

Firebrand

Chapter 13: Defenceless

Defenceless

For the day's first lesson with the other novices, Martel seemed to be ignored by his teacher, which suited him fine. Unlike with Master Alastair, he felt no need to share his breakthroughs, even if his experiment with the feather pen had proven his ability to conjure the shield. He could not imagine Master Reynard would care or offer any help. Instead, Martel retreated to a corner of the arena that served as the outdoor gymnasium and resumed his small exercises to improve his magical shield.

He knew that he attracted stares and laughs from the novices, but he was finally past caring. In a year, he would be an acolyte, and they would still be novices. As long as he passed his courses, of course. Which included empowerment magic. He would never have much need for this afterwards; so Martel accepted that his teacher did not care, and in turn, did not care either. He just needed to pass, and he would never have to set foot in this arena again.

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Once released from the tedium of the lesson, Martel decided to handle a quick errand. He returned to his room, collecting the jar of balm given him by Eleanor. While most of the ointment remained, he wanted to know what debt he owed her for its purchase, which required a visit to the apothecary.

This workshop of tinctures and potions lay in a part of the Lyceum near the Hall of Elements, yet hitherto unseen by him. Each time Martel had walked past the doors to this wing, he had hurried onwards. Even the muted sounds or faint smell brought unpleasant memories. Unable to avoid it any longer, he braced himself before stepping into the infirmary.

It was a large hall, filled with beds. Most of them held patients, whose complaints, moans, or winces resounded through the space. The air lay heavy with blood and sickness. Besides making Martel gag, it summoned undesirable images to his mind.

His father lying in bed at home, pale and sweating. Growing weaker every day. A small wound, yet infected and thus able to fell a large and strong man. Watching him waste away until death claimed him... A particularly loud outburst born of agony tore Martel from his thoughts. He hurried through the room, past the nurses who assisted the Master of Healing.

It took him a moment before his eyes found the door with the word apothecary written upon it. He knocked; when no response came, he dared to open the door and enter regardless.

Inside, he found it as he expected. Every wall held shelves bursting with ingredients, whether powders, liquids, or strange pieces of animals. Herbs hung drying from the rafters, and the tables held various tools. Mortar and pestle, a handful of knives, countless glassware in all shapes and sizes, and more. One large shelf held scores of flacons and vials, each containing liquids in different colours.

Enamoured by all he saw, Martel only noticed the short woman at work as the last. She wore the green robe of an earthmage acolyte, though it had extra markings; while he could not interpret them exactly, he knew it meant she had already progressed beyond simple elemental magic. Guessing by her location, he assumed her specialty lay in potions.

"Sorry," he spoke, clearing his throat.

The woman whipped her head to look over her shoulder before she relaxed. "Oh. I didn't hear the door open." She placed a mortar and pestle on the nearby table and turned around. "What do you need?" (n)ovel

"You're the apothecary?"

"I'm the apprentice for Mistress Rana. Whatever you need, I can handle it."

"I just have a simple question, really." Martel dug out the jar. "This balm is used for bruises and such. I wondered what such a jar cost?"

"Let me see." She reached out her hand to take it from him and put it up to her nose. "Right, skin salve. It's seventeen silver pieces, and you get one piece back if you return the jar." She handed it back to him. "Do you need one?"

"Oh, no, thanks. Not at present." Martel had never owned more than a few silver coins at a time, usually given by his father to be spent at market faire and the like. Given he had used all he had earned from Master Jerome as swiftly as he earned it, he needed to find more work to stand a chance of repaying Eleanor.

Just as Martel was about to leave, a nurse poked her head in. "Where's Mistress Rana?"

"She's away gathering herbs. I'm handling the apothecary today."

"If you see her, tell her that Master Kelsos is looking for her." The nurse lowered her voice. "The inquisitors found another."

"Again?" The apprentice frowned, looking troubled. "But they just brought one in?"

The nurse nodded. "Aye, it happened again." She glanced at Martel in his novice robe. "Well, I better get back to work."

As she disappeared, Martel nodded at the apprentice and left the apothecary as well. Back in the infirmary, he easily saw the object of the conversation. Several people stood gathered to the side around a bed. A tall, gaunt man wearing a dark blue robe with countless patterns, who Martel assumed to be the Master of Healing. Next to him stood two inquisitors, wearing the uniform of their order along with golden chains for incapacitating mages. As they moved about, Martel caught a glance of the patient in the bed.

