

Firebrand 141

Chapter 141: Copper and Cat

Copper and Cat

Martel looked around. The prize fighters held their staves with grim expressions, and the guards likewise appeared prepared for trouble. His own emotions reflected how they looked, and for a moment, he imagined that Tibert had gathered all these men solely to take revenge on Stallion. Next to him, Maximilian emptied his flagon, letting him free one hand to pick up food from his plate.

"You're still hungry?" Martel asked incredulously.

"Always." The mageknight shrugged. "Besides, by the looks of it, I will need all my energy."

"You think he's here for me?" The novice whispered.

"No. We knew about this since the day before yesterday," Lothar explained, standing next to them.

"Kerra knew he would show up? And she still went ahead with all this?" Martel asked, not believing his own ears.

Their conversation was cut short by the arrival of the woman herself. Dressed as usual in trousers and shirt, with a leather jerkin in addition and a dagger by her side, Kerra strolled through the assembled men to stand in front.

Martel did not understand how she could seem so calm and confident; Tibert had at least twice the numbers, and his men seem like hardened thugs and well-armed. He knew that Lothar, Cornelius, and Butcher could fight; he hoped that the doormen were similarly experienced.

People appeared from within the tavern, realising something was afoot. A few immediately made themselves scarce while some became spectators, watching with fascination; one even returned inside, only to reappear with others. Judging by the noise coming from within, the majority of patrons had yet to discover anything amiss.

Lothar gave Martel a staff, and he held it looking anxious. With a smirk, Maximilian emptied his plate, tossed it aside, and took the staff from Martel's hands. "He does not need a weapon," the mageknight explained. "Show them what a wizard can do. I will keep them back," he added towards Martel.

When a short stone's throw separated the two groups, Kerra spoke. "My apologies, Master Tibert, but you are not welcome here. I suggest you return to your own district."

"You ruined my business, you copper bitch. Now I return the favour." Despite his words, his expression remained blank; only his eyes showed their usual intensity, hinting at the anger underneath. "Leave the harlot alone, but destroy the rest!"

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Numbers on their side, Tibert's men stormed forward to overwhelm the defenders of The Copper Drum. They clashed with loud yells and screams, smashing clubs or thrusting blades at each other. Three torches came flying through the air. Reacting without thinking, Martel seized them all with his magic. Extinguishing the fire, he tossed them aside.

His mind returned to the dreadful day at the square in the Khivan quarter, where the air likewise filled with shouts and blood. Fighting in the pit was one thing; it was a small, enclosed space against one opponent. Here, everything felt like chaos, and Martel was not sure what to do. Already, the attackers and defenders were embroiled, meaning any magic flung at the enemy might hit his own side.

Lothar, Butcher, and Cornelius had joined the fray, using their staves to great effect. Maximilian held back, surveying the field much like Martel did.

Looking to his right, the novice saw two barrels for collecting rainwater. He seized one with magic, tipping it over. The contents spilled out, and he could now lift the barrel into the air. Turning it around, open side downwards, he floated it over one of Tibert's men and let it fall.

Taken unaware, the rogue found himself trapped inside a barrel, and his muffled cries could be heard, turning to a scream as someone kicked him over.

Tibert looked over the fighting and saw Martel, standing elevated on the steps of the tavern. "That one's a mage! Kill him!"

Several of his men moved around to follow his command.

Maximilian went into action. His staff swung to crack someone's skull. Another opponent came only to receive an empowered kick to the chest, sending the man flying back. "Come at me!" the mageknight roared, relishing the fight. They obliged; a blade thrust forward, but was stopped by the acolyte's magical shield, and Maximilian smiled as he swung his staff again.

Someone approached on Martel's far right. Seeing them step onto the puddle of rainwater from the toppled barrel, the novice stretched out his hand and froze the surface. The thug slipped, and his curse turned to a whimper as he landed straight on his back.

The fight was turning, especially thanks to Maximilian. Tibert's men could only attack one or two at a time, and they were no match for a mageknight. His shield kept him safe as needed, and his empowered blows needed only strike once to send a man to sleep. Martel exhaled, allowing himself to feel relief.

Movement to his right caught his eye, and he turned to look. Tibert came running at full speed. "I'll get you, stableboy!" he shouted as their gazes locked. In one hand, he held a long dagger; a throwing knife in the other. As he leapt over the patch of ice, he flung his smaller weapon straight at Martel's chest.

Instinct saving him, the novice raised his shield. The knife struck against his magic and fell harmlessly to the ground, but straight behind came Tibert with murder in his eyes.

Raising both hands, palms outwards, Martel shot a stream of fire against his attacker. It hit the man straight in the chest, and his clothes ignited.

Heat and pain cut through any battle haze that Tibert might have felt. He shouted a curse, stopping in his tracks to look down at the flames on his torso. Throwing looks around, he spotted the other barrel of rainwater and leapt headfirst to extinguish the fire.

More than one could not help but laugh at this sight, Martel included. Seeing their leader brought low, not to mention two wizards among the defenders, Tibert's men broke.

Kerra, who had fought with a pair of long daggers, walked over to kick the barrel. As it fell, disgorging water and Tibert, she placed one knife at his throat. "Remember this moment if you ever consider returning to the copper lanes. Be thankful that this copper bitch respects the Pact and lets you live."

She pulled her weapon and stood aside, letting him get on his feet. From all sides, he saw only hostile stares, except those who looked at him with amusement. Still dripping wet, Tibert pushed at the people nearest and followed in the direction of his men.

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Relieved laughter spread among the defenders. More people had appeared from within the tavern, watching the fight, but judging from the noise still emanating through the front door, plenty still partook of the festivities.

Watching the fighters and doormen slap each other's backs, Martel did not feel as charitable. He looked around to spot Kerra. "You knew this would happen. That's why you invited us," he spoke in accusation.

She shrugged. "I could have hired some poor saps to defend my tavern, but that would only have led to more casualties. I figured a pair of wizards could handle this more elegantly."

Maximilian joined to stand next to Martel. "That does not excuse luring us here under false pretences. You are lucky my clothes were not ruined."

"Your services shall not go unrewarded. Naturally, all your drinks tonight are on the house." Kerra took the purse by her belt and tossed it to Martel. "You won twenty silvers at every fight in The Broken Crown, right? The Copper Drum is happy to pay the same."

Martel felt the coins through the fabric. It annoyed him that she had the exact amount prepared in her purse, anticipating this very conversation.

She looked at Maximilian. "I'll subtract the same from your debt."

Martel glanced at his friend. "You still owe her money?"

