placed one in her hand.

"Thanks. Tell me, what sort of magical misadventures have kept you so busy?" She asked, taking a bite.

He took a deep breath. "As it turns out, I've been running an unlicensed apothecary in the copper lanes."

Chapter 93: Counting Coins

Counting Coins

Although doing arithmetic before breakfast felt like torture, Martel persevered. After saying goodbye to Shadi, various thoughts of earning money had rummaged around his head without reaching any conclusion. He had still been thinking about it when he went to bed, and it crossed his mind as soon as he woke up. Thus, wearing just his nightshirt, he sat by his desk trying to do calculations.

Martel had never been on good terms with mathematics. Father Julius had taught him how to count along with simple addition and subtraction, but otherwise focused on teaching him his letters with the assumption that Martel might become a scribe or other such associated profession. Now, the novice faced an enemy that proved frustrating and slippery, namely division.

In a fiveday, he had four bells available to work for Master Jerome. That meant four birds a fiveday, and he needed fifty. So it would take him... Martel almost went cross-eyed trying to figure it out. He could simply show Eleanor, and with a glance, she would give him his answer, but that felt like admitting defeat. Biting his tongue, Martel calculated like he had never calculated before.

Four silvers. He needed to reach fifty. That would take him one-hundred and twelve... Wait. That felt wrong. That sounded like years. Martel tried again. Finally, he reached an answer that felt correct. It would take him twelve to thirteen fivedays working for Master Jerome to gather the silver that Shadi needed.

Martel's joy at having solved his calculations quickly evaporated, as he realised what the answer meant. Shadi had need of this money in a month's time, and it would take him twice as long to earn it.

He had to consider other options. Mistress Rana had paid him twice as much as Master Jerome, and even if such sumptuous wages had been a temporary generosity given the unusual circumstances of that day, Martel still did work for her every morning. If he could be paid for that, it would help. However, he had already strained her goodwill with his last attempt at helping others, and asking her for favours straight after felt like poor timing.

What else could he do? He needed to do skilled work in order to earn the coin fast enough. But neither of his skills seemed useful. He could definitely not run another apothecary, straight after he had been told to shut down his last one; besides, the only people who would trust a sixteen-year-old as their healer would be those so desperate that they could not afford anything better.

His other skill was magic. Except he had not learned how to wield it in any way that could help someone with their trade, and the Lyceum frowned on students working outside the school anyway. If he searched long enough, he might find someone whose business could somehow gain from having even a novice mage helping out, but Martel had no idea where to look or what to look for. Feeling his stomach rumble, he decided to postpone the question; perhaps with his hunger sated, ideas would come.

~

Arriving for his lesson at the Hall of Elements, Martel saw something unusual. His teacher, normally poised and confident, seemed strangely apprehensive, and he hesitated to look the novice in the eye. "Martel, I think I owe you an apology."

Taken aback, Martel blinked. "What for?"

"I acted curt with you. Implied that you didn't take your studies seriously. Now I have learned from Master Kelsos that you were seriously ill this whole time." Appearing almost anguished with one hand wringing the other, Master Alastair spoke again. "Usually, when my students have drowsy eyes and lack of concentration, it's because they spend their nights irresponsibly. But you have always been a keen student. I should have known something else was the cause of this. I'm sorry I misjudged you and that I failed to notice you needed help."

Martel had not considered any of this. After all, Master Alastair had been right; he had sacrificed sleep in order to run his little apothecary in the copper lanes, thereby making his studies and out-of-class exercises less of a priority. But if this bought him some goodwill with his teacher, Martel was not above taking it. "That's fine. I didn't have many symptoms, after all. I just thought I was tired from not sleeping well."

"Regardless, I will be more considerate in the future." Master Alastair gave him a closer look, and his expression changed from guilt to a wry smile. "How did it feel? When Master Kelsos healed you?"

"Amazing. Such a complete change in a matter of moments." Even if the sensation of near euphoria had quickly faded, the memory remained strong in his mind.

His teacher nodded. "It reminds me that magic has such potential we barely even understand. Your time in the infirmary must nearly be up, right?"

"Yeah, I think tomorrow is my last lesson, and then I move on to a new course." Something with water; Martel had not quite understood it from the terse description on his schedule.

"That means Master Kelsos will test you. But you must not be disappointed if you lack this particular gift. Healers are extremely rare."

Martel nodded. "I know."

"Very well." Master Alastair smiled. "Let's focus on our own work and leave tomorrow's magic for tomorrow."

~

Despite Master Alastair's warning against disappointment, Martel could not help but imagine if his class the next day showed he had the gift of healing. It would, in an instant, solve all his problems. He would not have to worry about hiding his abilities with fire; healers were far more valuable than battlemages. He could demand any price he wanted for his healing skills, with no guilds interfering. Shadi would never have to worry about rent again, and Martel would have the coin and magic to prevent his family from ever starving or becoming sick again. As he went to sleep that night, thoughts of a bright future followed him into his dreams.

Chapter 94: Feeling the Sting

Feeling the Sting

Martel's last bell in the infirmary went by at a snail's pace. He helped take care of the patients, by now accustomed with the process of changing bandages and other such tasks, but he found it hard to concentrate. His mind kept turning towards the test that Master Kelsos would perform on him. He had no idea what it would be like or how it worked, only that it was the manner in which the Lyceum discovered potential healers. The other novices who had begun the course at the same time as Martel would also be tested, and when he asked one of the nurses, she explained it would be done so swiftly, they did not need to set time aside for it.