He felt a twitch go through his body upon recognising the unfortunate soul. Though Martel did not know his name, he recognised him to be the third boy that followed Cheval and Maximilian of Marche around. He lay immobile with his eyes staring into empty air, as if dead.

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Although a haunting sight, Martel knew better than to let it spoil his appetite. He ate as usual for lunch and did his typical check for letters at the desk in the entrance hall.

"One moment," said Henry, the airmage acolyte. "Think I saw something." He opened the cabinet by the wall and dug through until he could pull out a note. "Yep, thought so."

"Thanks." Martel accepted the piece of parchment, unfolding it to read.

Your armour is ready.

Master Jerome

Martel had forgotten all about it. With an eager step, he hurried to the workshop.

He found it bustling with activity as usual, though the artificer was not present in the outer rooms. Braving the inner parts of the workshop, Martel passed by acolytes busy preparing ink, quills, parchment, and other such resources, until he came upon Master Jerome.

"Ah, the tallest of novices! Mind your head."

"I received your message." Martel waved the slip of parchment around.

The craftsman snapped it from his hand. "You brought it back. Good, no need to waste good parchment. But you're here for your new garments. Follow me."

He led Martel to another room, holding all sorts of leather pieces in different stages of preparation. From a pole, he took down a large leather tunic meant to be laced in the front.

"Your robe should be loose enough to fit this underneath. Give it a try."

Martel disrobed and put the tunic on top of his undergarments. The leather was surprisingly hard, feeling more like metal. It fit him well, covering even his arms and down to his thighs. He moved about a bit, trying to get accustomed to the sensation of being wrapped up, before he put his robe back on.

"That should help." Master Jerome punched him on the shoulder.

Martel flinched and pulled away on instinct; only afterwards did he realise that he had hardly felt anything. A sudden grin appeared on his face.

"Feels good, eh?" The artificer responded with the same expression while flexing his fingers after the punch.

"Thank you, Master Jerome. This is such a relief."

"Don't mention it. Any student with combat training is meant to get one of these. I'm just sorry I didn't know earlier."

"Well, this will make the rest of the year much better." Martel smiled again, though as he spoke, his voice became hesitant. "Do – do I get to keep it? Do I owe the school for it?"

"We'd be a poor school if we didn't supply you with the materials you need. You get to keep it, boy, and may it serve you well."

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Arriving at his combat lesson with the mageknights, Martel felt calm for once. Although hidden under his robe, the hardened leather instilled him with confidence. No more being the whipping boy. He came as one of the last; the acolytes had already begun practising with various weapons. Maximilian had a hammer, Eleanor had a sword; Martel could not see Cheval anywhere, which suited him fine.

"Boy," Master Reynard called out. Unlike when Master Jerome used the term, it smacked of condescension rather than affection. "I assume you have picked up some basic defensive skills with all your fivedays using the staff." He barely looked at Martel nor seemed to care much whether his assumption had any basis in truth. "We will move on to actually using empowering magic. That is, I shall attempt, probably in vain, to teach you how to use magic for strength."

"There he is," a voice called out. Everyone turned to see Cheval arriving with a pair of inquisitors. Martel instantly felt uneasy at the sight, which proved to be for good reason as the mageknight pointed at him. "The gangly scarecrow in the brown robe. That is the one you want."

Master Reynard approached. "What is this? Why do you disturb my lesson?"

"We are investigating the possibility of a maleficar. You would be wise not to hinder us." The inquisitor spoke with a menacing edge to his voice.

"We need to question the boy. The novice," added the other.

Master Reynard looked over his shoulder at Martel and shrugged. "Take him."

Martel began to protest. Though he might have expected as much from the man, he still felt betrayed by his teacher. The inquisitors did not care either way; they grabbed him, one by each arm, and dragged him away.

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They took him to an empty classroom where Martel had not been before. Strange paintings hung on the walls, though he did not have an opportunity to inspect them, as the inquisitors planted him in a chair. "What's your name, boy?" asked the taller of them.

Martel frowned. Had they grabbed him and pulled him here without even knowing that? "You don't know?"

"Don't act clever! Say your name."

"I'm Martel of Engby."

"You're a novice at the Lyceum?"

Martel glanced down at his brown robe. "Well, yes. You just saw me in class."

"Watch it," growled the shorter inquisitor, bringing his face closer to Martel's. His breath reeked of onions.

"And you have a dislike for Gerard of Islemont?"

