

Firebrand

#Chapter 1: Fire-touched - Read Firebrand Chapter 1: Fire-touched

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Fire-touched

Martel stared at the battlements that for centuries had surrounded the seat of magic in the Empire. Every mage of worth had learned their skills in this hallowed place. To enter the Lyceum meant tutelage, recognition, and power; rejection meant ignorance, ignobility, and the end of dreams. The gate to the castle stood open, always; any hostile power would be repelled by a far greater force than weaponry or masonry. With an ounce of trepidation, Martel crossed the threshold.

Beyond the gate, he found himself in a large hall bustling with activity. People dressed in robes of various colours hurried across the space. Numerous metal tubes ran up the stonework, disappearing into the ceiling. Large cabinets lined another wall, and several writing desks stood in the corner. Behind them sat more people in robes, close to Martel's own age. He had no clue what the colours of their clothes meant, so he simply approached the nearest person, clad in white.

Clearing his throat, Martel waited until the clerk looked up. "I have a letter," he said. While the clerk tapped his fingers impatiently against the desk, Martel fumbled inside his tunic to fish out an envelope. He extended his hand, and the letter slumped down, mirroring Martel's confidence.

The clerk grabbed the envelope. "Alright, who's it for?"

"The overseer, I was told." Martel renewed the grip on his bag, holding his spare clothes and last provisions.

"Great." The young man took a piece of charcoal and drew a strange symbol outside the envelope. Standing up, he walked over to one of the metal tubes on the wall and opened a hatch. Placing his hand over the symbol, it glowed with a light of its own. The envelope took off like a galloping horse, disappearing up the tube.

Martel watched it disappear with alarm. The letter had been his armour, protecting him by giving him a reason to enter the Lyceum. As the clerk returned to his desk, he looked up. "Anything else?" he asked with a clear indication he expected a negative answer and Martel's immediate departure.

"I'm here to take the test," he muttered, belatedly.

"What test? For entrance to the school?" The young man in white stared at Martel with a mixture of disbelief and amusement.

"Yes."

"Mate, how old are you?"

"I'm sixteen."

He gave Martel a look full of pity. "You're about six years too late."

"Maybe he's been apprenticed until now," inserted another clerk in a green robe, sitting at the next desk. "He's just here for the final years."

"Still too late for that." The clerk in white gave Martel a scrutinising look. "I don't know what any hedge wizard told you, but the Lyceum doesn't take students older than fourteen."

"He's not a hedge wizard," Martel replied, finding his voice. "Master Ogion trained at the Lyceum. He wrote the letter." He gazed with longing at the metal tube that had swallowed said parchment. "He said I had the gift."

"You better hope he trained you well if the overseer is going to make an exception for your sake."

As it stood, Master Ogion had not provided any training at all. He had simply written a recommendation for the Lyceum. Anxiety clenched together like a fist in Martel's stomach.

One of the tubes rustled. The clerks exchanged looks. The one in white opened the little hatch and took out a small strip of paper. He looked at Martel. "You're up."

~

Martel walked down the corridor, only getting more anxious. Third door to the right and down the stairs. Easy to find, impossible to miss. Yet he felt like an intruder; he expected every moment someone would grab his arm and pull him back, telling him he did not belong here. Reaching the third door on the right, nobody stopped him. Trying to ignore the pit in his stomach, he continued to the examination room.

It had a table in the middle, and shelves filled most of the walls, holding all manner of strange contraptions, ingredients, flasks, and more. What looked like bits of dissected creatures floated in jars. Eerie light glowed briefly inside a flask before it subsided. Martel guessed these all served the purpose of the hundred examinations placed on

candidates, as Master Ogion had told him. Each of them could, in one way or another, reveal magical talents, should these prove elusive.

A door opposite Martel opened. In strode a tall woman, dressed in a purple robe. His eyes widened; he had never seen any in Engby wear that colour, not even Master Ogion. It exuded a wealth that exceeded what any could afford in his hometown.

The woman appeared no less formidable than her clothing. Her grey eyes stared with determination at Martel, and everything from her mannerisms to her tightly bound hair implied control.

She raised her hand, which held his letter. "You are the boy, Martel."

"Yes, milady." He dropped the bag with his few belongings onto the floor.