Finally, Master Kelsos appeared. "We'll start with the older one, I guess." He gestured for Martel to follow him to a corner of the infirmary, giving them a little seclusion from the rest. He sat down on a stool and motioned for Martel to take a seat on the empty bed next to it. "So, you've had a chance now to gain an understanding of the human body, and namely, how it heals. Let's see if you can do more than just understand. Hold out your hand."

Martel duly did so, wondering what came next.

"This won't hurt." Master Kelsos took the novice's hand with his own and held firm. With the other, he took the small knife in his belt and pricked Martel on the finger.

Martel ripped his hand away. "Ow! You said it wouldn't hurt."

"I lied. I hate when they fidget or try to avoid the knife." The healer handed over a small piece of clean cloth. "Put this against the rift."

Still pouting, Martel did so, feeling a small sting where the fabric met his broken skin.

"Think of your heart, pumping blood around your body. Moving through your arm until it reaches the wound. Imagine how the blood clots, the flesh assembles itself. And the skin knits together good as new."

Martel closed his eyes, letting his mind be guided by Master Kelsos' mesmerising voice. He envisioned every step as spoken, wondering if it worked.

"Let your magic flow freely. Like water in your veins, it reaches your injury and heals it completely."

Martel concentrated as best he could.

"Show me."

Opening his eyes, the novice saw Master Kelsos nod towards his hand. He carefully removed the fabric. After a moment, fresh drops of blood trickled out.

"Sadly, that is the end of your time in the infirmary."

Martel looked at the few beads of red betraying him. "Are you sure? There's hardly any blood."

"If you had the gift, you wouldn't even need my guidance. Your magic would simply heal. Like this." Master Kelsos touched Martel's fingertip with his own. Light glowed ever so briefly, and the small sting of discomfort disappeared. As Martel wiped the blood from his finger, he found no trace of the injury. "Fetch the next novice for me, would you."

~

Martel's dreams of becoming rich had once again proven short-lived. He knew of course that this would have been the likely outcome from the start. Being fire-touched already set him apart from most mages. It was absurd to think he would in addition possess the rarest of all gifts. Still, the day-dream had been beguiling. Especially now, trying to think of a way to earn fifty pieces of silver for Shadi and no idea as to how within the allotted time. Having a solution fall into his lap like becoming a healer would have been nice, but life never worked out that way.

His mood slightly suppressed, Martel continued going about his day. In the afternoon, as he was returning to his chamber – Master Alastair had unwittingly reminded him how he had neglected doing his exercises outside of class lately – he passed through the common room and found Maximilian engaged in a game of cards as usual. Mindful of what happened the last time, Martel kept his distance and did not make any comments as hands were played and coins subsequently changed ownership. The mageknight had bad luck and grumbled about his cards, reinforcing Martel's decision to stay silent.

He remembered how Maximilian had tried to play dice in *The Golden Goose* with his help and their subsequent failure, losing further coin. But only because Martel's involvement had solely been to prevent the other player from cheating, and they had still relied on luck to win, which failed them. Perhaps there was a way after all that Martel could earn a lot of coins swiftly using his magical skills.

~

Martel had to ask around a lot until he found someone who could lend him a pair of dice. Given the relative ease with which many of the students could manipulate the throw, dice games were not popular at the Lyceum. But persistence found him a pair of six-sided clay cubes with the typical symbols of a crown, jester's hat, and the four elements.

Inside his room, Martel began to practice. He rubbed the dice between his hands to transfer heat, making it easier for him to follow as they rolled across the table. He began by throwing both, but quickly found it confusing to track them with his magical senses. They were so small and so close to each other, it felt more like a single object. He certainly did not possess the fine control needed to manipulate their movements.

Instead, he practised with one. He let it roll across his desk, as slowly as possible while still looking like an actual throw. Once the die approached the symbol he wanted, he arrested its movement. Doing this too eagerly, the cube wobbled and clearly looked wrong, but it worked. All he had to do now was practice until he could make it look natural, and then add the other die, possibly letting them fall out of his hand one by one with a small delay. And once he had mastered this, his money troubles would be over.

Chapter 95: Familiar Ground

Familiar Ground

Martel entered the Hall of Elements and greeted his teacher with a smile. "I'm still having trouble controlling two different elements at the same time," the novice admitted, "but I have made some progress." He summoned a flame in each of his hands. At the same time, the fires rose into the air and began swirling around both master and student in increasingly elaborate patterns. Finally, he let them disappear. "Not the same as combining elements, but if I can control two different effects with the same element, maybe I can build on that."

Master Alastair nodded with a pensive look. "Possibly. Certainly, it is worthwhile for you to keep practising this. More control over your magic is always good. I see that your exercises have helped you, considering your progress since our last class only two days ago."

There was some truth to it, though Martel's advancement had come about from his practising with the dice, rather than the specific exercises shown to him by his teacher. Having no reason to elaborate on that, Martel just nodded.

"By the way, I checked with Mistress Juliana. Your new course for Maldays concerns the aqueducts and waterworks, she told me."

Martel nodded again. "Yes, though I don't quite understand what I'll be doing."

"I wanted to give you a little warning. Nothing bad, mind you. But Mistress Vana is in charge of this course as the Mistress of Water. Once you become an acolyte, if you are to become a weathermage, your principal training will be with her."

"Oh, I see."

"That also means, if she is not happy with you or your water skill, she may refuse to train you as such. So I suggest you make a good impression," Master Alastair advised him.

"Got it. I'll do my very best."

"Good lad."

~

In between lessons and lunch, Martel continued practising with the dice. When he threw them too fast, he had trouble making it look natural when he stopped them again, and making sure both of them landed on the same symbol at the same time also proved a challenge. But if he let one fall from his hand first and waited a few moments before letting the other follow, he could usually shift his attention fast enough. This was still harder than simply moving flames in the air, where he had complete control over speed and direction.

