

Firebrand 271

Chapter 271: Cooler Heads

Cooler Heads

Pelday began as expected with training in the Circle of Fire. Moira quickly divided the four students into pairs. This time, Martel faced Harriet, with whom he already shared a contentious history stretching back before he became an acolyte. He had humiliated her at the solstice celebration in the home of Legate Fontaine, which she had clearly not forgotten. She seemed to relish any opportunity to return the favour. To Martel, it made no difference. He faced and fought each of the other three acolytes in the same manner, though he would admit that Harriet proved a better opponent than the other two.

They took position opposite each other across the room, keeping to one half that William and Edward could spar in the other. "Fight!" came the command from the teacher.

Both acolytes burst into action, flinging fire bolts at the other. Thanks to their rigorous training, the simple spell did not drain any spellpower anymore, allowing them to keep it up all day. In terms of magic, at least. The swift movements from constantly evading took its toll, leaving every student sweating despite the cold temperature of the room. Under these restrictions, using only basic styles, athleticism rather than spellwork provided the upper hand.

Because of that, even though Martel considered himself the better mage, he found himself hard pressed against Harriet. She seemed in good shape, and her short stature proved an elusive target for Martel's spells. In return, his frame measuring over six feet, required more work to keep safe. Martel gritted his teeth as another fire bolt smashed into his thigh, sending waves of pain through him.

"Enough!" Moira called out. "Short break before you switch partners."

Harriet approached Martel with a grin. "That's four for me, two for you." She stretched her neck. "You're still easily distracted, I see."

"Not by a troll."

He saw her face twist into a grimace. "What sort of barbaric word is that? Sounds Tyrian. You really are a savage."

"Enjoy it," Martel scoffed. "You only stand a chance in here because of all these restrictions. In a real fight, like during the solstice celebration, I would lay you down flat with ease."

She laughed in disbelief. "Easy to brag. How about you prove it?"

"When and where?"

"You know about the Chamber of Earth? On Peldays?"

Martel nodded. "See you there tonight."

"Alright, you better have caught your breath, because we go again," Moira told them all. "Harriet, Edward, you two switch."

Originally, Martel had intended to continue joining the sparring matches on Pelday evenings. Presumably, the more he trained, the better, given his future in the legions. But between his exhausting lessons and the occasional demands such as Julia taking him into the city for hours, it had become easy to skip the gatherings. He still had six bells of training every fiveday, between fire magic and combat lessons.

But tonight Martel had time and perhaps more importantly, motivation. He was not certain why he had reacted so strongly at first, allowing Harriet to goad him just because she did better in one lesson. Maybe because it felt like he had been forced to prove himself ever since he arrived at the Lyceum, too old and too Tyrian to be accepted by these people.

Now he would do more than prove himself. He would make it clear that he was the stronger wizard. If anyone doubted him or mocked him, Martel stood ready to correct such a mistake.

Fire acolytes rarely showed up in the Chamber of Earth on Peldays. Presumably, the others had the same reason as Martel; plenty of other classes provided them with the training needed.

Because of that, the other students noticed when no less than two in red robes appeared in the underground room. And everyone took note as they faced off, silently demonstrating their intention to duel. Quickly, everyone gathered around to watch, though most kept a respectful distance.

"Maximilian, give us the signal," Martel said while already preparing his spell. Five breaths. Six breaths. Seven breaths.

"I cannot wait to see this," the mageknight muttered.

Ten breaths. Across from Martel, Harriet changed her stance and stood ready. Eleven breaths.

"Fight!"

Twelve breaths. Harriet immediately launched one fire bolt after the other while moving around.

Thirteen breaths. Rather than mirror her like in class this morning, Martel ran straight forward.

Fourteen breaths. He took a bolt straight to his stomach, grimacing in pain. Fifteen breaths. This close, he could not miss his opponent. He released the spell in his hand, pouring spellpower along with it. A chunk of ice flew forward and smashed against Harriet's jaw.

The magic summoned in her hands disappeared as she blinked and looked disoriented. A gust of wind blew her back, sending her to the ground.

Martel walked the final steps forward to stare down at her. "You fight like it's still the Circle of Fire. Too predictable. Even a savage knows what to do against you."

With a furious expression, she got back on her feet. Harriet stared at him with murder in her eyes.

He did not blink or move one inch backwards but simply returned her gaze. Finally, she stalked past him, pushing her shoulder against his arm as she walked by.

A heavy hand landed on Martel's other shoulder. "A fire acolyte using ice," Maximilian exclaimed. "Stars damn you, Nordmark, you are more surprising than a harlot in a monastery."

Martel inclined his head with half a smile, accepting the praise. Master Alastair was right; Harriet had expected any of his fire spells, and she would be accustomed to the pain and sensation of being

struck by one. When it came to water, the opposite element, she had no resistance. Granted, Martel was unlikely to fight any fire-wielding mages in the Khivan army, but it felt good to have a completely different arrow in his quiver of spells.

His ambition for the night complete, Martel turned and left the Chamber of Earth. He did not imagine anyone else present wanted to spar with him anyway.

Chapter 272: At Odds

At Odds

When Martel saw Moira enter the gymnasium at the beginning of Malday's second lesson, he sensed a repetition of last fiveday. True enough, Reynard sent the fire acolytes to stand on one end while this time, he selected eight mageknights as their opposition. Martel heard groans from some of his peers, facing twice their own number, but they all knew it was pointless to protest. On the stands, Moira watched them like a hawk; old age did not seem to hinder her sight.

Upon Reynard's signal, the mageknights rushed forward with weapons drawn. Repeating a strategy, Martel unleashed a fire ray. It struck his first target, taking her out, but as he turned the spell on the next, his opponent deflected with the shield and continued forward.

Forced into close combat, Martel defended with his staff while looking for the next opportunity. His opponent proved too skilled to give an opening away, so Martel had to make his own. Dropping his defences in his old feint, he raised his magical shield instead. The mageknight took the bait, stepping forward to strike at Martel's leg, only to be stopped by the shield. In a forward, precarious position, the swordsman was caught off-balance by Martel raising the wind, knocking him off his feet.

Looking towards the rest of the skirmish, Martel saw his allies beleaguered on both sides. Edward lay on the ground already; Harriet battled two, looking about ready to fall, and William struggled against one; Maximilian, Martel noticed. The mageknight who had defeated Edward turned to find a new target and settled on Harriet, making it three against one.