"I gambled a lot trying to win my ring back," he admitted. "I will confess, a little brawl was missing from this celebration! And the spoils match the victory. Come on! We have a tavern to leave dry before the night is over." The mageknight stepped towards the entrance before looking back at Martel.

The novice stood indecisively. Already, the staff fighters had returned inside, slapping shoulders and exchanging remarks. He still felt angry at being manipulated yet again by Kerra – but he could nurse his wounded pride, or he could go inside and drink free ale with his friends. "I'm coming."

"Good man!" Maximilian slapped him on the back, and they went inside the tavern.

Chapter 142: Axe and Fist

Axe and Fist

Martel felt more dead than alive when he woke the next morning. At least he did not have breakfast duty on Glunday mornings, so when the first bell rang, he could remain in bed. He even went so far as to commit what felt like sacrilege and skip the meal, sleeping away the entire bell. Still drowsy-eyed, he dragged himself to the apothecary for his work. Nora giggled at the sight of him and made

sure to mock him more than once until his two hours were done. His class in elemental magic went a little better, as Master Alastair accepted that his students were in less than peak performance during the harvest festival.

At lunch, Martel took revenge for his missing breakfast and stuffed himself before he left the school. He did not quite feel up for the noise of the crowds nor the bright sun outside, but Maximilian was participating in the game today, and he had an agreement with Shadi as well. At least the latter would make him feel better, and it might be fun to watch his friend fighting on the grounds; this time without Martel's life in any way being endangered. Squinting and shielding his eyes from the sun, Martel walked north of the street.

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The small melee, as the day's game was called, consisted of bands of mageknights battling each other in skirmishes. Two groups at a time, each having five members. Since these magical warriors could in theory beat on each other all day without causing harm, the rules were simple. If a mageknight became disarmed or fell to the ground, he or she had to leave the fight. If all five members of the group were eliminated in either of those manners, they had lost.

Because of the criteria for winning, many of the mageknights wielded hammers or other blunt instruments, useful for knocking somebody off their feet.

By the fence, Martel stood with Shadi as on the first day of games. More crowded and less comfortable than on the stands, but they had no choice as Maximilian participated and could not grant them access to the benches.

"Do you know when Maximilian fights?" Shadi asked.

"I think he said the second bout today. I got a bit lost, because he was explaining all the complicated ways behind how he was chosen to fight with this particular band," Martel admitted.

"I never thought about that."

"What other families they're aligned with, factions at court," he rambled. "I couldn't even keep track of half the names."

"Good thing we don't need to know what they're called to enjoy the spectacle," Shadi laughed.

Further conversation became impossible as trumpets rang, marking the beginning of the game.

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Ten mageknights took position in the middle of the square, arrayed in two rows facing each other. Some of them bowed, a few nodded at their opponents, and the rest did nothing but stand ready. The trumpets sounded the signal, and the two lines clashed with the dreadful noise of metal against metal.

Martel had seen Maximilian fight, and he had seen the acolytes at the school practice. This felt like something else entirely. The warriors moved with tremendous speed to strike with dreadful strength; at the same time, they accepted such vicious blows without flinching, always ready to retaliate.

It was hard to fathom no serious injuries would come of this, but the defensive magic of the mageknights held firm. When someone became knocked down, they got back up and walked off the field, no part of them wounded other than their pride.

At last, one side overcame the other, and the first fight had ended. While the crowd was still busy cheering, already the next ten fighters appeared. Martel recognised Maximilian among their number and pointed him out to Shadi, describing the emblem.

He looked at the opposing team. Wearing helmets, he could not recognise any faces, even if the distance had allowed for it. But he saw an armoured fist on a surcoat that looked familiar; it took him a moment to remember the crest for the House of Fontaine.

Martel did not know why this worried him. Eleanor was a mageknight, she could handle herself, and she had volunteered for the game. Yet as the trumpet rang and the two rows attacked, a sense of unease touched him rather than excitement from watching the spectacle.

Martel tried to follow Maximilian in the fight, though the constant movement of ten people fighting did not always allow for this. Maximilian had always struck him as a powerful warrior whenever they had been in scraps together, such as yesterday against Tibert's men. It was clear though that the main difference lay in his magic; now, facing his peers, he was far more challenged. Still, the scion of Marche swung his hammer and defended himself, staying on his feet.

As was perhaps inevitable, the two acolytes ended up opposite each other, while the more experienced mageknights battled it out. Maximilian struck out, and Eleanor withstood with her physical shield rather than magic. Retaliating, she slashed her sword against his arm, but the armour held.

They both continued their assaults; Maximilian trying with brute force while Eleanor attempted precision against weak spots, as both of them sought to knock the other fighter down.

Ever so often, another warrior blocked Martel's line of sight, but when the decisive moment came, he was fortunate enough to witness it all. Eleanor came in close, hitting at Maximilian's ankle. He must have deflected with magic because he did not react. Instead, he struck down with his hammer.

Almost too swift for Martel to see, Eleanor tossed her sword into her shield hand, evaded Maximilian's blow, and grabbed the haft of his hammer to pull it away. Taken by surprise or off his balance, Maximilian did not react in time. His weapon slipped out of his grasp, leaving him disarmed. Howling with frustration, he stalked off the field.

Eleanor's joy remained short-lived, as another enemy slammed his shield into her lithe body, knocking her to the ground. Martel felt nauseated watching her fall, and for a moment, he feared that he might actually throw up. Thankfully, he saw her get back on her feet and walk away without signs of injury.

Next to him, Shadi applauded as the remaining warriors finished the fight. "What a battle!"

Chapter 143: An Offering of Blood

An Offering of Blood

Maximilian's team ended up winning the bout, though it did not avail them much; they lost their next match, one short of reaching the final round. That left him out of the games for this harvest, as mageknights could not participate in the final contest, taking place on Manday.

The grand melee involved ordinary warriors; former legionaries given the chance to relive old glories and earn the title as Sol's champion for the year along with a sizeable prize.

Maximilian not competing had the advantage that Martel and Shadi could once again join him on the benches. A few still grumbled at seeing them, but none made protests loud enough for the young viscount to hear.

"You fought very well yesterday," Shadi told him.

The mageknight waved a hand around. "Not well enough." He exhaled. "But thank you," he added as an afterthought.

The contestants marched in. The rules were similar to yesterday, except there would only be one massive fight. Two hundred warriors, divided into two teams. They did not wear cloaks, but simply a coloured ribbon around their arm to signal their allegiance, yellow against green. Any man who lost his weapon or was knocked down, forfeited the game. Beyond that, lacking magic, they had only armour, helmet, and shield to protect themselves. Unlike the other fights involving mageknights, people expected and shouted for blood.