Then again, he did not have to win every single throw. In fact, that would probably raise suspicion. He would simply bet small, accept the occasional loss, but make sure to win most rounds and make a profit. When he finally felt confident, he gave the dice back to Henry with thanks for having borrowed them; tonight, he would enact his plan.

~

After a hasty supper, Martel went into town. In his pocket, he had a few silver pieces borrowed from Maximilian. Not a lot, so he would have to bet very carefully and be sure to win the first rounds. Once he had built up a small sum, including enough to pay his friend back, he could be a little more relaxed and allow room for error or even lose on purpose.

He walked a familiar path to the only place where he knew for certain to find gambling. Above the door, a sign hung depicting a goose with golden feathers.

"Unusual to see you alone," the barkeep called out as he entered.

"Friends are busy with studies," Martel claimed, not wanting to explain why he had felt it best to appear alone.

"Can I get you a mug of something?"

"No thanks, Jerold, maybe later." Martel was not thirsty, and he thought it best to save all his coin for the dice, at least until he had some winnings added to them.

His father had always told Martel never to gamble; it made a mockery of honest work for honest coin. But his father had also told him never to set foot inside a tavern, at least not until he was a grown man, and Martel had long since broken that commandment.

He headed towards the tables reserved for games of chance. Already, three men sat dealing cards, and two traded a pair of dice between them along with the occasional coins.

Nodding to the burly fellow who kept an eye on things and ensured good order, Martel approached the table with the dice players. Suddenly, his mouth felt dry. He wondered why he felt so anxious. He had been in fights and had to rely on his magic more than once to get him out of a tight spot. At worst, he risked a few silvers, not his life. Somehow, this made him more nervous, perhaps because rather than being thrust into the situation without warning, he was deliberately walking into it by his own design.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

The two men, who looked like hardened workers with calloused hands, glanced up at the beardless youth in his role. "If you got the coin to lose."

Martel patted his pocket, which gave a soft jangle in response. But before he could sit down, one of the card players looked over.

"Aren't you friends with the young viscount? Marche or something."

Martel stared like a beaver at a bursting dam, caught off-guard by the unexpected question. He could not even think of whether to say yes or no.

"Yeah, that's right. I've seen the pair of them in here all the time, got those pretty young legs with them."

Martel glanced at his feet, completely clueless.

The burly guard stepped over. "Sorry, guy, no mages at the table. If we had to ban your friend, that extends to you."

Martel opened his mouth to protest, but he could not think of what to say. Denying the truth seemed pointless, considering they clearly knew who he was. No point in pretending he lacked the gift for magic; mere association with Maximilian had sealed his fate.

Accepting defeat, Martel turned around and left. He did not feel like traversing the market district in search of other pastures, but he was not ready to give up. He simply had to find another establishment where he would be a completely unknown face. Tomorrow was another day.

Chapter 96: The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship

The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship

Despite it being his favourite class, Martel found it hard to focus on Master Fenrick's lesson. Thoughts swirled in his head as to how he could accomplish his plan. He had never considered he

might have to go elsewhere than The Golden Goose, which felt familiar and where he knew that informal gambling took place. He would have to risk going to a proper establishment for games of coin, but he had no doubt that if word came back to the Lyceum, he would get in trouble; unlike a tavern, Martel could not explain away his presence in a gambling den. It had to be far away from the school where he would not accidentally be seen by anyone passing by on the street or such.

The market district felt too close to the Lyceum for that reason. The copper lanes too far, not to mention, he should keep his distance given recent events in that part of town. Martel did not imagine the northern parts of Morcaster had places for gambling suitable for someone like him, posing to be a simple apprentice or clerk. That left the harbour as his best bet.

Feeling guilty for his lack of attention, Martel resumed listening to Master Fenrick's words. "There has been much speculation as to how the position of the stars might affect our magic. For instance, one might think that Malac high in the heavens would strengthen our mageknights. Yet observations have shown this is not always the case. It seems that the position of the other principal stars, perhaps coupled with the phases of the moon or other, minor stars, play a vital role."

Martel's mind swirled back to his astronomy classes earlier this year. He did not miss having to keep up with the terribly complex equations involved in charting the stars. While he found this topic interesting in theory, it seemed too complicated in practice, especially as it apparently barely yielded any benefits for a spellcaster.

"Of course, the most auspicious moment for magic occurs at winter solstice, regardless of the stars and their positions. The prevailing theory is that the absence of the sun allows the moon full influence. In fact, this knowledge affected strategic thinking the first time that the Asterian Empire attempted a large-scale conflict with the Tyrian tribes, launching an attack in winter." Master Fenrick gave a sardonic smile. "The strategy was quickly abandoned when it was determined that the Tyrians suffer and control the cold far better than us."

~

As Martel had his practical lesson with Master Fenrick in the afternoon, he had to wait until evening before he could venture into the city. This did leave him strapped for time, considering he had to walk all the way to the harbour district, gamble, and get home again. Well, he could sacrifice a few hours of sleep; he had become accustomed to that, after all.

Both the market and the harbour were busy districts, but in different ways. At the former, nearly everyone was a local resident buying and bartering. It felt more crowded, and the narrow spaces necessitated everyone to be on foot, but the people seemed generally of the same sort. The harbour had all kinds. Folks from Morcaster mingled with those from elsewhere in the Empire and sailors from across the seas. Some walked, others transported goods in carts or on the backs of donkeys. Fewer stalls and workshops, but a lot more places selling one form of entertainment or the other. Martel did not walk long until he saw a sign with a hand holding four playing cards. One place as good as the next, he entered.