Waiting until they were occupied, battering at her from all sides, Martel unleashed another fire ray. His spell being unexpected, none of the targets dodged this time. Two of the mageknights fell, as did Harriet; something that did not trouble Martel.

Feeling triumphant, the fire acolyte shot a fire bolt at the third of Harriet's attackers. The warrior avoided the attack, charging. Martel stepped back, buying time as he continued his barrage of spells.

Something struck Martel in the back of his knees, felling him unceremoniously. He landed almost face first into the dirt. Next to him, he saw William. Rolling around, he looked up at Maximilian's grinning face.

"You are not the only one who can attack using guile," the mageknight declared with a broad smile. He reached down a hand, helping Martel to stand.

"Lick your wounds another time," Reynard barked. "We go again. Back to positions!"

The fire acolytes stretched their sore limbs, picked up their staves, and got ready.

"Attack!"

This time, Martel saved his fire ray; the mageknights had become wise to his tactics, so he decided to conserve his spellpower and use fire bolts instead. He managed to take down one attacker before two others came against him.

Pressed back, Martel swung his staff as best he could to parry. Attacked by two, it availed him little. The mageknights knew how to fight together; defending against one left Martel open against the other. He used his shield for a reprieve, buying time for an offensive spell, but under all this pressure, the fire bolt flew wide.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Harriet alone, a mageknight at her feet. Demonstrably, she turned around to join forces with Edward.

Furious at being abandoned, Martel went for another shield and fire bolt. Another miss. Before he could recover, a sword slammed into his stomach, another took his knee, and he went down again.

Soon after, the second bout was over. The fire acolytes looked at each other with different expressions. Edward seemed ashamed, William appeared frustrated; Martel looked with anger at Harriet.

"You could have helped me!" he said in accusation.

"Like you did first time around?" she retorted.

"I did! I took down two of those attacking you!"

"Yeah, after they had enough time to wail on me. Didn't bother you to see me take a hit, did it."

"Quiet down," Reynard commanded; the mageknights ceased their laughter as well. "Enough of this for now. It would seem the fire acolytes have a long way to go. We shall go back to pairs, train the usual way."

Martel sank into the waters of the bath chamber, closing his eyes. He still heard the chatter of the other boys, unable to shut his ears as well, but the warm water eased his aches and made him indifferent to the noise.

"We got you good today, Nordmark," Maximilian roared, splashing water at him. Martel made an acknowledging expression and accepted that today would be a short bath.

Once dry and clean, Martel returned to his room filled with anticipation. A letter had arrived from home, and he had left it unread until his lessons were done with, as a reward for himself. Lying down on his bed, pulling his blanket around him, Martel opened the envelope.

My dear boy,

We are all grateful for the money you sent. We got the elixir from the alchemist only yesterday, and it has already done wonders. John is breathing just fine, and there is colour in his cheeks again. He even had a little to eat, and he has been drinking water and ale. Everyone in Engby marvels at how fast it worked, and that you could send us such a sum straight away. They must really be treating you well in Morcaster, but I never had any doubt. You have always been a good boy, and they would be mad to see it otherwise. Father Julius agrees with me, he is nodding even now as he writes this down for me...

The letter continued with quick explanations on the doings of his siblings, a description of their winter solstice, and regrets that Martel could not have been present.

He read it twice before folding it again. He would have to write and tell them about his new robes, at some point. But Martel was not in a hurry; he doubted his mother would be pleased to hear that her son was to be a battlemage. Besides, he had no coin for sending letters. It would have to wait.

Chapter 273: Co-workers

Co-workers

When Moira stepped into the Circle of Fire, her scowl seemed deeper than usual. Martel could guess why; their performance yesterday against the mageknights had not gone any better than last fiveday. He was not sure what she had expected; they had lost against six, so it only stood to reason they would fare even worse against eight.

"I am appalled by what I saw yesterday," she said.

The acolytes all avoided her gaze, looking down at the ground or off to the side.

"Before those mageknights have finished their charge against you, four of them should be on the ground, writhing in pain." She gave a harsh look towards Edward; Martel guessed that meant he had missed his initial spell. "As for you two," she continued, pointing first at Harriet and then at Martel, "leaving an ally to fend for themselves is a great way to lose any fight."

"I took down two attacking her," Martel protested.

"Once she had three on her," Moira added. "Making it certain she would go down."

Harriet smirked, seeing Martel reproached.

"Don't you smile, girly!" Their teacher turned her fury on the female acolyte. "You did exactly the same to him."

"It seems only fair he got the same," she grumbled.

"Quiet! Excuses are pointless. Only winning matters. If you lot can't fight together, you'll be dead on the ground in your first battle."

"What did you expect, pitting us against each other?" Martel felt his anger burning inside of him. Being chastised for making mistakes was one thing, but he would not accept blame from the teacher responsible for creating this situation.

Moira gave him a long look. "Only by competing with each other might any of you stand a chance to become good enough. But if you morons can't put that aside when fighting a common enemy, I'm wasting my time." She moved her gaze to linger at the other acolytes. "In battle, do you think you get to choose the soldiers by your side? Or that if you survived the fight, it doesn't matter who else died? There's always another fight coming and another. Every soldier you lose makes the next battle all the harder."

Martel still felt angry, but he could not find an argument against her. He thoroughly disagreed with how she trained them, but he lacked the experience or insight to suggest an alternative.

"New exercise. Martel, William, you're fighting together against Harriet and Edward. If you take three hits, you're out of the fight. First one down gets detention tonight."

They hardly needed more motivation to avoid being hit; every fire bolt carried a nasty sting by now. Watching the other pair walk to the opposite end of the chamber, Martel stuck his head close to William. "Edward's the easier target. We take him out first and then her."

The other acolyte gave a nod, and they separated, taking positions some paces apart.

"Fight!"

The room exploded with fire as all the acolytes hurled spells through the air. Martel was constantly in movement, trying to evade, though he still took a hit. Meanwhile, Edward found it impossible to withstand the onslaught. If Martel's spell did not strike, William's did.

"Edward! You're out!" Moira yelled, keeping score.

The lanky acolyte went down as the first, leaving Harriet on her own. Two against one quickly led to the expected outcome. Moments later, she was counted out as well. Martel shared a brief, smug smile with William.

"Why did you win?" Moira asked.

"We're better," William declared.

The teacher slapped him across the face. "Arrogance will get you killed."

"We worked better together," Martel said, giving what he figured was the desired reply.