The trumpets rang. Two hundred veteran soldiers stormed towards each other. The sound was deafening. Martel had been in fights before, but nothing involving these numbers. He could only liken it to his last visit at The Broken Crown when the crowd had gone into a frenzy, and he had felt trapped inside a throng of enemies as he looked up from the pit.

Everywhere his eyes fell, soldiers slashed and hacked at each other. Mostly, shields and armours held, but a lot would have nasty bruises tomorrow, and Martel believed he saw open wounds on some of the old legionaries limping away. He hoped they had skin and blood salve available.

He glanced at the other spectators. They seemed engrossed in the show, even his friends by his side. People shouted and laughed, elbowing each other in the sides to remark on a particularly vicious blow.

Martel did not know why he felt differently. Maybe it came from his own experiences, being in fights in the pit or on the streets. Or perhaps he had simply seen enough over the course of the fiveday. Regardless of the reason, Martel felt saturated by violence. He was glad that he had no special talent for empowerment magic. They would have made him become a mageknight, and every day would have been like this.

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It took over an hour, maybe two before the grand melee ended; Martel had not kept track of time. The best fighters from either team were rewarded, one of them crowned as Sol's champion to thunderous applause.

Martel was only too happy when the ceremony had ended. Some manner of religious ritual followed, but since Shadi had no interest in that, he took the opportunity to leave with her, and they drifted towards the market district. With Kerra's money from last night, he could once more afford to be generous. Warm food, jokes with Shadi, and a change of scenery helped his mood; by the time the sun set and the full moon took its place, he had forgotten any ill feeling from earlier that day. When he finally went to sleep that night, it had all in all been a pleasant Golden Harvest, another first to add to his experiences in Morcaster.

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Late into the night, Kerra walked down the street of the slums accompanied by one of her guards. "It's just down here," the man spoke, pointing at an old house straight ahead.

"Anyone live with the old woman?" asked the Copper Lady, pulling her cloak tighter around her against the cold wind.

He shook his head. "Neighbours said she lived alone. They wouldn't tell us much else. All claimed they saw nothing."

"How certain are you about this? You better not have dragged me down here for nothing."

The guard gestured towards the house as they stopped before it. "Go in and see for yourself, mistress." He extended the torch in his hand towards her. "If you don't mind, I'll stay out here."

She gave him a disdainful look, grabbed the torch, and entered the house alone. Although she walked with confidence, her free hand rested on the hilt of her dagger all the same.

At first glance, the place seemed entirely ordinary. A few pieces of furniture, a cooking hearth without any fire, a bucket of water, and some scattered morsels of food. Just like any house in the copper lanes, except perhaps in greater state of disrepair with creaking floorboards and loose shutters on the windows, causing the wind to howl through. Another example could have been the sound of water dripping through the ceiling – except the night was dry. It had not rained in days.

Faintly, the smell of blood lay in the air. Kerra followed the sound of drops falling to hit the floor. Kneeling down, she brought the torch close until it illuminated the patch of red liquid slowly spreading across the boards. Raising her eyes, she looked at the ceiling, providing the source of the droplets.

Continuing her investigation, Kerra climbed the ladder to reach the upper floor. It was, like below, a single room underneath the diagonal roof. The latter forced Kerra to bend her neck as she stood up.

She approached the bed, one of the only objects in the chamber. Holding up her torch, she looked down to see the body of an aged woman lying on the straw in the bedframe.

Staring at the resident of the house, Kerra saw how her throat had been slashed, which accounted for the blood. Her dress, already old and ragged, had been cut open from the collar down. Upon the torso, above the heart, a mysterious round symbol with intricate patterns could be spotted, seared onto the skin.

Chapter 144: A City Marked

A City Marked

The Golden Harvest finished with a great ceremony at the square of the Basilica. Few from the Lyceum participated, as their schedules and classes had resumed, which proved for the best. The news from the copper lanes could not be suppressed. Inquisitors had already investigated the scene of the crime, interrogating everyone in the vicinity. With little gain, they had expanded their search, calling in more members of their order. It was unusual to see more than two inquisitors at a time; thus, everyone took notice when two dozen of the men and women in dark blue cloaks crossed the city to search the copper lanes.

With each retelling, the story only grew. One victim became many. An old house was a den of depravity. A single maleficar turned into an entire cult. Tales of other misdeeds, whether real or

feigned, wove killings and kidnappings together stretching back years, and none could feel safe anymore on the streets of Morcaster.

The sight of inquisitors did nothing to calm people, on the contrary. Based on the stories now in circulation, maleficars had enjoyed free reins in the city for a long time now. Seeing the blue cloaks only reminded the inhabitants that they were not safe from these hidden killers.

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Eventually, the rumours reached the Lyceum as well, where they spread with the same haste as elsewhere. The faculty exchanged words in whispered tones, and Master Fenrick left towards the copper lanes. The students discussed the event in excited voices, adding their own speculations. Barely any of them had any actual knowledge on the matter, though, allowing the stories to continue growing albeit in new directions.

As one of the few already familiar with the topic of a maleficar in the slums, Martel avoided the many conversations in the hallways. He saw no reason to attract attention from his peers or the teachers, remembering Maximilian's warning to avoid the inquisitors.

Yet as he walked down the corridor and caught the eyes of Eleanor, the unspoken look between them made both the students stop in their tracks. With a moment's hesitation, she approached him. "I assume you have heard?"

He nodded a little. "Yes."

"Do you intend to get involved?"

Although her tone was neutral, he sensed disapproval behind her question. It did not seem any of her business, but he saw no reason to start an argument either. "No, I don't see what I could possibly do, anyway."

Her shoulder seemed to relax a little. "Indeed." She continued on her way.

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Martel did not intend to get involved. Trying to gain entrance to the place of the murder would only attract the inquisitors towards him. Besides, Martel was in no position to pick a fight with some dark sorcerer, even if he had any clue where to look.

But... He did have friends in the copper lanes who might be affected, and at the very least, he ought to check on them. So, once he had eaten supper, he left the school.

He avoided the market district, so he would not have to go through the harbour to reach the slums; as the other night had shown, Tibert had an appetite for revenge. Even if he had been run out of the copper lanes to raucous laughter, Martel had no wish to go by the docks and meet him by accident.