Bewilderment took hold of Martel's expression. "I don't even know who that is."

The onion breath barked with laughter. "You have class with the boy twice a fiveday, and you claim ignorance?" His voice turned to a sneer. "Suspicious."

"I barely know the names of anyone," Martel stammered.

The door burst open. A short man in purple robe strode into the room with a furious expression, and for a moment, Martel understood how Master Alastair would have inspired dread on the battlefield in his days as a war wizard.

"You will let my student leave," he spoke with cold anger.

"We have the authority to investigate and question any we deem necessary," replied the taller inquisitor.

"And if you had spent a moment doing that, you would have learned that Martel arrived only three fivedays ago. He cannot possibly be responsible," Master Alastair shot back.

"Arrived in Morcaster or at the Lyceum?" asked the onion breath. "He may have been hiding in the city before he came under your tutelage, mage." He spoke the final word with disdain.

"Master Ogion can confirm," Martel hurried to say. "He's the weathermage in Engby. Or Father Julius," he suggested. Presumably these inquisitors would trust the word of a priest.

The taller of the pair gave Martel a questioning look. "We shall make inquiries. You may leave, for now." He took a step back, and the novice hurried out of the chair to flee the room.

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"Thank you," Martel quickly spoke once he and Master Alastair were outside.

"Of course. They shouldn't have harassed you when you clearly aren't the culprit."

"Master Alastair, what's going on? Why are the inquisitors here?"

The mage took a deep breath. "One of your classmates has been found. Alive, but he does not wake or respond. Since he shows no signs of injuries, foul magic is suspected."

Martel finally put hammer and nail together; the acolyte in the infirmary, the companion to Cheval, whom he had seen just earlier today lying lifeless in his bed. And Cheval had pointed the inquisitors in his direction. "You said it couldn't be me because I only arrived three fivedays ago?"

Master Alastair sighed. "This has happened before. Months ago. Only to a few students, mind you, found elsewhere in the city. The school is safe, I can promise you that."

"That's comforting." But not by much if he wanted to ever venture into the city again. "Any idea how this happens? Or what to look out for?"

"None, to be honest," the teacher admitted. "Do not stay in the city after dark."

"I won't," Martel promised. "How did you know the inquisitors had me, by the way?"

"One of your classmates," came the answer, "she fetched me. Another time, tell them you won't talk unless I or the overseer is present. The inquisitors may have broad powers, but the Lyceum protects its students."

Only on school grounds, it seemed. While Master Alastair left to resume his class, Martel had no desire to do the same. He went to his room and locked the door behind him, only feeling safe once his solitude was assured.

Chapter 14: Menial Behaviour

Menial Behaviour

Martel's lesson in elemental magic was not until third bell, giving him lots of time every Glunday morning. With a debt to pay, he needed to put it to good use, so he went to the only place where he could imagine earning coin. After breakfast, Martel sought out Master Jerome.

The artificer was already at work, directing his labourers for the second bell. He frowned as he saw Martel. "Either you've mistaken the day, or I have."

"Oh no, I'm not scheduled for duty today. I came to ask if maybe there'd be extra work I could do. Like, I can do an extra turn in the washery."

Jerome regarded him with a glint. "Your need of coin that great? More trips to the city?"

"Oh, no, not this time. Another student bought something for me, and I want to pay them back."

"Well, as good a reason as any." The artificer crossed his great arms. "But most of the workload is handled by the regular servants. And the more intricate kind is done by acolytes with the necessary magical skills."

"I'll help with anything."

"Well, I do have leathers that need to be tanned. The others just left for the task. If you go out the door, you can catch them down the street." Jerome pointed at the exit.

"They're led by an airmage. Tell him I sent you to help out."

"Yes, master!" Eager to prove his words true, Martel hurried out the door.

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Tanning, as it turned out, was smelly work. For that reason, it was not done at the Lyceum, but at a building in the poorer part of town, where the complaints of neighbours mattered less. In addition, an airmage was deployed to deal with the worst of the stench, sending it straight and far up into the air. For Martel, who worked with his hands to prepare the leather, no amount of air magic could help. Once his work was done, he reeked. He had removed his robe beforehand, but his remaining garments and body needed an expert watermage to stand a chance of being cleansed. Failing that, an old-fashioned scrub with soap.

Returning to the Lyceum and aware of his effect on his surroundings, Martel hurried to the basement of his dormitory tower. Here lay the communal baths that he had already made good use of since his arrival. The thought of entire basins of water, readily available for nothing but washing, seemed like an emperor's luxury. No need to fetch bucket after bucket of water.