"Mistress Juliana," she corrected him. "This letter states you have had no formal training."

There was nothing gained by denying it. "No."

"Do you know the full contents of the letter?"

"Master Ogion said he'd write it to get me tested. So I can be a weathermage like him."

"Well then. Let us see what you can do." With careful movements, she bent down to collect four objects from beneath the table, placing them on top. First, an empty glass bottle. Second, a wooden bowl containing water. Third, a candle in a holder. Last, a metal jar filled to the brim with dirt. The overseer touched the wick of the candle briefly, and a flame sprung from her fingertip to ignite it. She turned her stern eyes towards Martel and pointed at the empty glass bottle. "Move it. Using magic."

Happy to escape her heavy gaze, Martel looked at the object instead. He had no idea how to move it. He stretched out his hand, fingertips aimed at the glass, and tried to focus. He imagined the bottle moving. He frowned his brow in concentration. Absolutely nothing happened.

"Moving on," the overseer declared, and Martel exhaled suddenly, having kept his breath in. "Make the water move." She pointed at the wooden bowl.

Martel let his arm hang limp at his side, stretching out the other instead. Maybe he was left-handed, magically speaking. He felt the pressure to perform intensify. Controlling water was the prime skill for a weathermage. If he could not demonstrate any talent for this, the Lyceum had little reason to train him.

Martel's entire body tensed up as he tried to do – anything. Push his magic out, wield it like a whip, just make it do something.

After what felt like an age, he thought he saw a ripple in the water.

"The candle. Move the flame."

Slightly encouraged, Martel turned his attention towards the object in question. Fire was familiar to him. He felt the warmth of the flame despite the distance. Extending his hand, he simply willed it to come, and it did. Abandoning the candle, the tiny flicker of fire flew across the room to land in his palm. It sat, hovering above his skin without hurting him, burning without fuel.

With a smile, Martel looked up; immediately as his attention faltered, the flame disappeared, as did his happy expression.

The overseer looked at him intently. "The jar. Move the earth inside."

Biting his lip, Martel focused. He imagined reaching out with his magic like a hand, grabbing the jar. It shook. With a triumphant smile, he increased his efforts, only to watch it fall over and spill its contents.

The overseer made a few tiny gestures. The jar jumped upright, and the dirt flew back inside. "We are done."

As she returned the items to their place under the table, Martel stood with open mouth. What about all the other options? What about that strange glass ball swirling with blue fog inside it? Or that odd plant with thorns on it? Maybe if he pricked himself on it, that would show him to be a mage.

Even as Martel considered all of this, he did not dare voice anything. The stern expression upon the overseer, even when not directed at him, kept him mute. She picked up a small stone, white and smooth. She briefly closed her hands around it; when she opened her fingers, it had changed colour to blue. "Go back where you came. Show this to the clerks." She rolled the stone across the table.

Breaking from his stupor, Martel barely caught it. Turning on her heel, the overseer left.

~

Once back in the corridor, Martel held the stone so tightly, his hand cramped. Feeling discarded, disappointment flooded him. It had taken him several fivedays to reach Morcaster, walking most of the way. How was he to return back home, where they had no room for his unskilled hands? He had told them he would return a weathermage, able to protect everyone's crops and prevent anyone from ever starving again.

Returning to the entrance hall, Martel approached the desks with the robed clerks. The one in white looked up. "Look mate, you need to wait for the overseer."

"I'm done," Martel simply said, extending his hand with the blue stone in it.

The clerk stared before he picked up the pebble. His eyes flickered from the stone between his fingertips and Martel's face. "She gave you this?"

"Yes."

"Already?"

"Yes." Martel's frustration began to boil inside him. "What does it mean?"

"That Mistress Juliana made a mistake, I'm guessing."

"Why?"

"Blue means the school will pay for your training. Even though you're too old." The young man turned towards his fellow at the other desk. "Jasper, this got to be a mistake, right?"

"Do you want to tell Mistress Juliana that?" replied the green-robed clerk.

"Point taken. Get the contract, will you?" He looked up at Martel. "Looks like you're in."

Relief flood Martel. "I'm in?"

The clerk in the white robe cracked a smile. "Yes, mate. Let's get you settled." He stood up and threw the blue stone to Jasper. "He has a contract for you to sign."