Moira nodded. "You used your information to determine the weaker link." An unhappy expression floated across Edward's face. "And you worked together to gain the upper hand." She gave a snort. "Alright, let's try this again before you switch teams."

Just one more lesson in fire magic, and the worst of the fiveday was over. Martel cleaned himself in his room – he would save the bath until after the second lesson – and went towards lunch with a healthy appetite.

Crossing the entrance hall to reach its dining counterpart, he recognised Flora. She likewise spotted him, giving him a wink. He hurried over, glancing around. "What are you doing here?"

"If you won't visit, I'll have to come to you."

"I'm trying to avoid attention," he said quietly.

"Come along. I'll buy you something to drink. We can talk elsewhere." She gave him a challenging look. "Or I can stay here?"

"Fine." He trudged out of the castle after her, shivering slightly in the cold without his cloak or cap.

Flora led him to the tavern across the street, familiar to Martel from playing host to their previous meetings. With two fingers as a gesture towards the barkeeper for ale, she sat down. Martel joined opposite her, looking at her expectantly.

"I'm a little hurt you ignored my messages."

"I am under a lot more scrutiny now."

"Good thing we're known for being discreet." The earthmage smiled at him. "And we have a new job where the client insisted on two wizards. That's why he came to us, having heard about our previous exploits."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not interested."

"Not even if it pays three and a half crowns?" She raised one eyebrow.

Martel had been ready to leave, but the number gave him pause. Thirty-five pieces of silver was a hefty sum. Still, he had no need of money.

Seizing on his silence, Flora continued. "The client is the Friar. Job is really simple. Just guarding some goods for one night."

One of the Nine Lords, Martel surmised; he vaguely recollected a man in clerical vestiges. "With a price like that, there's more involved."

Flora shrugged. "The cargo is very valuable. It's coming in on a ship tomorrow, and secrets are like sailors. As soon as a ship docks, they all flee ashore."

"He must expect company to pay such a sum."

"It's certainly a possibility, or we wouldn't be needed. But it might also be the most coin you'll ever get paid for sitting in a house until sunrise."

"Tempting, but I think I'll pass. I just don't need the trouble."

"And you think you won't need the money?" Flora stared at him.

"Not right now, no."

"What about tomorrow? The last jobs you did, your brother was sick. What happens if he gets sick again? Or someone else you care about? Wouldn't you rather have that money available instead of being forced to look for opportunities?" The earthmage kept her gaze locked on him. "The money is here, now. I can't promise that when you need it, I'll have another opportunity for you."

Martel slowly exhaled. It had been awful trying to get the money for the cure to heal John. Begging for loans from his friends, counting every penny, waiting and praying for any task that might pay him... His new arrangement with Mistress Rana paid him thirty silvers a month, but half of that went to Julia's rent. She needed food, clothes, at least another blanket, definitely soap, a brush for her hair, and probably many other things. "Fine. Tell me more."

Chapter 274: Stirring

Stirring

When Martel arrived at the apothecary, he found Mistress Rana waiting for him. "Fetch the ingredients I gave you and join me upstairs," she commanded.

Quickly turning around, Martel went back to his room and collected the small heap of reagents. He had tried a few nights to infuse them with magic as directed, but the effect seemed negligible. A little worried, Martel hurried down the dormitory tower and walked once more through the apothecary, making his way to the laboratory.

His teacher extended her hand, and Martel placed the ingredients therein. "Still some way to go, to put it mildly." She examined each of them. "Well, you have time to learn. Perhaps I was optimistic handing you several pieces at once." She walked over to a worktable and picked up a single herb. "Practise on this until next time. For hours, do you understand? Do not expect this to come easily."

Martel nodded and received the small plant, placing it in his pocket.

"For now, we shall proceed." Mistress Rana closed her hand around the ingredients, and Martel noticed a faint glow. As she unfurled her fingers, each of the leaves and roots had a shimmer to them. It looked like they bristled with magic. As always, Martel felt envy witnessing the display of powers beyond his ability, but at least in this case, it could be rectified.

The alchemist walked over to the hearth, collecting a small pot on her way. Martel followed. "The process for most potions, certainly the simpler kind, tends to be the same." She placed the pot on the cold fireplace and poured water from a nearby jar into it. "This is just water. The more delicate recipes might call for something more extravagant, but for this, ordinary water will do. Its purpose is mostly to be a container that binds the magic together, creating the elixir."

Martel was reminded of Master Alastair's description of the elements as vessels for magic; perhaps a similarity between the Asterian and Sindhian crafts.

"As for the process itself, we simply boil the ingredients together and stir. Until we have the desired result. Now, I assume getting a fire going is within your abilities?"

The acolyte blinked, taking a few moments to understand. He looked at the coals in the fireplace, eager to burn. They ignited willingly.

"Good. Once the water boils, put in all the ingredients and keep stirring." Mistress Rana handed him a ladle. "Arm yourself with patience – it will take a while."

Martel accepted the weapon of an alchemist from her and watched the pot.

He spent the whole bell stirring. Alchemy was not swift magic, it seemed. Yet even if it felt dull to simply stand and stir for so long, Martel was fascinated to see the overall progress. Little by little, the ingredients boiling in the pot lost their magical shimmer, which seemed to flow into the water itself. By the end of the lesson, the liquid had a warm, orange glow, albeit faint.

Hearing the bell toll, Mistress Rana joined him. "As you can see, it's simple enough so far. Bottling the potion is another trick entirely, but if I recall, you have a lesson now?"

"I do."

She nodded. "Next time, we'll do it when you have a spare bell afterwards. You can learn the final step of the process. Until then, practise drawing the magic out from the ingredient. Else nothing I teach you will be of any use."

Martel reached into his pocket, closing his fingers around the herb. "I will, mistress."

Once he had eaten supper, Martel left the castle for his assignment with the Night Knives. He wore his usual clothes – this was another task where they aimed to avoid attention – and had a small

scrap of paper with an address to guide him. By now, the goods should have arrived and been stashed in an unassuming house by the docks; Flora and Marcus would already be there.

Their charge was simply to guard it through the night until morning came, where it would be loaded onto another ship and sailed out of Morcaster. Simple enough; she had even promised Martel he would have plenty of time to return to the Lyceum before second bell and his work with Master Jerome. But the promised money told Martel this had to be more complicated than explained, though the same lure of coin had convinced him to do it anyway.