In addition, stones enchanted with heat lay in one of the pools, providing further blessing. Even a northerner like Martel shivered as he removed his clothes, standing in the basement in the dead of winter; as soon as he entered the hot water, his entire body shook before relaxing. He let himself sink until only his head remained above, closing his eyes in bliss.

He wondered how difficult it was to enchant the stones that provided the heat; it could not be simple, or every room in the school would be heated by them. Or perhaps the issue was that they would only be needed in winter, causing an issue during summertime where their heat would not be welcome. Still, one such stone might work very well to substitute a cooking fire, Martel considered, thereby alleviating the smoke that inevitably filled his mother's house.

"Even here, I cannot escape my own personal scarecrow," a loathsome voice spoke. "Or its violent stench, more pungent than usual."

Martel looked up to see Cheval enter the warm pool on the opposite side. "That's why I'm bathing."

"Chasing away the rest."

"The baths are open to everyone."

"Everyone who deserves to be at the Lyceum," Cheval retorted.

"Which I do. The overseer tested me. She gave me a spot immediately."

"I'm sure." The disdainful smile contradicted the young mageknight's words. "Her delusions will cost you both."

"Is that why you lied about me to the inquisitors? Think you could get rid of me?"

Cheval shrugged. "I told no lies. I simply pointed them in the right direction of someone who has no place here."

"But I do!"

"Listen here," Cheval spoke menacingly. He stood up in the pool, looking agitated as water dripped down his body. "I have been here since I was ten, scarecrow. Years and years as a novice before becoming an acolyte. Tutors before that, as a child. And you think you can saunter in here, half-blood," he inserted with a sneer, "and pretend to become a mage."

Martel stared at him, beginning to realise the pebble in Cheval's boot. He kept it to himself, rather than escalate the argument. With a final sneer, the young nobleman left.

Martel watched him walk away, a smile forming on his lips. He had seen Cheval during lessons. Much of being a mageknight was skill with weaponry, which did not require magical gifts; it helped mask someone whose ability to do empowerment was poor. Even the first time they had met, Martel had pushed him to the ground.

Cheval had spent his childhood trying to learn magic, and he had only come this far. In comparison, they had bent the rules to allow Martel to attend the Lyceum despite his advanced age. Cheval was not disdainful of Martel; he was envious.

Martel let his head sink under the hot water before he emerged again, enjoying the sensation and the revelation alike.

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"What do you think of this vintage?"

Alastair made a show of tasting the wine slowly. "It's not bad."

"You heathen. It is barely adequate. That Sindhian rascal fooled me."

"Maybe he didn't know."

"Oh, he knew. I'll give him a piece of my mind next time I see him," Juliana threatened.

Alastair laughed a little. "I'm sure you'll make him regret."

"Anyway, what's on your mind?"

"I'm worried. About Reynard."

"What of him?"

"You said he was training Martel with the acolytes, despite what is customary."

"It is his decision," Juliana admitted.

"I learned from Jerome that he never had armour commissioned for Martel. Poor boy's been taking a beating for at least a lesson or two."

The overseer frowned. "You think it was an intentional oversight?"

"Yesterday, the inquisitors came to investigate. They pulled Martel from Reynard's class, though we all know the disappearances started long before the boy arrived. He could have cleared it up, or at least provided Martel some counsel rather than leave him to be interrogated on his own."

"You're building up to a conclusion, I sense."

Alastair exhaled. "I think Reynard intends to have Martel fail his course."

"Martel is to be a weathermage. Passing the course is a formality," Juliana countered. "Reynard would not make himself look so foolish, unless..."

"Unless he has the headmaster's tacit approval. Who, with the right manoeuvring, will make Martel's expulsion reflect on you, giving him the chance to replace you with one of his cronies."

"I didn't think he'd dare," Juliana admitted. "Use the opportunity against me, should it arise, that I expected. Not that he would create it. Ensuring that students fail could cost him his own position."

"You served it to him, advocating that a Tyrian-blooded boy be admitted against the normal rules." Alastair scratched his forehead. "The war against Khiva has dragged on for too long, and the dislike against Khivans is spilling over to anyone who does not look Asterian."

Juliana sighed. "I'll find a solution."