The clerk in green had dug out a piece of parchment filled with letters. Catching the blue stone, he pressed it against the parchment, leaving an imprint of the same colour at the top. As Martel approached, the scribe pushed a quill and inkwell towards him. "You know how to read?"

"Of course."

"Well, to save us both the time, this is a contract between you and the Lyceum. The school will pay for your training, provide food and lodgings, and so on," the clerk rattled off. "If you fail to graduate, you'll be required to pay back the expenses. If you do graduate, you'll be bound to twenty years of service for the Empire. Paid service, of course."

Just as Master Ogion had warned him. Martel let his eyes run over the parchment before he grabbed the quill and signed his name.

Jasper looked at the parchment. "What else are you called besides Martel?"

The newly minted novice looked at him in confusion. "Nothing?"

"Well, where are you from?"

"Uh, my town's called Engby."

"Write down 'Martel of Engby' then."

He duly did so.

"Henry will show you to your room." He waved in the direction of the white-robed clerk, who stood holding a key.

"Come along, mate."

~

They left the entrance hall, walking down a corridor. Sounds of a hammer striking anvil reached his ears; as the son of a blacksmith, Martel would recognise that noise anywhere. Belatedly, he realised the other youth was talking to him.

"Dormitory for boys is just down here. If you go back to the entrance hall, the adjoining room is the dining hall. Food is served during first, fourth, and seventh bell."

Martel thought about how they had sent messages using magic through the metal tubes in the first hall. "How do they ring the bell?"

Henry shot him a look. "With the rope." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, do you know your specialty?" Keeping a brisk pace, the scribe glanced again at the new novice. "Your particular talents? Mageknight, airmage, stonemage or what?"

"Oh, weather."

Henry nodded. "Alright, elemental stuff like most of us." He tapped his own white robe on the chest, still walking. "I'm an airmage myself. At meals, in class, you'll want to stick to us. White, green, blue, those colours. Or brown for novices like yourself, until you specialise."

They reached the end of the corridor. A large room full of furniture loomed ahead with lots of boys occupying them, wearing a variety of coloured robes as those described by Henry.

"The black tunics are mageknights," he added. A few who fit that description sat in a ring, playing cards. "Lots of them are nobility. They keep to themselves. And if you see any in red, better keep your distance. Battlemages, they got a temper on them." He chuckled and walked inside. Martel hurried after, still taking it all in.

They ascended up a winding staircase in one corner of the common room. "This tower is where all the boys sleep. The girls got their dormitory north of here. Don't be there after last bell, or the floor watchers will make you regret it."

Martel had no such intentions.

"Here we are. I put you on my floor, where I'm the watcher. You got questions, you see me." He pointed at a door. "You need water, the common tap is over there." Another gesture. "Here, your room." Henry advanced to unlock the door marked with seven.

Standing behind, Martel looked in on a sparse cell. A small bed, strewn with hay. A tiny writing desk with a small chair. A commode with an empty bowl on top. All of it stuffed together to barely leave room for anything more.

"Your kingdom," Henry grinned, placing the big key in Martel's hands. "Tomorrow after breakfast, go meet the overseer. She'll give you your schedule. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Alright, I got to get back to my desk. Go down to the ground floor and take the north corridor. Continue ahead, you'll reach the quartermaster," Henry instructed him.

"Who's that?"

"She's in charge of supplies. Bedlinen, paper, ink, all the stuff you need. Clothes too."

"She?" Martel asked.

"Yeah, so?"

"Shouldn't she be the quartermistress then?"

Henry gave him another look. "You ask weird questions. Anyway, I've got to get back. See you later, weather boy."

The acolyte left, and Martel stepped into his room, closing the door. If he stretched out his hands, he could easily reach both walls. The bed was barely long enough for a tall youth like himself. The chair, little more than a stool, was likewise built for someone shorter, it appeared. Martel smiled. He had never had a room to himself before.

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As sunlight waned, the Master of Elements at the Lyceum made his way up the stairs in the western part of the castle, reaching the quarters reserved for the faculty. He knocked on a door until the overseer's voice from inside bade him enter.