Instead, his route took him through the quieter western district of merchants and warehouses. Walking this path had rarely bothered Martel before, but now the streets seemed eerie in abandonment. Work had finished for the day, leaving only the occasional stragglers walking around; people like Martel with their own errands.

He went first to the home of Weasel and the other children. Usually, they noticed him from a distance and approached him; nothing of the sort happened tonight. He reached the backdoor without anyone hailing him. As he knocked, nobody answered.

"It's Martel," he called out.

He knocked a few more times until the door was finally pulled back forcefully. The young chief looked up at him. "We are laying low," he sneered. "You're not helping with that."

"I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

"We are all fine," Weasel said impatiently, "but we are not keen on wizards in our home while the inquisitors are dragging nets through the whole district!" He slammed the door shut.

Glancing around at the dark alley, Martel suddenly felt alone and vulnerable, and he hurried back to the street, illuminated by the moonlight. He could go home, but he felt obliged to make another stop.

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At least the doors of The Copper Drum were open, with light and noise coming from within. Although it looked less busy than usual, it was hardly deserted. The guard outside nodded at Martel in greeting.

Walking inside, he had direct access to the bar for once. He placed a few copper coins on the desk and received a tankard from the barrel in the corner. Glancing over the common room, he found his friends at a table. They all sat with heads hanging low, staring into their flagons rather than saying much.

Martel sat down glancing around as they raised their faces to look at him. Even Butcher seemed subdued. "So, you heard," Lothar remarked.

"I did. Well, I heard a lot of rumours, but I assume they hold a grain of truth," the novice replied.

The old veteran nodded. "Old woman killed in her home. Strange, mystical markings on her. That's all Kerra told us."

"How did she find out?"

"One of her men found out. Told her about it, and she's the one who told the inquisitors." Lothar took a sip from his mug.

"Imagine not even being safe in your own home, your own bed." Nothing of Butcher's natural cheer remained in his voice; understandable given the circumstances, but it was eerie to see the jovial man in this mood.

"As if times aren't hard enough for copper people," Cornelius growled.

"What about Tibert? Have you seen anything of him?" Probably best to stay aware of the irate tavernkeeper, now that Martel had thwarted him twice.

The men's shook their heads. "Not since he ran out of the lanes. But he makes a good living from smuggling through the port, so he's not done for. Best to stay away," Lothar advised him.

"I intend to," Martel declared.

"You should head home before it gets any later. Nobody is safe these days, not even a mageling like you." Lothar emptied his mug.

With nothing more to gain, Martel nodded in farewell and left. Outside on the street, as he began walking home, he stuck one hand into his pocket and felt a small object. Pulling it out, the moonlight revealed it to be Regnar's rune token, gifted to him months ago. It would protect him, the hedge mage had said. Hoping that held true, but also hoping he would not need protection, Martel returned home.

Chapter 145: Sacrifice or Sacrilege

Sacrifice or Sacrilege

A new dawn did little to change the mood that hung like a dark cloud over Morcaster. All goodwill and cheer from the Golden Harvest had been dispelled by this one despicable act from the unknown maleficar. Already at breakfast, Martel could hear the other students still discussing the topic. Yet he had no desire to join in, knowing that none of them would offer anything of use. Master Fenrick would be the best person to ask, but Martel did not have class with him for several days, and he seemed occupied with his investigation, whether perpetrated on his own or in liaison with the inquisitors.

He did have class that day with Master Alastair. "Have you ever encountered a maleficar?" Martel asked his teacher.

Scratching his balding head, the Master of Elements frowned. "I am fortunate enough to say I never have. You have been listening to the rumours, then."

"It's not just rumours. Maybe they are exaggerated, but some dark mage haunts Morcaster." And Martel did not expect the inquisitors would be able to do much about it. "Magic is a wonderful gift. I don't understand why someone would use it for such terrible means."

"Perhaps they had no choice. There are those who suffer under curses," Master Alastair considered. "While I have not met any such unfortunate soul in Aster, I did once encounter a war party of Tyrians on the hunt."

"On the hunt for what? Someone cursed?"

"A shape changer. A werewolf."

Martel shivered. He had heard a tale or two about such creatures, but he never enjoyed them and always preferred other stories. "Are there shape changers in Aster?"

"No. It involves sinister magic by the witches of Tyria, enchanting the hide of a wolf or bear that a man might put them on and transform. There are legends that during the war, the Tyrians used such shape shifters to ambush our soldiers, but the Tyrians I met held no regard for anyone using such cursed magic." Master Alastair took a deep breath. "Let us put such tales aside for now. You have your own magic you must attend to."

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In the afternoon, Martel had an errand to run. While he was not keen on going anywhere related to inquisitors, he looked like an ordinary clerk in his brown robe, and nobody had reason to trouble him. He had already delayed paying homage to his father's spirit for months, forgetting about it; he did not wish to postpone it again. Who knew how long it would be before he remembered it next time? Besides, he still had a lot of silver left, but he would probably have it all spent soon. Better to get this done while he had proper coin to leave in offering.

His journey to the Basilica was uneventful, as could be expected; the legionaries of the city guard kept watch with full patrol in the northern districts. He approached the great temple, and the sheer beauty of its towers and ornaments made him forget his concerns. As he walked inside, finally having a valid reason, his sense of awe only grew. Above him, arches rose so high, he became lost staring at them. To every side, beautifully carved statues stared at him, looking as real as the supplicants making their way towards the great altar.

Gathering his wits, Martel joined them walking down the centre of the temple. Light streamed from every direction through intricate windows of stained glass, showing images from the history of Aster.

The altar itself showed Sol in all his majesty and wisdom, carved from marble until it looked softer than skin. The sinews of his arm ran across his hand as his fingers clutched a staff. By his side, though lesser in stature, stood Luna as his companion, draped in flowing garments with a rod in her hand. Behind the pair, Martel saw statues of Malac, Perel, and Glund, the Triumvirate of the Heavens. Adorned with gold, silver, and gems, the entire tableau glittered in the light, giving him the urge to kneel, which he did. He mumbled a few prayers as taught him by Father Julius, asking for blessings over his family and that his father's spirit might rest in the grace of Sol.

After leaving five silver pieces, hoping that the deity did not reject gifts earned from fighting, Martel got back on his feet and walked out.

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Feeling cleansed and blessed, his concerns temporarily forgotten, Martel walked carefree across the temple square. Already, all signs of the harvest games had been removed, and nothing hindered his path. The sun shone down upon him as if a physical manifestation of the spiritual blessing placed upon him.

