

# Firebrand

## Chapter 11: Circling Stars

### Circling Stars

If Malday was Martel's least favourite, Solday might be his preferred. No classes with condescending students or a sneering teacher. Only some tasks in the workshop with the artificer, who might even teach him a new skill or two. After eating a hefty breakfast, like he did every morning, Martel made his way to the workshop even before the bell rang.

"Good morning, Master Jerome!"

"I see my little – or should I say tall – hammer is ready for work," the artificer laughed.

"Yes, master."

"Well, we are still short in the washery, so I can use you there. I know it's not interesting work, but we have plenty of Soldays ahead for that."

"Whatever you need, master."

~

Two hours of washing and wringing passed by with ease. Even before the bell had rung, Master Jerome sought out Martel while waving a letter about in his hand. "Martel," he called out, gaining the boy's attention. "I need a courier again today if – what is that?"

Martel followed the artificer's gaze, landing on the bruises on his arms. He dropped the clothes in his hands and pulled his sleeves down. "I have combat lessons on Maldays."

Master Jerome's eyes darkened. "You're a novice. You shouldn't be learning combat."

"I have advanced classes, to help me finish school faster."

The artificer crossed his arms. "None mentioned to me that you'd be requiring armour for your lessons."

"Armour?"

"Of course! Some hardened leather will take the brunt of those beatings." Master Jerome's face darkened. "I will have words with that teacher of yours who let this happen."

Martel's instinct was to dissuade Master Jerome, avoiding conflict, but he stopped himself; he saw no reason to say anything in aid of Master Reynard.

"You needed a courier?"

"First things first," the artificer said. "Follow me."

They left the washery, returning to the central room of the workshop full of tools and equipment. The artificer dug through a box until he pulled out a ribbon, filled with numbers.

"Stand here. Stretch out your arms."

Confused but compliant, Martel obeyed. Quickly, Master Jerome measured the length of his limbs and most of his body. With a knife, he scratched down a few numbers down on a piece of bark.

"You have combat lessons on Maldays, you said?"

"Aye, master."

"That should be time enough. Alright, on to my original business."

"What is it, master?"

The artificer grabbed the letter from before. "As you must have guessed, I've commissioned Master Farhad to make one of his Khivan time pieces for us."

Finally, Martel understood. A watch was a timekeeper, apparently some special kind from Khiva. That explained the sundial over his workshop. The word still made no sense, except maybe if someone obsessively watched the time, but at least he knew now. "Oh yes, I figured."

"I've been arranging things with him through letter. His daughter, pretty little thing, brought me one the other day."

Martel remembered when Shadi had come to visit. That had been his favourite day so far at the Lyceum.

"She asked that my most handsome student deliver the next one. But since you already know where Master Farhad lives, I figured it was simpler to ask you again." Master

Jerome's eye twinkled until Martel understood it was a jest. "You'll be paid for your troubles, of course."

"I'll bear the burden," the novice accepted with a wry smile of his own. In fact, he would have offered to do it without payment until he remembered that last time, Shadi bought him food. It was only right he returned the favour, yet he spent nearly all his few coins sending a letter to his mother. "Master Jerome, could I be paid in advance?"

The artificer frowned. "Have you an urgent need for coin?"

"Well, last time, Shadi – that's Master Farhad's daughter – paid for my lunch. I would like to return the favour."

A grin spread across Master Jerome's face. "Who am I to stand in the way of such admirable goals? Wait one moment."

While Martel did so, the artificer disappeared into an inner room. He emerged soon after and let copper coins drop into Martel's hand, one by one, until they counted eight.

"A little extra given your particular need," he spoke, still with a smile. "But I expect prompt delivery!"

"At once, master!"

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This time, Martel had no need to steer by the harbour to find the Khivan enclave. Having walked home to the Lyceum from that particular destination, he simply retraced his steps. After an hour's walking or so, he noticed the change from great insulae built in stone to simpler houses, sometimes little more than hovels, made from wood. The Khivan tongue was spoken as frequently as Asterian on the street, and the people wore a mixture of clothing.

Soon, the sign with the sundial beckoned him. He found the door open and stepped inside after knocking. A strange ticking sound reached his ears, coming from elsewhere. A middle-aged man sat by a workbench, wearing a strange device in front of his eye. He sat with a thin tool in one hand and a tiny nail between the fingertips of the other. A wealth of mechanical gears and weights lay before him. Martel knew such were used in machinery; once, a caravan had passed through Engby carrying a few of these items for repairs.