"Juliana," he greeted her. Unlike the student accommodations, the room was spacious, even with all its furnishings. A large bookshelf filled one wall, holding many volumes of lore. A big writing desk stood against another; an alcove hid the sleeping spot behind a curtain.

"Alastair. I have a challenge for you."

"I am all ears." He took a seat on the other chair in the room, straightening his purple robe a bit.

"A new pupil. He wishes to be a weathermage. He has skill, though no particular aptitude for water or air."

The Master of Elements stroked his black, grey-sprinkled beard. "Should be possible."

"He is already sixteen, and he has no training hitherto," Juliana added.

"If he has the gift, I will coax it out of him."

"You only have two years."

Alastair frowned. "That'll be tight. Maybe with hard work... why?"

"The headmaster would not allow for more."

"But if the problem is the boy's age, surely allowing him the full four years is all the more prudent."

The overseer's expression changed from stern to briefly sardonic. "Yes, but the headmaster's political ambitions are better served by disdain towards students from Nordmark."

Alastair sighed. "Very well. But now I wonder why you would push for this boy to be accepted."

Juliana picked up a letter from her desk and handed it to him. "Ogion sent him to us."

Alastair's eyes ran over the missive. "Has this been confirmed? Is Ogion right?"

She nodded. "I tested the boy. It was clear as day. Do we understand each other?"

"I see. Yes. I'll teach him in private." The Master of Elements took a deep breath. "Nobody will know he is fire-touched."

Chapter 2: Scarecrow

Scarecrow

An unfamiliar sound woke Martel. Not the noise of siblings, the roar of the forge being lit, or the neighbour's rooster greeting the sun. A bell, tolling loudly.

Likewise, he did not recognise his surroundings as he opened his eyes. Clothes lay on a stool. An ink set rested atop a small desk. An unlit candle and an empty bowl stood on a commode. Strangest of all, he was alone. He smiled as he surveyed his fiefdom, all his.

He washed and put on the brown robe issued to him as a novice. Being possibly the tallest novice to attend the Lyceum, it ended several inches above where it should. The quartermaster had promised a better-fitting one, but it would take time.

Reaching the dining hall quickly, he found it empty. The many long tables stood waiting for students; as for food, neither sight nor scent reached him.

A boy appeared, carrying a stack of wooden bowls taller than his head. He looked at Martel. "Someone's hungry. Guess you didn't outgrow your clothes for no reason." He cast a look at where Martel's robe proved too short to reach his ankles.

"I heard the bell," Martel explained, a tad confused.

The other boy laughed. "Just to wake people up. We still got to make breakfast first. You'll be waiting a while."

~

At least Martel was first in line to fill a wooden bowl with porridge. Other students still trickled into the hall by the time he had finished. He noticed some brought their own small parcels of food, mostly bread or fruit, to supplement their breakfast. He felt a tad envious, but lacking coin, it was not an option for him at present. Instead, he remembered his first task of the day.

Making his way through the school, asking for directions a few times, he reached the chambers of the overseer.

"Enter."

Martel opened the door. He glanced around the room, noticing the wealth of books upon her shelves. As for Mistress Juliana, she sat at the desk with her back towards him. He could only see her hair, already tied up in a knot, until she looked over her shoulder.

"Martel. Good." She rose, holding a piece of parchment in her hand. "I have your schedule for the coming months." She handed it to him, and he looked at it eagerly. "You will learn elemental magic for two bells on Pelday and Glunday. For Malday, two

bells of empowerment magic. Manday is reserved for astronomy at present. Normally, you would begin learning the theory of magic, but time does not permit we wait until a new class begins, so you will learn astronomy first."

Martel only listened with half an ear, his mind filled with thoughts of learning magic. "Great."

"Some mealtimes have been highlighted. You will be required to work in the kitchen to help. When you hear the bell ring, make your way there immediately."

"Got it."

"As for Solday, you have no classes. But you will be assisting the artificer of the Lyceum according to his requirements, as your schedule shows."

Martel frowned briefly, having no idea who that was or what it entailed. "Very well."

The overseer placed her hand on Martel's shoulder; despite his height, she was even taller, which coupled with her thin frame only made her seem more intimidating. "Martel, you are expected to graduate in two years. I encourage you to spend your spare time practising your skills."

"Two years? I thought I had four."