A large, open space extended before his eyes. All sorts of colours gave it a vibrant look, from red chairs to green tablecloths and richly decorated walls. Likewise, the staff wore livery of sorts rather than just plain clothes. The noise rose to the ceiling from people talking, shouting, complaining, and more, games being played and coins exchanged, all the while a bard desperately tried to provide some music in the background.

Martel's heart began to beat faster as much from excitement as anxiety. The mood reminded him of the solstice celebrations held by the nobles with an atmosphere of wealth and amusement. He did not notice that as he crossed the threshold, a symbol on the floor gave a faint light when touched by his boot.

One of the staff, a muscular fellow with a dagger by his side, approached Martel. "Pardon me, good master, but as you have ignited the rune, we must conduct a quick test."

Feeling a little odd being addressed in this manner by a man twice his age, Martel looked down to see the soft glow running along the lines of the symbol. As he looked up, the guard had taken out a small pouch, from which he retrieved a pinch of a strange powder. Much to Martel's perplexion, the man sprinkled the dust into his face.

Wrinkling his nose, Martel almost sneezed as the powder drifted through the air towards him. As it almost reached his skin, the little specks lit up into flashes of light.

"Very sorry, good master, but by the rules of the Gamblers' Guild, none with magical ability may enter the premises. It wouldn't allow for fair games, you understand. Respectfully, I must ask you to leave."

His deception destroyed before it could even begin, Martel could not summon the wherewithal to attempt any protest. He simply turned around and walked back to the street.

~

Deflated, Martel walked home. Another scheme had proved short-lived. Perhaps it was for the best. Deception did not come easy to Martel, especially not with money at stake. And better he were discovered beforehand rather than in the midst of a game with angry players surrounding him.

He could find Maximilian and repay him. Martel disliked being indebted to anyone, even if just a few coins. He trudged all the way up the dormitory tower to the top floors and knocked on the acolyte's door.

Maximilian opened, already dressed for bed. "What is it?"

Martel let the coins dump into his hand. "Just wanted to give this back."

The mageknight looked at the silver with a frown. "You owe me money?"

"Yes, I borrowed this like yesterday."

"Oh, I did not pay attention when you asked. I just heard you mumble about money, so I gave you a few coins. I did not expect repayment." Maximilian shrugged and slammed the coins down on a dresser by the door.

A thought struck Martel. "The other night, in the copper lanes, you had been out gambling."

Maximilian rolled his eyes. "Do not bother. I have heard plenty of lectures on the topic."

"No, no. I just wondered where you went. I know licensed establishments have ways to detect mages, after all."

A glimpse appeared in the eye of the viscount. "They do, but how do you know that? More importantly, why do you wish to know of a place that can't detect mages?" Maximilian smiled. "Is that an opportunity I smell?"

Chapter 97: A Gambler and his Valet

A Gambler and his Valet

They discussed the details over breakfast, Maximilian glaring at any who might approach their table and intrude on the conversation.

"A two-man act is perfect. I can drink and appear the buffoon without harm, as I will not be controlling the dice." Maximilian waved his spoon around. "I can roll them with my eyes closed or throw them over my shoulder. Nobody could possibly suspect I am using magic, since I'm not. And if they inspect the dice, they will find them perfectly ordinary."

"Right," Martel admitted reluctantly. "But won't it be strange that I'm hanging around the table without actually playing?"

"Not if you are my valet accompanying me around, the young nobleman with money to waste on gambling. Unless you prefer to try your hand alone at getting admittance to illegal gambling dens, assuming you can find any in the first place?"

Martel did not prefer that. In fact, having Maximilian as an experienced hand, not to mention he would be doing all the talking and gambling while Martel simply controlled the dice, did seem a better choice. His only concern was that the young nobleman would not take this seriously or gamble it all away at the wrong time with his usual disregard for the value of money. But if nothing else, he needed Maximilian to find the right place that would not check for mages at the door.

"Fine. When do we do this? This afternoon? I have no classes after lunch."

The mageknight shook his head. "Too soon. First, I have to get you the livery of a valet from my home. You must look the part."

"I have the clothes from the solstice celebration," Martel suggested.

A dismissive sound came from Maximilian. "Valets do not wear silk or doublets with random embroidery upon it. No, leave that to me. We should also practice. After all, we must work in unison with precise timing. I do have class this afternoon, but after supper, we will practice until perfection. Tomorrow, we give it a go. No rush, no mistakes."

Martel found himself a little impressed at Maximilian's thorough thinking and methodical approach. Perhaps he misjudged his friend when he thought the mageknight would not take this seriously.

"Very well. I'll see you tonight."

~

The rest of the day passed at a slow pace. Following Maximilian's plan, they would not be going out tonight, and Martel had to arm himself with patience. Working in the apothecary and the workshop kept him busy for a while, but once afternoon rolled around, he had no further obligations until meeting Maximilian after supper.

Martel tried to occupy himself with Master Alastair's exercises, attempting to break through the barrier of controlling two different elements at the same time. Yet his mind drifted towards his current preoccupation and whether he had truly chosen the right course of action. While he could not collect all the money Shadi needed, he could collect perhaps half or so by honest work. Maybe it would be enough, along with what she herself and her father could gather.

On the other hand, what if it did not suffice? He would have approached Shadi with his gift of silver and promises of solving her fears, but if it fell short of what she needed, he could only imagine how her smile would falter. He would have raised her hopes with promises of aid and dashed them again. No, he would not leave it to chance. That was the point of magic, after all; taking chance out of the equation.