As he walked, he noticed a small crowd gathering in one corner. It looked familiar, though he could not readily remember why. But on his approach, as a rusty voice cried out and reached him, Martel recalled the event. The ragged preacher, who had railed against magic. Last time, members of the clergy had fetched the guards to remove him. It had clearly not prevented him from returning, and the crowd looked bigger this time than last. Furthermore, as Martel looked around, nobody seemed in disagreement. His words fell on more welcoming ears this time around.

Martel hurried past, looking the other way to avoid eye contact with anyone. He had no interest in hearing anything the preacher might say. And if this crowd began looking for mages to blame, given what had happened in the copper lanes, he definitely saw no reason to stick around and give them a target for their frustrations.

Yet even as he quickly trod his steps, the preacher's words followed him to linger in the open air.

"How long will you suffer magic to defile our home, our people? Yesterday, they murdered in the copper lanes. Today, they find their victims in the harbour or the market. Tomorrow, they will commit their sacrilege upon the very steps of our temple! And as we cry out to Sol for salvation, he will look down from the heavens and watch us suffer our just punishment!"

Chapter 146: Unrooted

Unrooted

No matter what took place beyond the walls of the Lyceum, life continued at the same pace within. For Martel, that meant classes and duties, and on Malday, that meant climbing the Tower of Air.

"More! Feel the storm! Don't hold back!" Master Gilbert had to roar that he might be heard over the howling winds that flew through the pillars of the platform.

Atop the tower, a ball made from cloth floated in the centre of the small square. Two novices stood on either side, raising the wind behind them to push the ball towards the opposing team while Master Gilbert shouted encouragement from the corner.

Perhaps a tad too confident, Martel had expected his side would win easily. By now, his magic powers had developed to overtake the novices he had class with. Yet it seemed one of the others could match him for controlling air, making it an even battle.

A particularly heavy gust of wind came against him and his companion, blowing them back against the railing. While the safeguard rose to cover the opening between the pillars, making it impossible to fall out of the tower, Martel nonetheless felt his heart in his throat as he looked at the sharp drop to the courtyard below. Perhaps even worse, the ball floated closer and closer. If it touched them or the railing behind, they had lost.

Determined to win, Martel poured spellpower into his control of the air and unleashed a gale. It proved enough. The other novice might have better aptitude for wind, but Martel had more spellpower at his command. Finally, the ball floated across the space to strike against the railing.

"Brilliant! I had my doubts about you, boy," Master Gilbert admitted as he glanced at Martel, "but you brought your magic to bear when it mattered. Next fiveday, rematch!"

Straightening his back, Martel already looked forward to it.

~

Satisfied with himself and in a good mood, Martel left the Tower of Air to attend his work in the apothecary. For once, Mistress Rana was present rather than Nora, who had been sent out of the city to gather certain herbs difficult to obtain.

"Good morrow, mistress," Martel greeted her.

"I disagree," the stern woman spoke. "The foolish harvest games depleted our stores of most salves, and with Nora absent, I have been busy doing grunt work to replenish them."

Martel knew about this, as he had laboured with the apprentice the last several days to create more salves, but it did not seem prudent to point this out. "I will get started on the next round."

"Not yet." Mistress Rana dug around in her pocket to retrieve a piece of parchment. "We need more supplies. Run to the herbalist and get everything on this list." She found some silver coins as well. "Do not overpay, and bring back the change."

"Yes, mistress." Martel grabbed the offered items along with a basket and left.

~

It was a short journey to the herbalist, although the usual crowds in the marketplace at this hour slowed Martel down. He still felt uncomfortable from time to time surrounded by this many people, especially when someone moved unexpectedly next to him, ever since the riots that had culminated

at the square in the Khivan enclave. But he knew such events were rare, and he had been plenty of times to market since without incident.

The old herb-gatherer greeted Martel by name and with a smile. Handing over the list, Martel waited as the vendor gathered everything up and placed it in his basket. Money was exchanged, giving silver to receive a few coppers in return, and Martel could go back to the Lyceum. He whistled as he went along, enjoying his trip while he could; once back at the apothecary, monotonous work awaited him.

Lost in his thoughts, Martel did not notice the two inquisitors until they practically stood in front of him, blocking his way. "You, boy!"

The barking voice startled Martel, and he blinked looking at the dark blue uniforms linked with gold. He noticed they each had two daggers in their belt before he raised his eyes to meet theirs.

"What do you have there?" asked the shorter of the pair with a brusque voice while pointing at Martel's basket.

"Just some herbs for Mistress Rana at the Lyceum," he replied, hoping that either of the names might lend him some authority.

"What kind of herbs?" The question was asked in such a manner to dash that hope.

Martel took out the list from the basket. "Just these. Pretty common ones."

The taller inquisitor snatched the parchment from Martel's hand. He gave a nod to his shorter partner, who walked down towards the herbalist, before he glanced over the list. "Strangleroot? What's that for?"

How to explain the alchemical properties of a herb to a layman? "When we make a salve, strangleroot makes the liquid become thick. So it becomes a paste." Even an inquisitor could understand that, presumably.

"Ominous name." He regarded Martel with suspicion under his heavy eyelids.

"I didn't choose it," the novice protested.

The other inquisitor returned from the herbalist, shaking his head a little. His taller companion stared at Martel for what seemed the longest time before he finally took a step to the side and made a throw with his head. "Run along," he growled.

Relieved that the interaction was over, Martel hurried away.

The inquisitors remained in place, watching the novice leave. "You should have pressed him about the copper lanes," grumbled the shorter of them.

"Not yet. Follow him for the rest of the day. See if we rattled him, if he does anything strange. I'll check this out meanwhile." He held up the parchment with the list of herbs on it. "If nothing turns up, we take a swing at him tomorrow."

"Fine."

The inquisitors parted ways; one went north towards the Basilica and their headquarters, the other followed a novice on his way back to the Lyceum.

Chapter 147: Good Inquisitor, Bad Inquisitor

Good Inquisitor, Bad Inquisitor

While the encounter at the market had shaken Martel a little, it had been brief, and he had no reason to suspect any continuation. He had no further errands outside the school, after all, and he assumed the inquisitors focused their attention on the copper lanes. He spent the next day attending his morning lesson as usual, having more or less forgotten about the short interrogation other than briefly mentioning it to his teacher.

After lunch, in the bell before his second lesson with Master Alastair, Martel retreated to his room to relax and try a few exercises on his own before class. He had barely sat down before a heavy knock could be heard.

Even as he got up, the knocking continued in an insisting manner. He wondered if it might be Maximilian, as he could not imagine who else might seek out in his room. As he finally opened the door, he was taken aback to find the two inquisitors from yesterday staring at him.