The overseer let her hand fall away. "The headmaster would not agree to that. Yet the Master of Elements and I are confident you can accomplish this in the given time."

If Martel had been better at interpreting tone of voice or body language, he would have seen signs contradicting the certainty expressed in Mistress Juliana's words. Instead, he simply smiled. "Alright."

~

Leaving the overseer's chamber, he went to a door in the corridor that had caught his eye earlier. With a nervous excitement, he entered the library. He inclined his neck to stare at bookshelves at least ten feet tall. The room itself probably measured thirty by thirty paces, with rows of shelves every other pace. Each of them stacked with books. Martel could scarcely fathom the amount of knowledge stuffed into this space.

"Wash and dry your hands before you touch anything," came an admonishing voice. Down the aisle stood a gaunt man, wearing an undyed, woollen robe. His eyes had the weary stare of a man spending his life protecting books against being manhandled by irreverent students.

"Of course," Martel hurried to say. "I am not here to read anything yet, though. I just wanted to see the library."

The librarian gave him a scrutinising look. "New student? Your parents must have fed you well." Before Martel could consider a reply, he spoke again. "This floor is open to novices. Once you become an acolyte and learn the runes, you will be able to use the door to the upper floor." He turned to point at a doorway in the opposite end. "Don't get an older student to open it for you, and don't remove books from the library. Either offence could see you expelled."

"Understood," Martel mumbled.

~

The time had come for Martel's first lesson. He made his way to the Hall of Elements, taking a deep breath before he pushed the doors open. Beyond, he found a large, vaulted room. Unlike the other halls illuminated by white-glowing crystals, the space had lamps burning with genuine fire along the walls. The floor was peculiar. Circular, the outer edge was stone like the rest of the Lyceum; a ring of water flowed next around the room, too narrow for any to fall in. Finally, the inner part was dirt. One might have expected it to be stamped hard, like the floor of any peasant's hut, but instead, the earth lay scattered and broken much like a newly tilled field.

In the centre stood a short man, wearing a purple robe. Upon hearing the doors open, he turned towards them and smiled. "You must be Martel. Come, boy, join me." Martel did so, walking to the centre of the room to approach the mage. "I hear you're to be my newest student. Do you know who I am?"

"The Master of Elements."

"Indeed. Alastair's my name. And this, appropriately, is the Hall of Elements where I teach." The wizard gestured at the surrounding space. "Mistress Juliana says you may have what it takes to be a watermage."

Martel's heart jumped in his chest. "Oh, yes, master. I want to be a weathermage more than anything."

"You've come to the right place. I imagine you have guessed why this hall is built the way it is?"

Martel glanced around. He noticed in the intervals between the burning lamps, holes could be seen in the stonework. "All the elements are here. Fire, water, earth, air."

"Good. Let's see what you can do."

"I couldn't do much with water," Martel admitted. "When the overseer tested me."

"A little is all it takes. Close your eyes, boy," the master commanded. Martel obeyed. "Think of the water you just saw in this room. You know it's there, even if you cannot

see it. Imagine it in your mind," Master Alastair's voice continued. "Imagine that it moves. Around and around the circle it flows. Do not lose focus. Do not cease to think about it. Keep going."

Martel was not sure how long he did this. Most likely, only a handful of moments, but it felt like forever. Other thoughts kept intruding, battering against the walls of his concentration.

"Boy, come look." Martel opened his eyes to find Master Alastair standing with his feet across the circular stream. Joining him, the youth looked down to see the water had been disturbed, making little waves.

"Not much," the youth conceded, unable to hide the disappointment in his voice.

"It's a start," Master Alastair told him. "Let's try something else. I was told you could control fire with greater ease. Could you summon the flame from that lamp?" He pointed towards the wall.

Eager to impress, Martel held out his hand. "More than that, master." From his palm, a tiny flame sprung forth. The only type of magic Martel was able to control, but when he had shown it to Master Ogion, it had been enough to gain the old sage's aid.

With a surprised laugh, Master Alastair placed his hand inside the flame. It was cold and flickered as it met his touch. "Well done, boy."

Martel felt pride swell in him, breaking his focus, and the flame disappeared, efficiently dispelling his brief sense of accomplishment.

Master Alastair laughed again. "Let's go back to water."