~

The newly minted pair of partners-in-gambling ate their supper without too many words and left the dining hall for Maximilian's room; unlike Martel's, it could actually comfortably fit two people. The mageknight produced a pair of dice, which he had procured from somewhere, and threw them on his desk. They rolled around and came to a stop showing two different elements.

Martel looked from the clay cubes to Maximilian. "Oh, you expected me to do something?"

"Well, you claimed that you had practised how to decide the throw."

"Usually, I have a bit of warning, seeing as I throw the dice myself. Try it again, and heat them by rubbing your hands first."

Maximilian grumbled but picked up the dice and rubbed them between his fingers before he let them roll.

This time, Martel caught one of them and turned it to show a crown, but before he could focus on the other, it had already stopped, showing an element. "It works best if you delay them. Let one roll first so I can focus on that, and then roll the other."

"The amount of rules for doing this simple task of rolling the dice," Maximilian growled, but he complied nonetheless.

This time, Martel caught the first die and made it show a crown; as the other came rolling along the same path, he grabbed it as well with his magic and turned it to create a pair of emperors.

Maximilian frowned. "Why are you moving your hands?"

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Do it again." The acolyte picked up the dice and let them roll.

Martel's immediate attention lay on the cubes, turning them right; yet even as he did, he realised that unwittingly, he twisted and twirled his fingers around in lockstep with how his magic control the movements of the dice. It was unnecessary as such; still, moving his hands unconsciously must have made it easier for him to grab the dice with his magic.

"In the world of gambling, we call that a 'tell', and it will immediately cast suspicion on us," Maximilian warned. "We are going to do this again, and we will continue at it until you can do your part with your fingers completely still."

It took half an hour before the mageknight was satisfied, proving a harder taskmaster than most teachers. As Martel made to leave, Maximilian slapped a set of clothes into his arms; the appropriate livery for the valet of a viscount. Everything was ready for tomorrow.

Chapter 98: A Pair of Emperors

A Pair of Emperors

Going through his day, Martel felt a tinge of cold feet. Even though his plan with Maximilian echoed what he had intended to do on his own, it felt different. Alone, he retained the option to back out at any time. He could sit down at the table, change his mind, and leave. Going to a gambling den with Maximilian felt like a commitment to see it through, and Martel could not be sure he had the stomach for it.

He paused practising his spellcraft in the Hall of Elements, looking at his teacher. "Master, if I needed money, how might I earn some?"

"It was my understanding you do work for Master Jerome in the workshops."

"I do, but with my growing magic skills, I wondered if I might find other work – more challenging, and with more pay?"

"Master Jerome might have such tasks as well, but if he hasn't offered them to you, I imagine he doesn't consider you ready. Certainly, such work is usually reserved for acolytes." His teacher gave him a scrutinising look. "Is something the matter? Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"No, not at all. I just have a friend, I wanted to do something nice for her." Martel took a deep breath. "Let me try air and water together this time."

~

A young nobleman and his valet moved through the city to reach the slums. Unlike his usual robe, Martel wore a shirt and doublet made from flax and wool, though neither he nor Maximilian had any crest or other such markers of identity.

"I guess if we don't want to be recognised, it's good we are as far away from the school as possible," Martel mused. While a few people did know him, such as Weasel's gang, he was not worried they would report on his whereabouts to the Lyceum.

"Not much choice either. All the places in the other districts, they are part of the Gamblers' Guild. If we want unlicensed games that do not check for magic, we have to go to the copper lanes."

"Why is it called that?" Martel asked. He had picked up the name from others using it, but he had never heard an explanation why.

Maximilian smirked. "In the northern districts, people count their wealth in gold. In the market or the harbour, they count it in silver. In the copper lanes..."

"They count it in copper pennies."

"Do not worry. Where we are going, there will be plenty of silver for both of us."

~

Maximilian led them down the street to knock at a door that looked just like all the other houses. A small hatch opened to let a bald man inspect them before they heard the door being unbolted, and they were given entrance. When they stepped past the threshold, the entrance became closed behind them, and the guard at the door turned towards Maximilian.

"Who is this?" He nodded towards Martel.

"My servant. It takes me quite a while to stagger home some nights, so I thought I should have some assistance," Maximilian explained. He dug out a few pieces of silver.

The bald man rolled his eyes. "Fine. Four silvers."

"What?" Maximilian protested. "He is not going to play." He pointed with his thumb at Martel. "He does not have a single coin on him. He will not take a seat for a moment all night, I guarantee you."

The doorman squinted, looking at Martel. "Fine. But if he touches a single die or a card, you are both out of here. Give me two, then." He extended his hand, and Maximilian paid the agreed amount.

This first obstacle overcome, the young nobleman led his companion into the gambling house itself. Undetectable from the street, several houses had been smashed together to create a large, open room. A few wooden beams provided support for the ceiling; in between, numerous tables had been scattered.

It looked confusing at first, especially compared to the stylish decorations of the licensed gambling establishment that Martel had visited the other day. The tables stood haphazardly with different numbers of chairs. He could not tell who worked here and who came as patrons.

Maximilian waved his hand dismissively in one direction of the room. "People playing against the house. Sure to lose their money. Come along."

Martel glanced towards them, mostly men seated at tables with cards in front of them, before he followed his friend to another part of the room.

Here, men sat with dice around the tables. Some seemed to play in pairs, while others in larger groups. "Anyone care to wager a bit on a simple game of Emperor's Fool?" Maximilian asked.