Alastair emptied his glass. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

This chapter is updated by

Chapter 15: In the Maelstrom

In the Maelstrom

His only lesson happening late, Martel had time to work a bell for Jerome on Manday. Working the tannery was tedious, laborious, and smelly, but one silver coin richer,

Martel did not care as he soaked in the baths afterwards. While he would not be able to work most days, he felt more comfortable about his debt to Eleanor.

In fact, he would have some coin to spare that he might spend on other matters. While the Lyceum provided everything he needed as such, it was good to have silver in his pocket if venturing into the city. And since he had the afternoon free, as his astronomy class took place at night time for once, he decided to do just that.

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He knocked several times on the door to the workshop before he dared to enter Master Farhad's domain. This time, the watchmaker turned to look at him as he stepped inside.

"Knock once. I'm not deaf," he muttered brusquely in his strongly accented Asterian.

"Yes, master," Martel replied.

Farhad narrowed his eyes. "You are mage."

"Well, yes, studying to be."

"You found my nail because it was warm."

Martel frowned before he remembered. "Oh, yes, I did."

"And I hear palace has frozen room in basement, always kept cold, to store ice and food. Kept cold by magic."

"Uh, that could be."

Farhad scrutinised the boy. "You can do this? You can remove heat with magic? Keep it always same cold?"

"Well, no, I'm still learning."

"Not, you, boy. You! You mages. All of you. You can do this?"

"Oh, like that. Well, sure, I imagine someone can." Martel thought back on the heated stones in the baths. "That can't be too difficult."

The watchmaker stroked his beard. "Interesting. Yes, very. I can use this for clock."

"Dad, stop interrogating my friend, you'll scare him away." Shadi came down the stairs.

"Boy frightens easily if old man scares him with words."

"Don't pay him any heed," Shadi told Martel. "Dad, I'll be out," she added while dragging her friend out of the door.

"Back before dark!"

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"Your timing is good, magic boy," Shadi told him once out on the street. "I was going out anyway."

"Where to?"

"The temple."

"Oh, right, you'll be gone a long while. Or we will, now."

She giggled. "Not the temple of the Sun. I'm Khivan, not Asterian. We got our own."

That made sense, now that he thought about it. The Tyrians certainly did not worship the Sun either. "What is it dedicated to?"

"The eternal flame," Shadi explained. "It's not something I spend a lot of time on," she added, glancing at him as they walked down the street. "But today it's been seventeen years since my mum died, so I need to make a small offering. Customs and all."

"I see. What about your dad?"

"He doesn't want to do it. Guess the memory's painful and all," Shadi considered. "I never knew her, so for me, it's more that I feel – wistful, I guess. Anyway, even if I didn't know her, she still gave birth to me. So the least I can do is remember her on this day."

They crossed a small square, and Martel noticed the only structure made from stone. It had a small belltower, but otherwise looked plain. As they approached, he saw a man in black robes cleaning away something painted on the temple wall. He could not guess the meaning of the symbols, but the paint smelled strange, reminding him of when his family butchered chickens.

"It's alright, you can come inside," Shadi told him. They passed through the doors into a large room without windows. In the centre upon a pedestal burned a fire inside a great bowl. The flames cast long shadows, flickering. "Wait here," she whispered.

As he kept to a corner, he watched her approach the flame and pull something out of her pocket. It appeared to be some kind of cloth, though the darkness made it hard to tell. She carefully folded it together and placed it in the bowl, where it began to burn. After a deep bow, Shadi retreated without turning her back to the flames until she reached Martel. "Let's go," she spoke quietly, and they left.

Outside, Martel glanced at the priest cleaning the wall. "Is that from a ritual?"

She shot him a look. "No, that's defacement. Someone painted the wall with chicken blood."

That explained the smell. "Why?"

"I guess they thought chicken blood would be more sacrilegious. Or that's all they could get hold of." Shadi shrugged.

"But, why do it?"

"Oh, things like that have been going on for months now. Lots of thugs in the district these days. More and more people are moving away. Returning to Khiva or crossing the sea to Sindhu, I hear."

"Do people dislike Khivans that much?" Looking at the slender girl by his side, Martel could not understand it.

"Some definitely do. There's been shades of it for years, but it's really stepped up lately. I guess people are tired of the war and blame us." Shadi explained it in a casual manner, but Martel thought he noticed an edge in her voice.

"Hey, today's your birthday!" Martel finally drew the conclusion of Shadi's mother dying in childbirth and today being the anniversary of her death.

Shadi grinned. "Took you long enough."