He reached the building where he would spend the night; it looked like any other old house of the sort that could be found everywhere in poorer districts like the copper lanes. They were less frequent by the harbour, slowly being replaced by more stately homes for merchants or great insulae for the dockworkers. Probably this particular house only survived in its current form because it saw use by less savoury elements, such as the Friar and his people.

Martel wondered if the new Ninth Lord controlling the harbour district knew about this particular task done on his territory, and their use of this building. If the acolyte were to guess the reason for the large payment to the mercenaries, he would place his money on discord between two of the Nine Lords.

It almost made him reconsider and turn back, but he had made a commitment to Flora and Marcus. Besides, assuming he had read the address correctly, he had arrived.

He quickly walked up to the front door of the ramshackle building and knocked. Marcus opened and ushered him inside. "Good. Follow me." Inside, the layout of the house was as expected. One large room on the lower floor, though bereft of furniture; some blankets formed a simple bed in one corner, nothing else. "The goods are in the cellar." Marcus pointed at a hatch in the ground. "Flora is upstairs, watching the street. You'll take the next turn standing outside, watching the back alley. We rotate, meaning you'll be upstairs next, Flora gets to sleep, and I'll take your position. After that, you get to rest, Flora stays outside, I'm upstairs and so on." Marcus threw him a chain shirt. "Anything suspicious, don't fight. Run inside, bolt the door, and take position along the wall. Wake me up too, of course, and give a yell to Flora."

"If I hear her yelling?" Martel disrobed to put on the armour.

"Same procedure, except take position behind the stairs and watch the front door. I'll stand up against the wall."

Martel nodded, finishing up by placing his red robe over the armour and clasping his cloak around himself once more. Marcus gave him a staff and opened the door for him. "Enjoy your watch."

Stepping outside, the acolyte glanced around. A completely ordinary alleyway greeted him, as did the cold. He leaned the staff against the wall of the building, and rubbed his hands together for warmth. A long night lay ahead.

Chapter 275: Standing Guard

Standing Guard

Pacing back and forth to help himself keep warm, Martel still shivered every time a gust of wind made its way down the alley. He wondered how long it would be before he got to move indoors. It would not be any time soon, he surmised, if the person sleeping during each shift was meant to get

any decent rest. Based on that, it might be three hours before he would take Flora's place, which meant another three hours before he could sleep. He thought about the money to comfort himself, which did little to cheer him up. At least the sum would be enough to keep his purse heavy for a long time; he would not have to worry about coin or finding other work.

Trying to put his time to good use, Martel reached into his pocket and withdrew the herb given to him by Mistress Rana. Toadflax, named because its flowers resembled the wide mouths of toads, she had explained. He would have to look it up in the library to see its properties. For now, he practised the exercise shown to him by the alchemist, trying to activate its latent magic. Imagining it like a drop inside the root, he tried to connect to it with his own magical talent and pull on it until the magic flowed through every piece of the plant.

Drops of water formed in Martel's hand. He quickly looked up; the last thing he needed while being forced to stand out here was rain. But nothing fell; the sky remained closed. Chiding himself, Martel realised the water in his hand came from his own magic. Like Mistress Rana had warned, he had ended up channelling the elements rather than the supposed magic lying dormant in the plant itself. This would not be easy. At least he had a lot of time ahead with nothing better to do.

Yawning, Martel blinked repeatedly. He pulled down the hood of his cloak, allowing the wind to hit his face, helping him stay awake. Mistress Rana's herb was back in his pocket; Martel had grown bored trying to work the necessary magic. He might give it another try once he moved indoors to relieve Flora. He wondered how long he had been standing guard; it felt like hours, but it might have been far less. This late at night, no temple bells rang to announce the passage of time.

A pity he did not have his Khivan clock, though the contraption was far too valuable to lug around. He wondered how small they could be made; just the reduction in size from the astronomical clock in the entrance hall to the small device sitting on his drawer was enormous. Perhaps with the aid of magic, a skilled watchmaker might create them so small, they would fit inside your pocket. They would still be too expensive to risk carrying around, though, either for fear of damage or theft.

Thinking about watches inevitably led Martel's thoughts down a path towards Shadi, and he quickly tried to distract himself. Glancing around for the hundredth time, he looked at the alley that ran on either side of him. Down his right, it eventually reached one of the main streets of the harbour district; lamps illuminated the opening, and even at this hour, Martel noticed people moving past from time to time. Probably drunkards going home, or knaves on unsavoury business. As long as it did not involve Martel, he would not quarrel.

Down his left, the alley twisted and turned to disappear deeper into the array of buildings clustered together. The darkness made it nearly impossible to distinguish much; a cloudy night shaded what little moonlight would be available. On occasion, Martel heard movement, and his ability to sense heat came in useful, letting him know something the size of a cat or small dog was running around. Yawning again, Martel pulled up his hood, tired of the cold wind.

A jolt went through Martel as he realised he was nodding off. Had he been sleeping? No, he did not think so. He looked around the alley. Everything was quiet. Not a sign of anyone to his right, down the street. To his left, everything lay in silent darkness. Just to be sure, he sent out his magical sense to look for heat.

A start went through him. Something much bigger than any cat stood around the corner. More than one, in fact, though at this distance, Martel could not tell if he sensed two, three or even more. Especially not as they might be hiding around corners.

Martel did not wish to be the boy who cried 'raider' needlessly, but at the same time, someone skulking in the dark this close – he could think of no benign reasons for it. Making his decision, he went inside the house, closing and bolting the backdoor behind him.

"Marcus," he hissed at the figure sleeping on the ground.

To his credit, the warrior woke immediately. He pulled his blanket off and got on his feet.

"Something amiss?"

"People outside. Several of them."

"This better be trouble if you woke me up for it," Marcus grumbled.

"You've seen something too?" Flora's voice reached them even as she appeared at the top of the staircase. "Something suspicious outside as well on the street." As she turned back into the upstairs room, Marcus and Martel followed her.

They crossed the open chamber to stand by the windows, looking through cracks in the shutters.

"Little while ago, a guard patrol crossed by. Now, there's another standing just down the street. Not armed with staves, but spears," Flora explained.

Martel felt dread rising in him. The city guard usually wielded staves when maintaining order, using blunt weapons to knock heads rather than anything sharp. Spears meant they had come to fight without worrying about arrests or prisoners.

"Lots of reasons the guards would be in the docks," Marcus argued. "Might have nothing to do with us."

Martel watched the patrol of legionaries, and something struck him as odd. They usually moved in bands of five, yet he counted seven. Two of the number did not wield the red uniform of the Legio Urbis either.