Martel had to cough, and the sound sent a start through the craftsman. He dropped his tool and nail with a Khivan exclamation, which the boy imagined to be a swearword. He whipped his head to look at Martel, showing that the strange thing in front of his eye appeared as little circles of glass. "Who are you?" He spoke Asterian with a thick accent, but understandable regardless.

"I'm – I'm Martel, Master Farhad. I have a letter from the Lyceum."

"Knock when next time, boy," the man grumbled in his strong accent, adding a few more Khivan curses. "Bloody nail, I'll never find you," he added, bending down below his workbench to let his hands search the floor.

"Martel!" From the stairs, Shadi descended. "Here with another letter?"

"Aye," he replied. He extended the item in question towards Farhad, which helped little, as the latter's eyes and knees were on the floor. "I did knock," Martel mumbled in his own defence.

"I'll take it since dad is busy kissing the ground." Shadi grabbed the letter. "I'll remind him of it later. Hey, want to go outside?"

"Shouldn't we help?" Martel felt guilty watching the man fumble around for his lost nail.

"Hardly room for more of us under that bench," Shadi pointed out.

"But we don't need to look." The room was cold in winter; they had no source of heat in the room. Martel could feel Shadi and her father's warmth, and little else except a tiny piece of metal, heated up by being held between fingertips. It had jumped quite a distance. Guided by the sense of warmth, Martel bent down and picked it up.

"Dad, look." Shadi's request caused no change. "Dad. Dad!"

Finally, Farhad raised his head. "Do not trouble me, daughter! You know what the smith charges to make nail? Outrageous when little metal spent."

"Dad, Martel found your splinter." Shadi pointed at the nail lying in Martel's hand.

"I suppose that makes up for scaring living fire out of me," Farhad grumbled. "Good eye, boy, I admit." He picked it up carefully from Martel's palm.

"Oh, I could feel the heat on it from your fingertips, master. I'm – I'm good with fire, and heat is nothing but a residue of elemental fire. According to Master Alastair," Martel added a little awkwardly.

Farhad stared underneath bushy, black eyebrows without comprehension.

"Dad, this is Martel, he's a novice at the Lyceum. He brought you a letter." Shadi placed the parchment in her father's hand.

Farhad gave Martel another glance turned discerning. "You are mage."

"Training to be, yes, master."

"You like my daughter?"

Martel's cheeks, untouched by the frost outside, turned red. "Well – she's – I mean."

"Dad, he's my friend, don't scare him away. We're going to get something hot to eat," Shadi said.

"Yes, go. Not to disturb my labour. Go, go." Farhad made a shooing motion with his hand before returning to his place at the workbench. Grinning, Shadi grabbed Martel's sleeve and pulled him along with her.

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This time, they got bread with cheese, seasoned by herbs Martel had never heard about before. Regardless, the taste was great. "So that's your dad," he remarked between bites as they walked down the street.

"Yeah. He's a bit brusque, also because he doesn't speak Asterian so well. So he doesn't always know how to be polite."

"I did disturb his work, I guess. But I knocked, I swear."

"He always gets so absorbed, he wouldn't notice if the house fell down around him." Shadi laughed.

"Is it just you and him?"

"Yeah. My parents came here from Khiva shortly before I was born. They didn't have kids before me, and my mum died giving birth to me."

"Stars, I'm sorry!"

She shrugged. "I never knew her. Sometimes I might feel sad, thinking about it, but when it's all you've known, you're used to it." fr eewebn ovel.com

"What made your parents come to Morcaster?"

"Well, the way my dad tells it, Khiva has lots of good watchmakers, Aster had none." She shrugged again. "Mechanical clocks, that is. He just went where he figured people would buy his work."

"Well, since the Lyceum is buying from him, he must have been right."

"We do alright. Got enough money for food, clothes, and rent. That's all you can ask for, sometimes."

"You rent?"

"Yeah, of course. We can't own land."

Martel halted in his tracks, sending her a disturbed look. "Why not?"

She gave a little frown in return. "We're not citizens, Martel. Nobody in the enclave is. We all have to rent our homes."

"I had no idea. Though I guess lots of tenants living on the noble estates don't own their homes either, but that's because they're too poor."

"What about your family?"

"My dad was a smith. My brother has his forge now. I got plenty of siblings though, both older and younger."

"Your mum?"

"She's also back home. I'll be going back when I'm done," Martel explained. "Be a weathermage for Nordmark. Some of it, anyway. It's too big for one mage to handle all of it."

"Hey, show me some magic!"