"We got some questions for you," barked the shorter one.

Martel remembered the advice given to him after the last time he had been interrogated by inquisitors. "I want Master Alastair present. Or Mistress Juliana."

The blue-clad men moved into his room, forcing Martel back. "No need. We'll talk right here. You don't have something to hide, do you?"

Martel did not, but given the conversation yesterday, he did not trust these men to be swayed by truth alone. But they blocked his only exit from the chamber, and even if he dared to use magic to force his way through, their golden equipment made that impossible. "What do you want to know?" He remained standing, so at least they could not intimidate him by towering over him.

"You can tell us what reason a novice of the Lyceum might have for spending his time in the copper lanes," growled the taller man.

"I help some of the children there," Martel explained. "They cannot afford an apothecary, so I give them herbs and such."

"Again with the herbs. You spend a lot of time around plants, don't you?"

"Well, yes, I work in the apothecary here." Martel was confused. How did apothecary work relate to the hunt for the maleficar?

"Any of these plants dangerous?"

"Not if you know what you're doing."

"And you do, I take it. Including how to keep them dangerous," said the taller inquisitor while his companion began rummaging through Martel's drawer.

"Hey!" Martel protested, but he felt powerless to do anything about it.

"You look at me, boy, not at him. You ever see this symbol before?" His interrogator held up a chalk drawing of the sign used by the maleficar on the victims.

"Yes."

The shorter of the inquisitors stopped his search of Martel's belongings, and they both stared intently at him. "Where?"

"On a patient in the infirmary. Your people brought him here." It was abundantly clear to Martel that he should not mention Sparrow's kidnapper or the abandoned house in the copper lanes, where the symbol had been inscribed on the basement floor. These men were not looking for the truth, but a scapegoat, it seemed.

The shorter inquisitor held up Martel's silk shirt from the drawer. "Expensive clothes. How does a peasant from Nordmark afford that?"

"It was a gift." Martel snatched it from the short man's grip, angry at the thought of his dirty hands on the precious fabric. "From my friend, the viscount of Marche. I attended the solstice celebration at his family's palace. Also the one hosted by the duke of Cheval, who has offered me a position at his court. And Legate Fontaine of the First Legion, whose daughter gave me the other clothes in that drawer."

"Your connections won't save you from the Inquisition if you are guilty of maleficus," the shorter inquisitor sneered.

"Well, do you have any more questions?" Martel crossed his arms.

"Not for now." The taller of the pair looked at his companion and gestured with his head towards the door. Once they had gone, Martel closed the door and bolted it.

~

He still felt shaken when the bell rang, summoning him to the Hall of Elements. He usually felt safe within the Lyceum, at least safe from any dangers that might haunt the streets of Morcaster. While the inquisitors had interrogated him before inside the school, this time, they had reached all the way into his own chamber. His sanctum. It felt violated.

Master Alastair greeted him with an absent-minded remark, but when Martel did not respond, the teacher gave him a closer look. "Something the matter?"

"Remember I told you this morning about the inquisitors that questioned me yesterday? At the market," Martel clarified.

"Yes, what about them?"

"They came again, here, at the school. Just now."

His teacher frowned. "You saw them somewhere?"

"No, I mean, they came to my room. To question me. Asking me about herbs, my time in the copper lanes," Martel explained with a twinge of frustration in his voice over the whole ordeal.

"What have you been doing in the copper lanes?"

Although annoyed at being questioned about this again, Martel knew it would be foolish and unfair to antagonise Master Alastair, so he replied as neutrally as he could. "Helping some of the street children. Bringing them herbs and medicine."

"Ah yes. That time you contracted consumption. Well, it is outrageous that inquisitors are hounding you, considering that they should be hunting a maleficar. I will speak with Mistress Juliana to lodge a complaint and demand they change their methods," his teacher promised him.

Mollified, Martel was glad to know that, though he wondered if it would have any effect. The inquisitors did not seem like they cared about any authority other than their own. If they were willing to corner him inside his own room, they clearly did not respect boundaries in general.

"See if you can push it from your mind. Try the exercise with the whirlwind and the motes of flame," Master Alastair told him. "Once you master that, I believe you may be ready for both rain and lightning after."

Martel attempted to do as told, but he had little success practising his magic for the rest of the day.

Chapter 148: Cursed Lessons

Cursed Lessons

Martel wondered if Master Fenrick would show for his classes as Manday arrived; rumour around the castle claimed that the teacher was investigating the appearance of the maleficar, and Martel had not seen much of him during the meals. But as he entered the classroom this morning, he found the man observing his students behind his heavy spectacles as always.

Martel doubted that Master Fenrick would say much about the recent events, especially with the younger novices present, but it was worth a try. "Master, have the inquisitors made any strides in finding the maleficar?"

"If they have, they are not inclined to share such knowledge with the faculty of the Lyceum."

That suggested Master Fenrick was working on his own, if indeed he had made any investigation into the matter. Rumour, as Martel had learned from all this, was not necessarily reliable.

"Besides, by all accounts, this is a petty sorcerer accomplishing little, however gruesome their deeds. I imagine by next fiveday, we have all forgotten this affair. Therefore, let us return to our own lesson, even though I admit the subject matter is a bit too familiar, perhaps." The teacher cleared his throat. "I have told you of leechcraft and necromancy. One of the final areas of maleficus deals with curses."

Martel did not really wish to pay attention, as he did not want to know more about this. Besides being an uncomfortable topic, it seemed like the sort of knowledge that would only attract the inquisitors' attention; yet it was part of the lesson, so he forced himself to listen.

"From what we know, casting a curse involved some of the most complex magic known to the Archean wizards. While that fortunately no longer takes place in the Asterian Empire, it is still useful for you to learn of this for two reasons. The first is that curses do not expire. If cast upon an object rather than a living being, the curse may linger indefinitely and inflict itself upon any touching or using said object."

Martel felt a chill down his spine at the thought. Before coming to Morcaster, magic had always seemed exciting and amazing to him, full of possibility and wonder. It troubled him to learn of all the ways it could be abused towards malicious ends; it was even worse to consider that such abuse was why the inquisitors hounded him in their search for maleficars.

"The other reason is that curses, at least how we would understand them, are still used by the seier-wives of Tyria. The witches of the North, as we call them, have such powers at their disposal, which they may use for better or worse."

The last sentence made Martel frown. He thought about Master Alastair's tale of a Tyrian band pursuing a werewolf, and he could not see how a curse might be beneficial. "How can it be used for good?"