"Yeah, I'll play. Not having luck with the Legionary's Round." A man separated from the larger group, moving his chair to another table, so Maximilian could sit down opposite him. He looked typical for the slums, with old clothes, unkempt beard, and calloused hands. He hefted the clay cubes in his hand. "Local dice. Courtesy of the house. You satisfied?"

Maximilian placed two silvers on the table between them. "First throw is yours."

The man met Maximilian's bet and rolled the dice. Emperor and fool.

Maximilian replicated the movement. Two different elements. Emperor won.

Standing behind the chair of his supposed master, Martel tried to look relaxed. They had agreed to let luck run its course for the first rounds; Martel would intervene once bigger stacks came on the table.

Another wager of two silvers. The middle-aged man got an even better throw, showing a pair of elements. Another loss for Maximilian.

"Five silvers," the young nobleman grumbled, playing the part of a gambler chasing his losses. Acting impatient, he picked up the dice, rubbed them between his hands for good luck, and let them roll on the table, one after the other. A pair of fools came as a result with Martel clenching his hands together behind his back.

The other player scooped up the dice and swiftly let them fall. Once again, he landed on a pair of elements. With a cackle, he pulled all the silver towards himself. "You've got bad luck, it would seem."

"Indeed," Maximilian growled. "If only my lucky stars would wake up. Another five. You roll first." He counted out the coins and stack them on the table.

Taking a swig from his mug, the other gambler mirrored the bet and picked up the dice. He let them roll. The first came to a quick stop on a crown. The other looked poised to stop on that symbol as well, giving him the best possible result. Wrenching his hands, Martel stared until the die finally took another turn, showing an element instead.

He did not have time to relax. Maximilian scooped up the small cubes and sent them rolling. Almost sweating from the pressure, Martel concentrated like his life depended on it. A pair with water showed. Winner Maximilian.

"Aha!" The viscount picked up his silver, leaving half as his next bet.

~

An hour later, the nobleman and his valet left the unassuming house. Maximilian tapped a purse heavy with silver inside his tunic. "By my count, subtracting expenses, that is seventeen pieces of silver for each of us. Not bad for half a bell's work."

"It really isn't. We could probably have stayed," Martel considered.

Maximilian shook his head. "You win long enough, even with honest means, it always ends with someone getting mad at you, accusing you of cheating. Since we are vulnerable to such accusations, it is best we do not invite any suspicion."

"You know best," the novice conceded. It did not matter either if they had to do this over several nights. Two more outings like this, and he would have enough to solve Shadi's problems. "What will you do with your half? It's not like you lack for money."

Maximilian assumed an offended expression. "I have a lifestyle to maintain."

They continued along the dark streets of Morcaster, populated mostly by others enjoying entertainments of the night or people planning to take advantage of the former.

"Those men we took money from... Do you feel bad that they didn't actually have a chance to win?"

"Martel, never gamble coin you cannot afford to lose. Odds are, any coin they did not gamble away, they would have spent on drink. The only difference is whether we or the house would gain that money, and I consider us the worthier recipients."

That made a certain amount of sense, and Martel's conscience was happy to seize it. "Do we go again tomorrow?"

Maximilian smiled. "We go again tomorrow."

Visit for the best novel reading experience

Chapter 99: A Pair Earthbound

A Pair Earthbound

Martel stood in the entrance hall, slightly unsure of himself. His new class to replace the infirmary had been titled something strange such as waterways or similar without much additional description. Furthermore, it had not listed any classroom or location at the Lyceum where the

lessons would take place; the accompanying note had simply explained to gather in the entrance hall and be dressed for the outdoors. Martel glanced at the three novices, whom he had met when working in the infirmary. They had come for the same purpose, presumably, which made sense, as their education seemed to follow the same track as his. At least this suggested he had come to the right place at the right time.

A woman in the purple robe of the faculty appeared. "Four novices, none of them knowing what to do with themselves. You must be my students. I am Vana, Mistress of Water at the Lyceum." She looked to be in her forties, hair done elaborately but without cosmetics or jewellery to augment her appearance. Although her words could be interpreted as condescending, her demeanour seemed friendly enough, and Martel did not get the impression that she actually disliked her students.

Mindful of Master Alastair's advice, he looked lively and waited for an opportunity to make a good impression.

"Come along. I shall explain while we walk, considering we have only one bell before we must return." She made a quick gesture for them to follow her as she trotted out of the hall.

They hurried after her, trying to stay close to hear her speaking without getting in each other's way. Thankfully, this early in the morning, traffic on the streets was light. They moved eastwards towards the bridge district.

"Morcaster has a massive system of waterways. Some of that is the sewers, of course, discharging into the sea. The other, which runs alongside but for obvious reasons must be separate, contains our drinking water. The source of this is the river Alonde, flowing outside the eastern side of the city walls, though rainwater is also collected for this purpose," Mistress Vana rattled off.

Martel had only entered and left the city through the northern gates; while he knew of the river, of course, he had not actually ever gone to see it. He had never had any reason to go in that direction or cross the bridge that lay just east of the city.

"Much of this water is collected in cisterns, especially the gathered rainwater. But our system using river water connects throughout the city and is stored in towers as the one you see ahead, distributing it to the surrounding district squares." The teacher pointed at a stone tower that rose before their eyes.

Martel had seen one or two of those moving around the city, but had never considered their purpose. If asked, he would have assumed they served as watchtowers or such for the city guard.

"This reserve serves us well in times of drought, or Stars forbid, should the city ever come under siege and we somehow would be cut off from the river. Though I grant that is unlikely." Eventually, they reached the tower. Mistress Vana took out a key and unlocked the door. "The city employs a number of watermages to serve a few functions. Primarily, keeping an eye on the reserves, but also investigating any potential blockage or other such issues, maintaining the system itself and so on." She led them into the tower itself and up a narrow staircase that spiralled along the edge of the building.