"Uh, sure." Martel's bag of tricks remained pitiful, but he did have something new to show. He stopped in front of a house with vines growing up the wall. The small leaves had inklings of frost remaining. "Stretch out your palm."

With an expectant smile, Shadi extended her open hand.

Reaching out, Martel pulled at all the little droplets on the vine. Not all heeded his call, and he felt almost out of breath, but his focus did not break. Across the air they travelled, joining together to form a drop the size of a thumb nail. It floated over to land on Shadi's palm. She looked from the water to Martel, her eyes as glowing as her smile.

~

Martel made sure to return in time for supper at the Lyceum; he had tried going to bed hungry more than once and did not care to repeat the experience. Afterwards, he knew he had to put some work into his studies; he had spent the entire day so far without doing anything related to magic. The thought of creating the star chart for astronomy class hung around his neck like a millstone, which was all the more reason to work on it rather than delay.

Moving up the tower, he found it like yesterday, already occupied by Eleanor. He had not seen her since their argument yesterday, the thought of which now embarrassed him. He already knew the noblebloods looked down on him for his ancestry and ambition, both fitting that of a peasant; he had only given her more stones to throw by revealing the state of his family and his private grief.

Their eyes briefly met as she raised her gaze to see who entered. Both turned theirs aside and pointedly avoided words or further looks. Martel collected his items and chose the writing desk furthest from hers. He unfurled his star chart, which at present only deserved that title as intention; it barely held any of the celestial objects and circles that it should.

With a little sigh, Martel trotted over to collect the great tome containing the arithmetic. His mind absent, distracted by the thought of impending equations, he forgot the battered state of his arms. Pulling down the book from the shelf, he underestimated its weight and dropped it with a loud slam to the ground.

"Clumsy fool!" Eleanor exclaimed, hurrying over.

With his ears burning with embarrassment, not to mention the fear that he had damaged an item worth more than a lifetime of menial labour, Martel did not need her reproach. "It's fine," he declared, hoping it to be true. "It landed on the side. It didn't tear or anything." He bent down to quickly pick it up, his arms protesting at the demand made upon them.

"Let me handle it," Eleanor said sharply. As she grabbed the book from his hands, her movements suddenly became arrested. His sleeves had fallen up, and she stared at the heavy bruising along his arms, painting all of his skin either black, blue, purple, or yellow, according to age.

If his ears had been red before, his whole face now felt like an open flame. Even worse to see Eleanor handle the great tome with ease; he realised she was using her magic to help her lift the burden. A magical skill he had yet to learn.

She did not speak, and he did not look to see her expression. "I'll come back later," he mumbled.

"No, it is fine. Resume your work. I have made good progress already." She placed the book on his desk and cleared her own without further words before leaving him alone.

## **Chapter 12: A Balm for the Mind**

### A Balm for the Mind

For the first time since his arrival, Martel went to his class in elemental magic with confidence. As novices streamed past him, their own lesson finished, he did not mind

their glances or giggling remarks. Walking inside, he found Alastair returning the hall to its normal state. Earth became smooth, water filtered out from the dirt and stones and back to the channel, and the lamps on the walls were reignited.

"You're here on the bell," the master remarked.

"I did it," Martel told him excitedly.

Master Alastair's expression turned to a smile. "Show me."

One foot on either side of the circular channel, Martel stared down at the water. From it, drops began to rise into the air. One after the other until his focus broke and they fell back down.

The teacher slapped his hands together. "Well done, boy!"

"Thank you, master," Martel replied, feeling pride wash over him.

"The exercises worked."

Martel hesitated to explain, as it might sound like criticism of his teacher's methods, but his desire to be truthful won out. "I don't quite know how it worked, to be honest. It was the other night, I stood by my window and watched the stars. And somehow, I just felt like a door opening inside of me, and magic flowed through."

The Master of Elements watched him with a scrutinising gaze that Martel could not dissect. "If that's what was needed, I'm glad. Now the real work begins."

"I can't wait, master."

"But first, there's something I must explain to you."

"Yes?"

"Once you've unlocked your powers properly, you'll begin to use magic for much longer periods of time," Master Alastair began to explain. "You will find that doing so tires you out."

"Tires me? Like, if I have been running?"

The master smiled. "Something of the sort. Using magic drains strength from your body. You will eventually become exhausted and require rest."

"So using magic is like physical labour?"

"Similar to it, yes. Usually, Master Fenrick would inform you of this in your lessons on magical theory, but since you're taking classes out of order, I thought it best to inform you now."

"So if I get tired from doing magic, I should rest?" That seemed simple enough.