Opening the shutter a little to allow his magic unimpeded access, Martel extended his senses towards the group down the street. Closing his eyes, he still could not accurately count how many sources of heat met him, but he did not need that either. At the edge of the assembled legionaries, where he ought to feel the warmth of something at least, he sensed nothing. A dead area, a void.

He closed the shutter again and looked at the mercenaries. "They are here for us. Two of them are inquisitors wearing gold. They've come to fight mages."

Chapter 276: Trouble in the Alley

Trouble in the Alley

Flora took a sharp breath as she glanced out through the shutters again. A curse followed. "I think you're right."

"I don't understand. I thought we'd defend this cargo from criminals – why is the city guard here? They would be paid off," Marcus pointed out. "And with inquisitors? How can they know we got mages inside?"

"Good questions to ponder later," the earthmage retorted. "Now, we make our escape."

"What about the cargo? Our payment?" Marcus protested.

Flora sent him a sharp look. "This is a trap. There is no payment. And I'm not letting the inquisitors drag me to a pyre." Resolutely, she crossed the room to hurry down the stairs; the others followed.

"Which way? They must have someone at every route," Martel said, thinking about the shapes in the alley. Both exits would be guarded, he assumed.

Flora's brow furrowed. "We're too exposed on the big street. We'll have to punch our way through, down the alley, and disappear." She looked at the other two. "Marcus, deal with the inquisitors. We handle the guards."

Without further words, Flora unbolted the backdoor and tore it open.

Martel's heart beat faster than a rabbit could run. How could he fight and survive against an inquisitor? Even if he escaped, should they discover his name or just see his face, he would be branded a maleficar. They would hunt him down and strangle him with a golden chain. He pulled his hood down as far as it would go.

Once outside as the last one, he grabbed his staff still leaning against the wall; he had forgotten all about it in his drowsy state earlier. Flora stood likewise armed, and Marcus had his shield and axe.

Down to the right, soldiers appeared. Time was up. They all broke into a run, the Night Knives moving towards the left with legionaries and inquisitors in pursuit.

Martel felt a release of power from Flora, and moments later, a wall of earth rose behind them to block off their pursuers.

That dealt with one threat, but they still had an unknown number of enemies ahead, barring their escape. Reaching out with his magic, Martel felt a tangle of heat some twenty paces ahead, probably more around the corners. Approximately where he felt them, Martel summoned a glow of light, revealing a handful of legionaries.

He felt another tremor from Flora, tearing the earth asunder ahead of them to make their opponents fall down. Yet as the magic coursed forward, a man stepped out in front, and the power died immediately. Martel did not need to see his blue uniform to know they faced an inquisitor, protected from their magic.

Marcus leapt forward, using his shield to bash into the inquisitor and knock him aside. Other tactics worked still.

Guards appeared from the sides, having waited to spring the ambush. Martel blasted air against the nearest, knocking him back into the wall. Another came swinging a sword at him, which the acolyte parried with his staff. Acting on instinct, Martel launched a fire bolt straight at his attacker and watched him buckle over in pain.

One more appeared, and Martel shot a second blast of air. It reached his opponent and dissipated. A second inquisitor. Wielding a sword in one hand, dagger in the other, he attacked. Martel desperately defended himself, trying to think of what he could do. None of his spells would work directly. Perhaps he could raise something up and drop it on the inquisitor, like he had done against

Leatherfist, but the zealot's golden protection made it impossible for Martel to reach out around him.

The haft of Marcus's axe smashed into the inquisitor's head from behind, knocking him to his knees. "Run, boy!" the warrior yelled.

Jumping forward, escaping the oppressive aura of the fallen mage hunter, Martel blasted air against anyone in red uniform. As he ran forward, seeing Marcus with Flora ahead of him, he increased the intensity of his glowing orb still in the air, until it blinded anyone behind him.

Once more, he felt the power release from Flora, raising another wall of earth. She did it so close, it caught Martel on the backfoot, and he stumbled to the ground, luckily, still landing on the right side of the divide. He scraped the skin from his hands, but nothing worse. Picking up his staff, he got back on his feet and continued after the others in frantic flight.

They kept running, Martel following the two mercenaries ahead of him with no other thought. Behind, they heard shouts; the labyrinthine structure of the old alleyways made pursuit difficult.

Abruptly, Marcus and Flora came to a halt, and Martel almost crashed into them. "We have to keep running!" he almost yelled, lowering his voice just as he spoke.

"She can't." The declaration came flatly from Marcus.

Walking around them, lighting a tiny flame for light, Martel saw Flora's face was all white. She leaned on Marcus for support.

"Bastard got her with a dagger." He renewed his grip around her, and she groaned in pain. Dark red stained her clothes across the chest. "I don't know how to get her back to our house," the warrior admitted. "We try to cross the main streets, they'll be on us. We have to stay here, hope they miss us."

Martel thought about the city. Marcus was right; they would have to cross half the harbour district and cut through the market just to reach the bridge area. Lots of illuminated streets between them and that destination. Any flight north or east seemed impossible. But not west; the poor neighbourhoods did not have street lighting. "Follow me."

Marcus gave him a scrutinising look, lasting only a moment before Martel dismissed his flame, returning the alley to darkness. The warrior would have to trust him or not; staying in this place was not an option. Turning around, Martel began walking west towards the copper lanes. Behind him, one Night Knife lifted the other one up under her shoulders and followed.

Chapter 277: Improvised Aid

Improvised Aid

Three people made their way on the crooked streets of Morcaster, leaving the harbour district to enter the copper lanes. One of them walked in front, moving with hasty steps yet constantly stopping to accommodate the slower pace of his companions, giving him a nervous aura. Behind him came a bulky man supporting a woman half-bent over, staggering her steps. Few people were about at this hour of the night, and any they encountered quickly looked away, minding their own

business. All sorts of peculiar people moved about in the copper lanes, and the residents knew to keep to themselves.

Reaching a derelict house, Martel urgently knocked on the backdoor. It took a while until somebody answered; to Martel, it felt like an age. As the door swung open, it revealed a bundle of children, some of them armed with rusty knives.

"Martel!" The children quickly blathered to each other as the three wanderers crossed the threshold. "Tell Weasel!"

A litany of questions assaulted Martel, but he ignored them for a more pressing matter; Flora looked worse and worse. Marcus carefully laid her down on the ground, and some of the children offered up rags to use as a pillow.