~

When the fourth bell rang, ending the lesson, it took Martel a moment to remember his schedule; for Pelday, he was to help make lunch. Thankfully, the Hall of Elements lay near the dining hall and thus the kitchens. Bowing his head and mumbling his gratitude to Master Alastair, Martel hurried to his chore.

Upon his arrival, he was tossed a peeling knife and vegetables. It was a strange pace to go from manipulating the elements of nature through magical skill to peeling carrots, but his labour served as payment for room and board, not to mention the tuition. If that required him to disembowel the odd potato once a day, so be it.

As he settled into his chores, he found himself more comfortable than he would have expected. It took him a moment to recognise why. For the first time since leaving his home, he felt at ease. While certainly these kitchens were far greater than the modest home of his family in Engby, the sounds and smells were the same. Large pots boiled

over a crackling fire while the scent of food permeated the air. Nobody gave him strange glances or made remarks, busy with their own tasks.

It lasted until he had to carry out a tray of wooden bowls to the dining hall. A handful of students already sat waiting, impatiently. All their eyes turned to Martel as he entered. "Look at the scarecrow!" yelled one wit, causing laughter.

Mindful of his ill-fitting robe, Martel felt his cheeks flush. He all but dropped the bowls in their place, eager to escape back into the promised sanctuary of the kitchen.

The witty student quickly got up to block Martel's path; he wore a black tunic. "Hold a moment. How can it be that I have never noticed your gangly frame ambling about before?"

By his speech, Martel could tell the other boy came from a home with stone floors and servants, and he felt no desire to tangle with him. But as he tried to move past, his interrogator simply extended a hand and pushed Martel back.

The shove came with such force, it seemed impossible; it took Martel a moment to realise the boy must have used some kind of magic.

"I await an answer, little novice."

"I'm new here," Martel mumbled.

"Hah! New to the Lyceum and new to Morcaster, by your speech. And the blue in your eyes betray a northern influence in your blood. Half-breed, are we?"

Martel looked into the dark, condescending eyes of his counterpart, not quite his own height. It took him a moment to digest the insult. He had spent his life in a small town in the northern province bordering the Tyrian lands; it had never occurred to him that any might mock him for having physical features revealing Tyrian ancestry.

"It would seem the question has left the beast dumb, or at least, dumbfounded." The mageknight smirked, looking towards his companions with a clear expectation of laughs. "To be expected from a scarecrow too big for his breeches."

"Yes," Martel finally replied with rising anger, "I got Tyrian blood. Yes, my parents fed me well. Yes, I've outgrown my clothes." He pushed forward, catching the other boy off-guard, who fell to the ground. Hurrying past, Martel fled into the kitchen.

One of the servants, who had watched from the door, gave him a smile. "You know who that is?"

"Who?" Martel asked with a sinking feeling.

"I don't know his name, but his father is the duke of Cheval. I bet everyone enjoyed seeing him on his back. Well, except for himself." The servant slapped Martel on the shoulder. "You should probably keep an eye out."

"I'll just keep my distance," Martel considered. "He's ahead of me in his classes. No reason we should have anything to do with each other." Ignorant of how fate worked, he resumed his chores in the kitchens.

~

An hour later, when the meal had been finished and Martel's duties completed, he left the kitchen. He had only made it halfway through the dining hall when a shout got his attention. "Out of the way!"

Stepping aside, Martel watched two men carrying a stretcher. On top lay a young man, barely older than himself, wearing the green robe of an earthmage. His eyes stared emptily at Martel, who could not help but stare back. In addition to his lack of expression, his cheeks looked hollow, and his lips were cracked as if suffering from terrible thirst.

Besides the sick or wounded youth, Martel's attention was caught by two others. One walked ahead of the stretcher – it was him who had called out – and his companion followed behind. They walked clad the same in dark blue cloaks clasped with a sun. Along their belts ran a thin golden chain, and their bootstraps were made from the same metal. Martel had only once seen men in such raiment before. They were inquisitors from the Faith of the Sun, tasked with hunting down all things unnatural and evil – including maleficars such as necromancers and warlocks. Mages using their magic for ill purposes. The inquisitors scowled briefly at Martel as they led the servants with the stretcher through the hall to the infirmary, gone as swiftly as they had appeared.