"That depends on your perspective. To us, it may all seem horrible. But the witches have at times decided that certain crimes are so heinous, only a dreadful curse would be suitable punishment." Master Fenrick's voice sounded cold, almost cruel, as if mimicking the women of whom he spoke. "Often, the effects of such a spell diminishes the senses of the victim, making them mute or deaf, and deprives them of the ability to enjoy food and drink. Or in the case of shape changers, it may turn an ordinary man into a terrible weapon to be wielded against their enemies. But we shall leave that particular thought for another time."

~

Knocking on the door to the overseer's chamber, Alastair barely waited for permission before he entered. "You happen to have any vintage you're sampling?" he asked.

Juliana had begun tying up her hair but let it fall once she recognised her visitor, and she nodded at a bottle on a shelf next to some cups. "Help yourself. What is the matter?"

He walked over to pour twice. "It concerns Martel. Inquisitors have been after him, both yesterday at the market and today, here at the castle." He handed one cup to her.

"You do not think he is involved in this grisly affair in the copper lanes, do you?"

He took a heavy sip. "No, that would be preposterous. The first rumours began long before he even came to Morcaster. No, what bothers me is that they showed up to interrogate him in his room."

She frowned, drinking from her wine. "What troubles you about it?"

"The boy is busy most of the day with chores or lessons. They did not come for him during a meal, where he could be found easily in the dining hall, but also where you or I might notice and demand to be present. They knew where to find his room and when he might be there." He stared at her over the edge of his cup before he drank what remained.

Juliana took a deep breath, forehead wrinkled in thought. "You think someone pointed them in Martel's direction."

He nodded. "I think someone is hoping to cause enough stir that dismissing him from the Lyceum will be easier. His novice's examination is in two months."

"I have considered that. I will invite his teachers to the examination. Plenty of witnesses, who will agree that the boy deserves to finish his studies. As for the inquisitors, they have gone too far. I shall make a complaint to their office, using my connections at the High Council. Make them leave the boy alone." She emptied her wine as well.

"I will tell the lad to stay at the school for now, just as a precaution. Give them no excuses to follow him around."

She exhaled. "Very well. It is madness that they would investigate anyone at the Lyceum. As if we would harbour a maleficar, or any of our students would even have such knowledge."

"Make sure to mention that in your complaint."

She gave half a smile. "Maybe using more diplomatic terms. What do you think of the wine?"

He shrugged. "I could certainly go for a second round."

Chapter 149: A Good Foundation

A Good Foundation

Despite Martel's fears, the inquisitors did not return, at least not regarding him. He saw them a few times moving through the school, but he simply turned around to avoid them. He had already decided that if anyone came knocking at his chamber door, he would refuse to open, but they never did. A fiveday passed, and things began to feel normal. As Master Fenrick had predicted, without further events, the gruesome story of the maleficar began to fade from the public conversation.

His final lesson in air magic came, where he created his small whirlwind. While not of practical use, other than perhaps picking up paper scraps from the ground, it was a decent demonstration of control over wind, and Master Gilbert was satisfied that Martel might train as an airmage, even if he was not convinced that the storm dwelt in the novice.

As that was not his desire, Martel did not mind. Master Gilbert's approval meant he could train as either a weathermage or seamage, depending on his wish. The doors to his career remained open, whether one or the other.

~

The following Malday, Martel gathered with the other three novices, waiting for their introduction to earth magic. He watched his fellow students as they talked and joked amongst themselves. They probably had lots of classes together, not just this single one every fiveday. Martel had never made any efforts towards friendship, and neither had they; the age difference made it less interesting for him, and he assumed they were satisfied with their currently established friendships.

But perhaps he should try and find at least one more friend besides Maximilian. Even if it probably would not be among these novices, two or three years younger, it might serve as practice. Looking at the novice who had excelled in air magic, Martel cleared his throat. "That was impressive what you did last time. Making the winds blow against each other from opposite directions."

"Thanks. I like what you did, making the whirlwind."

"I'm sure Master Alastair will show you as well."

The novice shrugged. "Maybe at some point. We don't get individual lessons like you."

It did not sound like a reproach, but Martel felt a little guilty all the same. He was so used to feeling disadvantaged due to his age or background, especially compared to someone like Maximilian, it was strange to be reminded that he also had certain advantages, such as personal attention from the Master of Elements. "I guess I'm lucky."

"I'm just glad we are moving on to earth magic," interjected another novice, sparing Martel further awkwardness by changing the topic. "Master Alastair says I have a natural talent for it. Going to be nice doing some magic I'm actually good at."

A short and stocky teacher, identifiable by his purple robe with green and brown imagery, approached them. "You must be my students." He spoke in a slow, monotonous tone, which most of all reminded Martel of a turtle. "I am Master Basil. The Master of Earth."

The novices bowed their heads and mumbled greetings.

"Come. Walk. With me." Their teacher turned around and began walking towards the gate out of the Lyceum. "Earth magic has many uses. For soil. To ensure good harvest. Or stone. And brick. For buildings."

The novices settled in behind their teacher as they entered the streets. Whether walk or talk, they had no trouble keeping pace.

"Much can be done with hands. But magic ensures perfection." Master Basil patted the stones of the Lyceum as they walked alongside its walls on the street. "The whole school was built with magic. But first. Before any stone is placed. A good earthmage examines the foundation."

They moved east along the main road, and for a while, nobody spoke as if this had been the extent of the lesson, and now they were merely on a trip of leisure.

At length, Master Basil continued. "We approach the river. Outside the walls. This land here was marsh. Before it was drained. So the ground is reinforced. With piling under the buildings."

If Martel had not been outside, walking in the breeze, he feared he might fall asleep.

After an hour's walk, they reached the eastern gate closest to the school in the bridge district. Gazing through the entrance to the city, they saw the bridge itself across the Alonde river. The amount of traffic moving in and out forced them off the road to find another path until they could stand up against the wall. The nearby guards glanced at them, but either they recognised Master Basil, or else they knew to leave a man in purple robes alone.

"Look at these stones." For once, a touch of excitement snuck into their teacher's voice. It was the first sign of emotion he had exhibited. "Perfectly hewn. Each the same size as the others. A masterpiece."

The children followed his hand sliding over the stonework, acknowledging his words to be correct.

"Let us return. To the school."

Taking a deep breath while trying to keep a straight face, Martel followed his teacher and the other students back to the Lyceum.

~

Martel yawned as he sat down to eat his lunch. While he had slept fine, he somehow felt tired; not from the trip into the city and back, but simply from listening to Master Basil.