"We need to treat the wound." Martel did his best to recall his hours working in the infirmary. Marcus was already ahead of him, removing Flora's armour and outer clothes; the movements made the earthmage groan repeatedly. Her eyes lacked focus, and she seemed unaware of her surroundings.

Martel crossed the room to where he knew the children kept their small storage of herbs and plants; the tiny apothecary that Martel had set up for them last year. He knew they would not have any blood salve, but perhaps some of it could still be useful. Rummaging through their sparse inventory, he recognised thistleroot. Better than nothing. "Get some water," he told Beaver. At least with the recent snow, water was abundant and easy to get.

Putting the root in his mouth, Martel began chewing to release its juice. A bitter taste washed over his tongue. Not the best way to make use of the herb, but they did not have time to boil the water and wait for the plant to suffuse the liquid.

Kneeling down next to Flora, he saw that Marcus had uncovered the wound; a stabbing injury on her stomach, which looked nasty. The warrior had used some of the water brought by the children to clean the gash.

"Let me." Martel tore some of Flora's clothes to use as rags, bundling them around the root from his mouth to transfer its juices onto the fabric. That accomplished, he pressed the cloth against the wound, hoping he remembered idle conversations with Nora in the apothecary correctly.

That should stem the bleeding; the question remained whether it was too late. Flora had lost all colour from her face, and even as Martel had treated her wound, she had made little sound or movement regardless of what had to be a painful experience.

"Nothing to do but wait," the acolyte considered. He leaned backwards against the nearest wall.

For a while, they watched Flora, listening to her shallow breathing. The children, their questions gone unanswered, dispersed again except for the few that also remained observing the wounded woman. As for Weasel, he made quiet discussions with Marcus, which ended with the man handing over a handful of coins to the little chief.

After that, Marcus walked over and sat down next to Martel. "How much do you trust these little people? When the guards don't find us, they'll post a reward."

"They're not the sort to trust the guards. More likely, they'd get slapped just for approaching anyone in the uniform."

The warrior snorted. "I hope you're right about them."

"What about Flora? She needs a physician."

"Wound like this – not much a physician could do. A highly skilled surgeon, perhaps, but they would only ask questions. Magical healing might save her, but even if we could find a healer, they'd likewise be suspicious."

Martel took a deep breath. "Alright. I can come back with some healing remedies, maybe, but I have to get back to the Lyceum. I'll be missed once second bell rings. If inquisitors look for anyone missing class, they'll be onto me, and you after that."

"Lad, they'll be patrolling all across the city. They could even be watching the Lyceum, suspecting any wounded mage might seek refuge there. Avoiding guards in the copper lanes is one thing, but you won't make it to the centre of the city unseen," Marcus warned him.

He had a point. Martel needed another way. Getting up, he crossed the room to reach Weasel, who sat on a stool.

The little chief looked at him. "Quite some trouble you bring to my doorstep, wizard."

"I noticed you got paid for it. Want to make some more coin?"

"I'm listening."

"How well do you know the sewers?"

"Well enough. Why?"

"Remember when you unlocked that grate door for me? Opening the passage between the sewers and the Lyceum. I need the same, only to go the other way, from the tunnels and into the castle."

Weasel's mouth curled upwards. "That's funny how it goes sometimes. Sure, I can get you there. I'm guessing that you'll need me to unlock the door for you too."

Martel exhaled. "That's great."

"For ten silvers."

"I figured. You'll get it."

"Now. Last time, it took you ages to pay."

"I get paid tomorrow, Solday, five eagles. You'll get them all. Next Solday, the other five. That's the best I can do," Martel declared.

"You're not exactly trustworthy, mageling."

"That's coming from you? Look, you'll make ten silvers guiding me through the sewers to unlock a door. You can't tell me you got better things to do this night than earn a full crown."

Weasel regarded him sceptically. "Curse my bleeding heart. Fine. Let me get my picks and some more clothes. But you better pay as promised, or your friends will get thrown out."

"Sure, sure."

While Weasel went upstairs to retrieve his belongings, Martel went back to Marcus and Flora.

"I'll come back when I can, with medicine. Keep her warm as best you can."

"Not my first time caring for a wounded comrade," Marcus retorted. "Just come back with something more useful than chewed roots."

Weasel returned. "Let's go, wizard."

With a final look at Flora's white face, praying to Sol he would show mercy on the earthmage, Martel followed the young chief out of the house.

Chapter 278: Down the Hatch

Down the Hatch

Bent over with his cloak almost huddled around him, Martel followed Weasel through the copper lanes. Being nearly twice as tall, his long legs could easily keep up with the urchin even with this posture.

They followed a path straight north. After they had walked a while, Martel grew doubtful, wondering exactly at their route. "How much further until we go underground? You're here to take me through the sewers, not through the city." Once they left the copper lanes, streetlamps and regular patrols would trouble their progress.

"We have to reach an entrance first, don't we," Weasel retorted. "No sewers in the poorer part of town. That's only for rich folks." Reaching a half-broken fence, the boy pressed through, allowing them to go from one side street to another while avoiding the main road.

Martel had to admit, Weasel's assessment was probably right. Not to mention another problem that prevented sewers below the copper lanes; given that one could descend directly into the Undercroft from The Copper Drum, the great subterranean caverns would take up most of the space underground in the southwest. There would be no room to build the sewers. Martel wondered if the engineers in days past had known about the Undercroft, or if they were solely guided by the reason as Weasel guessed, restricting the tunnel work to the other, richer parts of the city.

They continued into the merchant quarter; the surrounding streets grew wider, illuminated by lamps, forcing them to take longer detours to stay out of sight. More climbing and ducking ensued, sometimes passing through what had to be a private backyard, all to avoid the main thoroughfares. Martel had to admit some admiration for the young boy guiding him; his knowledge of the city was astounding given his age. But it made sense that someone accustomed to life on the streets would have such familiarity with them.

Weasel came to an abrupt halt. Martel almost crashed into him before arresting his own movement. "What is it?"

They stood by the exit of an alley, leading onto one of the main streets of the district. The soft glow of the magical lights that lined the thoroughfare almost reached them. "Guards."

Martel edged his way forward to peak around the corner. Down the road, five legionaries stood, presumably keeping watch of an intersection of larger streets meeting at a square. Worse, they seemed to stop anyone passing by, questioning them. Given the few people on the street, any

attempt to cross it would be noticed. "Can't we just retrace our steps a little and find another way somewhere else?"