"In a nutshell. Mages tend to push themselves beyond their limits, even to the point where they might lose consciousness," Master Alastair warned. "You should never risk that. Some of the cautionary tales even mention wizards that exerted themselves to such a degree, it killed them."

"I'll be careful," Martel promised. He could not imagine ever needing to push himself like that.

"Good." The master smiled. "Let us begin honing your skills."

~

Once Martel had finished helping with lunch, he had a free bell before his second lesson. He went to the western courtyard to take advantage of its cold solitude. The frost between the blades of grass gave him all the water he needed to practise his newfound skills; while Master Alastair's warning remained in memory, he did not feel tired at all, and he relished the opportunity to sharpen his abilities.

Seated by the statue of Atreus, fast becoming one of his favourite spots, Martel reached out to feel the moisture surrounding him. He imagined this was how the spider felt in the web, with countless strands stretching out. Martel called to the water, doing his best to gather it all. There was little response, but his efforts did not go unheeded; some drops, apparently more willing than their brethren, stumbled over grass and leaf to gather in a tiny pool before where Martel sat.

"Look at the half-blood! Thirsty?" Cheval's mocking voice rang out.

Raising his eyes, Martel saw his tormentor stalking across the yard. His two friends from class followed. Maximilian, the broad-shouldered one, and the other still unknown to Martel. While they set a course that led across the open space and back inside, Cheval moved towards the novice.

"Playing with water, scarecrow?"

Martel bit his lip to keep quiet. One against three, all of them years ahead of him, would not work out in his favour.

"You're playing a good scarecrow, being mute," Cheval jeered, towering over him.

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Clenching his fists, Martel felt a fire begin to burn inside of him.

"Come on, Guillaume," Maximilian said impatiently. "It is colder than the Nether out here. Leave the boy be."

"Yeah, you have a whole lesson tomorrow to put the peasant in his place," the third boy interjected.

"True enough," said the young nobleman. "You and I will have lots and lots of lessons together, is that not so, scarecrow?"

Martel's hands felt hot. Like the flame stood ready to burst out. As Cheval's laughter spread across the clearing, the novice took deep breaths. Finally, the mocking voice became lower as the mageknight walked away, following his companions inside.

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After his second lesson, Martel had lost his appetite for practising in the courtyard. Instead, he went to the astronomy tower, though not to work on his chart; he had no stomach either for another encounter with Eleanor. Rather, he went all the way to the top. Up here, above the noise and smells of the city, he finally felt free to breathe again. Only the lonely cry of a seagull disturbed him.

He looked up as dusk arrived, slowly pulling the curtain of stars over the sky. Martel still did not know what had happened; how their light had helped him with his magic. He had so much to learn. He understood that in the grand scheme of things, the other students did not matter. Only attaining his silver wand as a weather mage. Far above him, the star Glund blinked.

~

After supper, Martel retired to his room. He would practise in the safety of his own chamber, avoiding any disturbance. Already, he felt that he had improved. He could do more than simply affect the water; it moved as he wanted, albeit unsteadily and only in small amounts. His range was also far too limited for someone meant to call rain down from the sky in times of drought.

A knock interrupted him. Rolling his eyes in annoyance, Martel got up and pulled his door open. His mouth fell down a little in surprise, seeing Eleanor outside.

"Oh good, I found you." She stood, shifting her weight from leg to leg as if nervous. "We mageknights use this for bruises and such." She extended her hand, which held a jar. "If you empty it, the apothecary would like the jar back. In the infirmary."

Martel accepted the proffered item, looking from Eleanor down to his hand. "Thanks," he mumbled, still taken aback. fre(e)webno(v)el

"My pleasure." Still looking uneasy, she turned away. "Goodnight."

It took Martel a moment to remember his manners. "Goodnight," he muttered, barely possible for her to hear as she was already at the stairs.

Stepping back to close and lock his door, Martel smelled the contents of the jar. It had a strange odour, unfamiliar to him. He considered briefly if this was some kind of trickery, but dismissed the thought. While he found it strange that Eleanor would show him any courtesy, she seemed the sort to speak her mind rather than resort to underhanded ways if she meant to harm him.

Cautiously, Martel dug out some of the ointment and spread it across his miscoloured arm. It took a few moments before a cooling sensation set in and the ache lessened. Satisfied, Martel proceeded to apply the balm elsewhere on his limbs where needed. Sitting down on his bed, he placed the jar on his commode before leaning back to enjoy the relief. It only occurred to him later that such medicine would have to be costly, and quite possibly, Eleanor had paid for it with her own coin.