"Someone needs to go to bed earlier," spoke Maximilian's mocking voice.

"No, nothing like that. I started my first class in earth magic today."

"Say no more. If you could put that man's voice in a potion, you would be richer than the emperor."

Martel laughed and dug into his soup.

"By the way, you have plans tomorrow evening?"

"No, why?" The novice looked up at his friend. "I'm not feeling up for going to a tavern or anything like that," he quickly added. Just in case the inquisitors were still on the hunt.

"Nothing like that. My father should like to meet you."

Martel stared at the mageknight. "Why?"

"I have told him you are a promising young mage," Maximilian explained. "You would not refuse him, I hope?"

"No, of course not." Martel was rather surprised by the request, but he saw no reason to disappoint his friend.

"Great. I will send word, and his carriage may fetch us tomorrow." The mageknight stood up, collecting his plate and cup. "See you later, Nordmark. And enjoy your lessons with the turtle!"

Chapter 150: A Bitter Drink

A Bitter Drink

Practising the different elements during his lesson with Master Alastair, a question came to mind. He had been introduced to the specifics of water, air, and soon also earth; what of the fourth?

"Master, will I be doing a monthly course involving fire? Just as I have done one for the other elements."

"No, no." The teacher shook his head. "It would only endanger your secret. Besides, we already know you are skilled with fire. Fortunately, Mistress Juliana is in charge of your schedule and has simply left it out. That will give you more time to prepare for your examination."

"I'm still not sure how that is supposed to go, or what is expected of me."

"All in good time," Master Alastair reassured him. "Now practice your air and fire again. If you are ever out in a thunderstorm as a weathermage, you better know how to direct lightning away from yourself."

~

Martel stood with Maximilian outside the gate of the school. "Should I have changed my clothes?" the novice asked, suddenly remembering that he was going to a palace.

The young viscount waved his hand around in a dismissive gesture. "No, better that you look like a mage. My father is not one to be impressed by clothing, anyway."

"Oh, all right. Wait, am I trying to impress your father?"

"No, not him. Well, perhaps initially, and we should not get us ahead of ourselves."

Martel gave him a confused look. "What?"

"Never mind. Just be as you are, answer my father's questions, and make polite conversation."

Martel could not grasp what made Maximilian seem almost anxious, other than the impression that his friend was perhaps a bit cowed by his father. Before he could ask again, the carriage arrived, ready to bring them to the seat of the House of Marche in Morcaster.

~

On the drive, Martel tried a few more times to get an explanation from his friend about the nature of their visit. Receiving only vague answers, the novice had to settle for patience.

They entered the stately mansion through one of the smaller entrances like last time, rather than through the front doors. The majordomo waited for them, bowing in greeting.

Maximilian inclined his head in response. "Where is my father, in his study?"

"I was told to bid you wait for him in the western drawing-room, and he shall join you shortly."

"Very good. Martel, follow me." As the servant went off in one direction, Maximilian led his friend in another. A little confusingly, they walked towards east.

They reached a chamber with rather strange decorations. On all the walls hung masks, weapons, and what Martel assumed were tools. The headgear was colourful, resembling animals or birds and such. A vicious-looking dagger with serrated blade hung next to a buckler. As for some of the other items, he did not know what to make of them.

Maximilian took a seat in the largest chair. "I always rather liked the western room."

"But why is it called that? This is the eastern part of the house."

The young nobleman laughed. "It has nothing to do with that. All these decorations, they come from the Western Isles."

What an odd notion, Martel thought, to decorate an entire chamber solely with objects one would never use. He supposed that happened when you had a big house with more rooms than needed.

The doors opened to allow a man entry. Not quite as tall as Maximilian, but with the same build, he wore the fine clothes one would expect from a count. His beard was full, but carefully trimmed, and he walked with confidence.

Seeing his father, Maximilian leapt up from the chair and bowed his head. Unsure about etiquette, Martel mirrored the gesture.

"I am the count of Marche," he spoke in introduction, not that the novice had been in any doubt.

"You must be Maximilian's friend, Martel. Welcome to my home." His voice was brusque, but not hostile.

"Thank you for the invitation," Martel hurried to say.

The count motioned towards the chairs, and Maximilian quickly stepped aside to let his father take the largest seat. "Do you enjoy drinking coffee?" he asked of Martel as he motioned with his hand for a servant to enter.

"I don't know what that is," the novice admitted.

"It comes from the isles," Maximilian quickly explained. "Similar to black tea. Most invigorating."

"It has yet to reach Nordmark, I imagine. Some sugar for our guest," the count commanded as the servant sat down a tray on the table between them. While his father and Maximilian took their cups, the attendant poured a large spoonful of cane sugar into Martel's.

Curious, the novice accepted his drink and tasted it. Bitter, even with the sugar. He did his best to avoid showing his reaction on his face.

"My son tells me you are skilled. And already learning alchemy."

"Yes, my lord." He was not sure what else to say. "I like to learn as much as I can."

"Commendable. But I understand you will not seek the path of a mageknight, nor battlemage, for that matter." Emptying his cup, the count kept his eyes on Martel.

"No, my lord." The novice looked at Maximilian, wondering what he was meant to say. "I intend to work the weather, either on land or at sea."

"There are some who must, I suppose. But my son claims you played a part when he took down the Tyrian berserker."

"I helped. Maximilian took the brunt of the fight." Martel glanced at his friend again, who sat uneasy in his seat.

"I see." Silence developed as the count continued to scrutinise the novice, who did not dare to speak. "Martel, while you drink your coffee, will you excuse me and my son? I require his attention for a family matter."

As his host stood up, the novice scrambled to do the same. "Of course, my lord."

~

Moving to a different chamber, the count turned around to look at his son. "I am not convinced."

"I tell you, father, Duke Cheval has taken an interest in him for a reason."

"None at the Imperial court has ever hired an alchemist before."

"They may not have considered the opportunity to hire one trained in Sindhian methods before," Maximilian argued.

"Regardless, we may already be too late, if the duke has taken control of the boy."

"If that were the case, Martel would have told me. In any case, he may be of use with His Highness, giving me a chance to gain favour."

The count stroke his beard. "Fine. Invite him."

"Yes, father."

"Also, I have decided you should marry the Fontaine girl."

Maximilian cleared his throat. "Eleanor?"

"Certainly not the younger," the count scoffed.

"Very well, father."

"Keep it quiet for now. Go back with your friend. I will see you next fiveday."

Maximilian bowed his head. "Yes, father."