Weasel shook his head. "Hatch to the sewers is over there." He motioned at the entrance to an alley opposite their own, across the street. "It's a dead end. No other way in."

"But it's not the only hatch. Surely you know of another way down?"

"Closest one other than that, at least what I know, is a long way into the market district. Defeats the whole purpose, doesn't it, going that far."

Unfortunately, the boy was right. There would be plenty more illuminated streets and guard patrols between here and there, bound to hinder their progress in the same manner. But perhaps magic could provide a solution. "Be ready to move," the acolyte told the urchin.

Martel searched the street until he saw some refuse lying against a wall; a broken crate or barrel, something like that. Reaching out with his magic, he felt it near the limit of his grasp. But he did not need to be soft-handed with it. Pushing spellpower through his connection with the pieces of wood, he made them move around, striking against the wall before hitting the ground again to cause a good amount of noise.

All the guards turned in that direction, some of them walking closer to investigate; seeing that, Martel ran to cross the street, Weasel by his side. Congratulating himself on his clever ruse, the acolyte smiled as they reached the alley.

"You there! Stop!"

Not that clever after all. Not to mention, they had just walked into a dead end; no way to escape the guards running towards them, unless Weasel was right about the hatch. Martel prayed that was the case. He saw no good outcome from trying to fight the city guard, win or lose; he was in enough trouble already.

Ahead of him, the boy pushed some debris aside to reveal a metal trapdoor. At least they were in the right place. Groaning, Weasel began to tug on its handle. "A little help!"

Martel leapt forward to grab the hatch and pulled it open, lending some empowered strength to his arm. Without delay, Weasel slid down the hole. Glancing over his shoulder at the guards, only a few paces behind, the acolyte followed suit, jumping rather than using the steps in the wall.

The familiar stench greeted him as he landed, almost slipping on the wet tiles. The darkness overwhelmed him as well, but thanks to his previous visits to the sewers, Martel knew the layout instinctively. Using his heat sense, he saw Weasel running down one direction of the tunnel and followed. Already, he heard the guards going down the hatch as well.

Finding inspiration in his own near mishap, Martel grabbed the water in the sewer with his magical skill and poured it over the ledge behind him as he fled. With another spell, he froze it to ice. Still running, he heard the satisfying sound of someone slipping and cursing as they struck the ground. A loud splash announced that either the same person or someone else had suffered the misfortune of falling into the sewer itself.

"Stars, get me up! Help me, you bastards!"

Outbursts and bemoaning followed with sounds of struggle from the guards, trying to pull one man up while staying upright on their own feet.

Still following the patch of heat in front of him, vaguely familiar as the shape of Weasel, Martel smiled to know that his second ruse had proven better than his first.

Chapter 279: The First Touch

The First Touch

Walking through the sewers instead of fleeing or sneaking through the streets of Morcaster, Martel had time to consider what a disaster the whole night had turned out to be. He kicked himself for being greedy, letting the promise of coin blind him to such dangers. At the same time, neither Flora nor Marcus had voiced any reservations about taking this task.

It made Martel wonder who exactly had been the target. His first instinct would be that this was all part of the constant skirmishes between the Nine Lords, striking at each other through mercenaries or city guards, since they could not attack directly. That seemed the most obvious answer.

Yet it did not satisfy Martel. The promised payment of three and a half crowns had seemed too good to be true. It struck him as the kind of large sum you would promise someone knowing they would never collect on it.

Furthermore, Flora had seemed insistent on bringing Martel along. Two mages, not just one for this outing. Whoever had set this in motion had gone to some lengths to ensure Martel's presence.

Martel had no proof, but he could think of one man with the wealth and motivation. The pieces began to fall into place. If the duke of Cheval had found out that Martel worked with the Night Knives, it would not be difficult to arrange another job and manoeuvre everything to ensure Martel got hired.

The task itself had been well suited for a trap. Make the mercenaries remain in the same spot and alert the inquisitors about renegade mages ready to fight the city guard. It had only failed because they had spotted the ambush and immediately taken to flight.

It did seem like a ploy favoured by the duke, given what Martel knew of him, using others to keep his own hand hidden. And what better vengeance against a mage than leading the Inquisition to him? If Martel had been caught using magic against the city guards, nothing would have saved him from being branded a maleficar.

What a fool he had been. Thinking that petty affairs like the trouble with the Apothecary Guild had been the duke's actual plan. Nothing but distractions, keeping him busy or perhaps giving him more incentive for earning coin; more bait for this trap. And it might not be over. Even if he had avoided capture tonight, they might find ways to connect him with the fight in the docks.

And how much had the duke already shared with the inquisitors? Did they know the full extent of Martel's activities, most pertinently his identity? Or had the vengeful nobleman simply pointed the mage hunters in the direction of the docks, leaving out the specifics?

If the duke had any actual evidence against Martel, he would have handed it over as well, and the acolyte would be in chains by now. So instead, the duke had tried to create the evidence through this trap.

Of course, it was entirely possible someone else had planned all of this, and either Martel or the Night Knives had another, unknown enemy... Regardless, Martel would have to watch every step, consider his every move.

Which brought him to another issue. Flora on death's door. Martel knew he had a duty to help her; they would not have escaped tonight without her spells blocking pursuit. But he had to do it without being discovered or leading the inquisitors to her. The acolyte took a deep breath. The coming hours or even days would be difficult.

Walking underground confused Martel's sense of direction, yet he still had the distinct feeling they walked north rather than east. "You know where the Lyceum is, right?"

His summoned flame floating in front of Weasel cast a strange glow, illuminating the top of the boy's head. "Of course."

"We just seem to be following a rather circumventive route."

"Fancy word. I can tell you're going to school."

"I simply mean, we've come very far north."

"The parts of the sewers underneath the market are prone to flooding. With all the snow recently, it seemed smart to avoid them. Any other criticism of my pathfinding?"

"I'm just worried." Even as he said it, Martel was unsure why. It was simply a feeling of unease that kept increasing, though he could not explain its root. Nothing about this part of the sewers distinguished it from any other. Except, of course, that northeast lay the entrance to... "The catacombs."

"That schooling is really paying off for you."

"Quiet!" Martel whispered, placing one hand on the boy's shoulder, which Weasel immediately wrested away from.

Looking down one of the branching tunnels, Martel saw only darkness. They could not accidentally have strayed into the catacombs; he would have noticed. Nor did he think Weasel would steer them that wrong. But he could not shake the feeling creeping down his spine, which reminded him of his encounter with the undead creature in the crypts of Morcaster.