On one side of the stairs, the outer wall of the tower. On the other side, the reservoir that held massive amounts of water, though the stonework kept Martel from having any sense of its presence. In between, the novices and their teacher walking one by one towards the top.

"In extreme periods, such as long-lasting droughts, watermages may even be employed to pull moisture from the air itself to help fill the reserves. Though I have not experienced such myself in my years at the school."

Finally, they reached a small platform at the top, which let them gaze down into the reservoir. The water flowed at a level six or ten feet below; sunlight only reached them through tiny windows at the top, making it hard to tell as they peered down into the dark basin.

"Due to its importance – we all need to drink water, after all – all novices at the Lyceum must be instructed in how the waterways work, even if you will not train as watermages. And besides making sure we have sufficient water, we must also be certain it is drinkable. To that end, an alchemist's rod should be floating in every reservoir."

Martel raised his hand. "What is that?"

Mistress Vana gave him a wry look. "We are only four, you can just ask. An alchemist's rod is basically a branch that floats in the water. It has been treated in various ways to show discolouration if the water contains toxins. The most common kind, at least." She leaned over the railing to point into the darkness below. "Every day, a watermage will check the rod. Which requires the ability to sense it among the water and raise it up. Anyone care to try?"

Martel stepped forward to the railing. He could sense the water easily, and he tried to let his magical senses pour into it. It proved a mistake. Just like frosty breath disappearing into the empty air on a cold morning, his magic spread through the great mass of liquid, as if dissolving. It was beyond his ability to shape or control this much.

He changed tactics. The rod was made of wood, presumably, or some material like that, floating. Rather than focus on the water, Martel reached out until he felt an elongated object. Keeping a careful grasp on his sorcery, he shaped a narrow column of water around the object and lifted it towards himself. His eyes became blurry from the sheer pressure of keeping his magic restricted rather than letting it spread out among the remaining liquid, but he continued the spell until Mistress Vana could reach out and grab the rod.

"Very well done." She inspected the strange staff, carved with markings at specific intervals, and threw it back into the reservoir.

~

Early evening, a pair of youths crossed the city to reach the copper lanes. Maximilian took the lead, steering them down a different path than yesterday.

"Isn't it this way?" Martel asked, pointing in another direction.

"We are going to a different establishment tonight."

"Why? It worked great yesterday."

"Exactly. We show up to the same place with the same luck as yesterday, we invite scrutiny. No, we change venue every night."

"Oh, clever."

They reached another ordinary-looking house, and the procedure from yesterday repeated itself. Maximilian paid a small fee and gained entrance with his supposed valet at his side. They headed for the dice games, and the young nobleman took a seat, soon winning and losing stacks of silver.

After a while, the bets reached a size of five birds, which seemed the limit of what people in the copper lanes would wager at a time. Maximilian's latest opponent, who had a thin face and sinewy arms, scratched his scraggly beard. "How about playing by Tyrian rules? None of those even throws, get the game flowing faster."

"Fine by me." Maximilian stacked five coins on the table. "Feel free to make the first roll."

The other player took the time to empty his mug and slam it down, making the silver jangle, before he swept up the dice, rolled them around in his hands, and let them fall quickly while Martel was still distracted. Pair with earth. A strong result.

As Maximilian prepared to roll, Martel considered the options. He had already made his friend win the last couple of wagers, and making Maximilian win this one with a pair of emperors seemed too lucky. Better to make him roll a pair of elements, forcing a tie and a reroll. He could make the other player roll something low, making Maximilian's win seem much more likely.

Thus, as Maximilian let the dice tumble, Martel made them show a pair with fire.

The other gambler grinned and pulled the silver to him.

"Wait, why did you lose – my lord?" Martel asked, belatedly remembering his role.

"We play by the Tyrian rules," Maximilian explained with a clenched jaw. "The elements are no longer valued the same. Earth, water, fire, air, in that order. Not that it matters, since you will not be touching the dice."

They continued with a few more wagers, and with his expanded knowledge of the rules, Martel made sure that Maximilian won more than he lost, slowly increasing his stack of silver. His opponent grew visibly frustrated at each loss, helped along by more tankards of ale until his face looked red and sweaty.

"Ten! Tyrian rules still," the player growled, pushing the aforementioned amount out onto the table.

"Very well, we will make this the last one." Maximilian looked over his shoulder and up at Martel standing behind him. "We shall head home after this last wager."

Satisfied with that, Martel focused. As the young nobleman threw the dice, Martel gave him a pair of fools. Respectable result without seeming too lucky.

The other gambler picked up the dice, but before he let them roll, he grabbed his mug and emptied it. Slamming it down on the table as before, he quickly let the dice fall onto the table.

One of them stopped on earth almost immediately, but the other took an extra tumble. It nearly ended on the same symbol, giving the sinewy man a winning throw, until Martel convinced the clay cube to make one more turn, landing on a crown.

A pair beat two different symbols. With a smile, Maximilian grabbed the silver.

His opponent leapt to his feet. "Something is wrong! That would have landed on earth. I was going to get a pair with earth and beat you!"

Maximilian narrowed his eyes. "You seem awfully sure of that."

The nearest bruiser, tasked with keeping the peace between hot-headed gamblers, came over. "No trouble here," he growled.

"He seems very certain that his bones would produce a pair with earth, right after he insisted we played by Tyrian rules," Maximilian explained, gesturing from the dice on the table to his opponent.