"Congratulations! How should we celebrate? Or do you have to go home to your father?"

"Nah, I can do that later. I want to see more magic!"

Martel considered his options for a moment. He had made some progress with his water magic, but he could not show much of it; the town square was dry after a warmer than usual winter's day. "If you are up for a walk, I'll have something to show you."

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With Shadi as company, Martel returned to the Lyceum. Lunch was served, meaning the students had gathered to eat, and the classrooms lay empty, including the Hall of Elements. Leading Shadi in a long, circular walk around the dining hall to avoid the others, they eventually reached their destination.

"Come, stand here in the middle," he told her. Shadi joined him in the middle, standing on the earthen floor. Martel let his magic extend to feel the water lying in its circle

around them. From all directions, he pulled on it. It answered him reluctantly, most of the liquid remaining in its channel, but enough responded for his purpose. From the ground, droplets rose and streamed towards them before circling around, like a maelstrom centred around the pair.

More and more water joined the dance, flowing in the air faster and faster. Shadi laughed as some of it sprayed onto her face, twirling herself around to keep up with the swirling water.

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Shadi was still laughing with drops on her cheeks when they left the Hall of Elements, and Martel felt a warm sense of pride that he had given her a birthday gift few could match. His elation lasted only briefly before being shattered by a familiar, yet unwelcome voice.

"Who let this Khivan dog inside? Obviously the half-blood." As the bell rang, students had begun to pour out of the nearby classrooms, including Cheval. Sensing trouble brewing, more and more stopped to watch it unfold.

Martel felt his cheeks burning with anger. "Shut up."

"Let's go, Martel." Shadi tugged on his sleeve. "He's not worth our time."

Cheval stepped forward. "Listen to your Khivan bitch, scarecrow."

Martel's fist made impact on the acolyte's chin, who staggered backwards. Everyone else stared in disbelief, none more so than Martel.

His mouth curled into a sneer and his fingers into a fist, Cheval raised his hand to strike back.

Another seized the young nobleman around the wrist, keeping him back. "You are a mageknight, learning empowered attacks," Maximilian spoke with a growl. "If you strike another student in a hallway brawl like this, you are open to accusations of using magic to hurt them." The tall acolyte, using his own empowered strength to hold back Cheval's, glanced at the increasing circle of witnesses. "You could be thrown out."

Cheval struggled to escape Maximilian's grasp to no avail. "Fine," he finally conceded, relaxing, and the other mageknight relinquished his hold. "But I will have satisfaction." He turned his menacing eyes on Martel. "A sparring match," he suggested with an ominous smile. "Staves only. We are encouraged to train our abilities, after all."

Several students in the crowds, including other mageknights, called out their approval.

"You will face me in the arena, scarecrow, or I shall haunt your every step," Cheval continued. "Either satisfaction on the sand or I will take it from you, pound by pound."

Martel meant to say he had no interest in fighting. But he felt trapped by the circle of students surrounding them, their excited shouts, and Shadi by his side. "I'll be there."

"Tonight."

"We have astronomy tonight," Maximilian interjected. "You should let the matter drop. This behaviour does not benefit you."

"Tomorrow night, after last bell rings," Cheval said undeterred. "In the gymnasium. If you are not there, scarecrow, you will have the remaining year to regret it."

"I'll be there," Martel reiterated.

Satisfied for now, Cheval stalked away. With no further escalation, the other students dispersed as well, rapidly sharing the news.

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"That was so tense!" Shadi exclaimed as she and Martel left as well. "And you just hit him!" f reewe bnovel

"Yeah," he mumbled. With the tension of the situation gone, the consequences of that action had started to sink in.

"I don't think anyone's ever hit someone for me before." She beamed as she continued her excited talk. "And now you'll be duelling him!"

Martel did not need the reminder; he was vividly aware of what awaited him.

"Can I watch? I really want to see."

"Uh, I don't think people outside the school are allowed in after last bell," Martel claimed. He had no idea if it were true, but he did not want Shadi to watch him get beaten. The thought that they might turn on her worried him as well.

"That's a pity. You'll come and tell me all about it afterwards?"

"Yeah," Martel promised, half-heartedly. He got the sense that Shadi did not really grasp what would happen; what Cheval could and would do to him. Frustration at the situation and her reaction began to rise in him.

They reached the gate. "I'll see you then," she said with a smile before she gave him a tight hug. Martel watched her disappear down the street, filled with conflicting emotions.