He let his magical senses sweep down the tunnel, even as it felt foolish. If a walking skeleton had somehow escaped, it would not exhibit any heat for him to feel. But it was the only thing he could think of doing.

As expected, no trace of warmth. Not even a rat. Yet something met Martel's magic. It made him feel uncomfortable, like digging his hands through filthy sludge. His unease grew, troubling his breathing. He could not describe the feeling exactly; it was worse than nausea or when he had suffered from consumption. The sensation, fed to him through his magic, surpassed any physical illbeing.

He could only describe or understand it as being touched by evil.

Martel broke off the connection. "Run!"

Once they had passed through several stretches of tunnelling, Weasel stopped. "Nothing is after us," he claimed. "What spooked you?"

Martel did not know how to explain it. Nor did he trust that they were safe, simply because nothing behind them made any sound or movement. As much as he dreaded the prospect, he let his magic sweep out to find a connection other than vermin. Nothing. Perhaps it had not been a creature of any kind, but simply the place itself, cursed by evil magic.

"You hear me? What are we running from?"

"Nothing. I felt something, but I can't explain it. But when you go back tonight, don't go the same route."

Weasel gave him a strange look in the flickering light of Martel's summoned flame. "At least we ran in the right direction. Your school is not far from here."

Martel sighed with relief as the grate door came into sight. Deftly, Weasel reached his small hands through the gaps between the bars and picked the padlock. Once they were both through, the urchin placed it back on the door. "I'll leave through other means," he said in reply to Martel's questioning look. "Sewers ain't the only hidden way in and out of this place."

Together, they ascended up into the workshops of the Lyceum, where they parted ways. Martel had no idea what secret route Weasel knew to enter and leave the castle, nor did he care at this point. At least for now, he finally felt safe.

Chapter 280: Slow Means

Slow Means

First thing, once back in the Lyceum, Martel went to the baths. He needed to get rid of the sewer stench; not only for his own sake, but to disguise where he had been. While scrubbing himself, he heard the distant sound of the first bell ringing. Sleep would have to wait. Trying to get any rest now, he would just end up sleeping through his chores at the second and third bell.

Removing the last traces of the sewers from his body, Martel wished he could do the same with his mind. He had no idea what he had encountered down there. Could something have escaped from the catacombs? That seemed the only explanation. As to its nature, Martel hoped he never had reason to find out. He considered whether he should tell someone, such as Master Fenrick. But besides revealing his own presence in the sewers, which he could not explain, he also had little evidence to offer. He knew nothing other than a vague sensation of deep discomfort. A sign of sinister magic, perhaps, but not anything useful enough for anyone to investigate.

After throwing his old robes to be cleaned, Martel got dressed in a fresh set. Sitting on his bed, he found it hard to get up. All the fear, excitement, and his battle reflexes, which had kept him going through the night, had dissipated once he returned to the Lyceum. Sinking down into hot water in the baths had only exacerbated the effect.

But he could not allow his mind to follow the example of his body. Tonight's troubles were not over. The inquisitors might still be on his trail, or watching him in case he made a mistake, such as leading them to Flora and Marcus. Which was another issue to handle; he had to find a way to get her the help she needed.

But first, he had one shift in the apothecary and one in the workshops to complete, exhausted or not.

Sitting alone in a room making ingredients for ink proved a challenge, as very little prevented Martel from falling asleep. More than once, he nodded off, and by the end of his two hours, it could be seen in his small amount of progress. If Master Jerome was disappointed, he kept it to himself and simply treated Martel with his usual, jovial manner.

The apothecary hours proved a little easier to get through. Standing on his feet made it more difficult to fall asleep, as did Nora's presence, reminding him to stay alert; and as she did not actually speak to him much, he did not have to stumble through any conversation either.

When the lunch bell rang, Martel's need to be at the Lyceum came to an end. His time was his own. He wished he could retire to his room for sleep, but Flora needed help. Waiting until he saw Nora in the dining hall, Martel returned to the apothecary. He helped himself to a little blood salve and some fresh bandages, keeping both amounts small; no more than what would be spent on any student in need of wound treatment. Afterwards, he left the castle.

Constantly checking over his shoulder, Martel felt a sting of anxiety every time he saw someone wearing blue clothes. Yet his fears seemed to be for naught; either nobody followed him, or they did a better job at being subtle than Martel had ever known any inquisitor to be. Still, he took a long route towards the copper lanes, even using some of the parts that Weasel had shown him last night. Other times, he rounded a corner and remained in the same place for a while, just to watch if anyone followed in his footsteps. With these precautions, it was already late afternoon by the time he reached the copper lanes.

Inside the house, he found a scene similar to last night. Flora lay on the floor, her face looking lifeless, given what little comfort could be found in terms of improvised pillows and blankets. Marcus sat next to her with a cup of water. "Tried to get her to drink. Not much luck."

Martel knelt beside her. She still breathed, at least, but little else looked promising. He removed the shoddy bandage from last night and replaced it. He knew it would not do much good; the point of blood salve was to close a wound, preventing the patient from bleeding out. Flora seemed to already be at that stage. Around them, some of the children watched, but they seemed otherwise indifferent to the spectacle. Presumably, they had experienced similar situations before.

"I spent half the day going around the city, asking for a surgeon who might save her. But the only ones are across town, charging upfront fees I could never pay. Not even sure she would survive us dragging her that far. Assuming the guards would let us." Marcus sounded as despondent as his words suggested.

"You were right yesterday. She needs magical healing," Martel admitted.

"How do we get that? Can you get one from your school?" The warrior looked at him with an expression swinging back and forth between fear and hope.

The acolyte shook his head. "We'd have to bring her to the infirmary. And they'd report something like this to the guards, so the inquisitors would know."

Martel looked again at the earthmage drawing her shallow breaths. He had only known her for a few months; he would not describe her as a friend the way he would Maximilian or Eleanor.

But they were comrades. Brothers-in-arms, so to say. They trusted each other every time they went into a tough situation. The Night Knives had trained him on chain armour and improved his skill with a staff, doing more to ensure his survival in a fight than his own combat teacher back at the Lyceum. They had treated him as a fellow soldier, even if he was not actually a member of their band. Martel had to do the same for her now.

He thought about the time he had contracted consumption. Master Kelsos had healed him in an instant. Such was not available, but the children in Weasel's gang had also been cured through more obtainable means. "We need a healing potion."