The sinewy man stammered objections, but the guard ignored him. "This right?" he asked of the other gamblers at the nearby table. They nodded and confirmed the story.

The bruiser picked up the dice and let them roll on the table. They showed a pair with earth. He repeated his gesture, gaining the same result. "Right, you're coming with me." Grabbing the weighted dice with one hand, he caught the gambler by the collar with the other and began dragging him out.

~

As they walked home, Martel kept wondering what fate awaited the man exposed for cheating. "What will they do to him?" he finally had the stomach to ask. "The man with the false bones."

Maximilian shrugged. "He will lose a few fingers, if he is lucky, and they will put a mark on his hands to show he is not welcome any more."

"Are we responsible for that? We exposed him, after all."

"He cheated, and now he must suffer the consequences. If that bothers you, think about the twenty-two pieces of silver you earned tonight."

Martel took Maximilian's advice and did some quick calculations, which in his case still took a little while. But this should give him thirty-nine birds; nearly enough for what Shadi needed. One more night, and they would be done.

Chapter 100: A Pair of Fools

A Pair of Fools

More than once during the next day, Martel returned to his room solely to check on his hoard. Leaving it in his room, even under lock, made him uncomfortable. He had never seen this much silver in one place, let alone had ownership of it. He did not even have a purse big enough to hold it all. He would have to buy a big one just so he could transport it all to Shadi. Not a problem, seeing as he could easily afford it.

~

As the day waned, he once again went to the copper lanes with his friend, both of them dressed for the part as before. Like yesterday, Maximilian led them down new paths to reach yet another lair of cards, cubes, and coin.

"This is the bigger place, more silver at stake. I figured we would practice on the smaller places first before taking this on. With a little luck, ha, we will earn all we need tonight."

Considering that Martel only needed eleven silver pieces, he considered that a certainty. In fact, they might not even need a full hour like the other nights, but could leave sooner.

From the outside, the establishment already looked bigger than the ordinary houses surrounding it; once inside, Martel could see further differences from the other places. Besides being just a larger space for gambling, it had many doors leading either to rooms or deeper into the complex. Twice as many people filled the room, and more walked up the stairs to a second floor.

Soon, their scheme proceeded as it had the other nights. Maximilian played dice, being boisterous and generally attracting attention. He cheered his wins without being obnoxious about it and grumbled about his losses without whining. He drank happily one tankard after the other, even buying for his opponent if said player proved to have bad luck. Meanwhile, Martel played the role of the servant, fetching drink for his master and otherwise staying in the background, barely noticed by any.

Half an hour later, Martel stood by his post, ensuring that Maximilian's throw turned into a pair with air, giving him another win. Another man, short and looking unassuming, approached the table. In his hand, he had a small piece of cloth inside the palm, upon which a symbol had been written. He slapped Martel on the back, pressing the fabric against the supposed valet without anyone able to see. Leaning forward, he smiled up at Martel. "Your master seems in good luck tonight!"

Taken aback, Martel did not know how to respond to this jovial outburst from a complete stranger. "I guess," he mumbled, losing his focus on the dice.

The other man smiled again and winked, as if he had made some kind of jest, before he removed himself. But first he made sure, once Martel's attention had returned to the table, to sneak a glance at the fabric in his hand, resting against Martel's back. The symbol had a soft glow to it.

~

Eventually, Martel wondered at how long they had been playing; the gambling den did not have any devices for measuring time, and all windows that might allow observation of the night sky were shuttered. Judging by the stack in front of Maximilian, there was no need to continue, and Martel made a discreet suggestion that they should retire.

"Your master is having a pleasant night, I see."

A little startled, Martel looked towards the speaker. A woman around forty met his eyes. She did not look like any of the staff working to run games or serve drinks, but nor did she look like the typical residents of the copper lanes who might be here playing. She wore sensible clothing such as leather trousers and a hardened jerkin, much like a dock worker. Yet Martel noticed a golden chain around her neck, and each of her hands had a ring of the same metal. Furthermore, her nails did not suggest she did labour for a living, whatever her clothes might insinuate.

"Upstairs, we have rules that allow for greater wagers. Intended for gentlemen such as your master. If he would care to play for more than a few coins at a time..."

"Most kind, but I believe we were about to take our leave –"

"Nonsense!" Maximilian got on his feet while stuffing his winnings into pockets and purses. The colour of his face suggested he had been drinking a little more than just for show. "Lead the way."

As the lady began walking away, Martel leaned in to whisper at his friend. "We have enough!"

"You may have, but I do not." The young nobleman pushed his way past Martel and followed the woman. Left behind, not knowing what else to do, Martel finally trudged after them.

They went up the stairs and down a hallway into the complex. Martel had no sense of where they were exactly, becoming confused in the almost labyrinthine layout of the building.

At length, the woman opened the door and stepped inside. As they followed, Martel saw what appeared to be a study of some sort. A desk stood opposite the entrance with two chairs in front and one behind. Besides that, a drawer in one corner and a chest in the other could be seen, but this was clearly not a place for gambling.

Evidently, Maximilian had reached the same conclusion. "What is this?" he growled. His right hand crossed over to rest of the pommel of his dagger.

Their guide moved around to stand behind the desk, looking at them. She gave them a smile that felt anything but reassuring. "I am Mistress Kerra, the proprietress of this establishment."

Behind them, two men entered to stand by the door. Martel noticed that one of them had brass knuckles on both of his hands, while the others had several daggers with a red-yellow glint to them stuck inside his belt.

Kerra spoke again. "Forgive me the subterfuge, but I thought it best we spoke under more private circumstances, and this seemed the easiest way to get you here. You see, I am aware that you are mages."