

Firebrand

Chapter 16: Friendly Sparring

Friendly Sparring (n)ovel

Martel woke with a knot in his stomach. Last night's astronomy lesson had been tense and uncomfortable, with Cheval staring daggers at him. He had paid little attention to Master Fenrick's teachings, as his mind kept thinking on the fight.

Sleep had done nothing to dispel his fears. He thought about every combat lesson on Maldays where Cheval had slapped him around. At least tonight he would have the leather armour to take the worst of it, though it did not protect his head. He was not sure how far Cheval would go; how much pain would satisfy the young nobleman. He was certainly not eager to find out the answer.

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Solday meant assisting Master Jerome for a bell. Martel did so, distracted; his thoughts constantly loomed around tonight's event. It did not matter much for the work, which his hands did with little interference from his mind; yet as the bell rang and he did not stir, his gaze mostly vacant, the artificer approached him.

"Have you had loss of hearing, boy, or what troubles you? The bell has rung and your chore is done."

Martel looked at Jerome. "Sorry. Something's on my mind."

"So I noticed."

With the artificer keeping his gaze on him, Martel felt compelled to speak. "Master Jerome, do you know any tricks for defending yourself? With a staff for weapon."

"Ah. Combat training giving you trouble?"

"Yes." Which was true, even if not the source of Martel's current worries.

"I'm guessing that so-called Master of War is not teaching you much."

"He's not," Martel admitted; although speaking ill of a teacher made him uncomfortable, it remained the truth.

Jerome scratched his beard and exhaled. "Follow me, boy." He led the novice into the other room where he had equipped him with the leather armour the other day. More pieces of half-finished armour remained. "Wait here."

The artificer disappeared briefly into a deeper room before he returned with two staves, throwing one to Martel, who barely caught it.

"First, you position your feet like this," Jerome explained, using his staff to gesture at his feet. Martel mirrored his stance. "Your hands should hold like this." He extended the weapon, letting Martel see his grip clearly. "Finally, this is how you move when..."

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They sparred for the better part of an hour until Martel began to feel sore. Only from exertion, as Jerome knew how to control his blows rather than cause any hurt. Grateful for the help, Martel thanked him repeatedly, to which the artificer laughed and sent him on his way to clean himself up before lunch.

As he ate his meal at a deserted table, feeling more isolated than ever, Martel's confidence from sparring with Jerome slipped away. Cheval had trained in weaponry for years, presumably. He could not catch up in an hour. Besides, even if their skill with staves were equal, Cheval knew empowering magic. He could add magical strength to his blows beyond what Martel might parry. However poor a mage Cheval might be, he was still ahead of Martel in that regard, who had yet to learn any form of empowerment.

Looking at the table of teachers having their meal, Martel considered involving them. Yet he could not see the gain. Students fighting each other with magic was prohibited, but sparring was not. Martel could not prove that Cheval intended to cause him injury, as he would simply deny this. If Martel shared his misgivings, a teacher could do little besides advising him to avoid the fight, in which case, Cheval would take his revenge at some other point.

Looking at Master Alastair, the unassuming short man who had once been a feared battlemage, Martel had another idea. He waited until the Master of Elements had finished his lunch and left. Following at a distance until the teacher entered his room, Martel hurried over to knock.

"Martel? What is it, my boy?"

"I was hoping for some advice, master."

"Come on in." Master Alastair gestured for him to enter and take a seat.

Martel briefly admired the books, not to mention the staff leaning against the wall in the corner, which looked magical. "You were a battlemage," he began to say.

"Yes?"

"How did you do it? Fight with magic, I mean."

Master Alastair raised an eyebrow. "Planning on going to war?"

Martel gave a nervous laughter. "Hardly! I just had a run-in with some kids in town, acting like bullies, and I didn't know what to do. I'd like to be more prepared next time."

"I suppose self-defence is reasonable," the teacher considered, his voice slightly tinged by doubt. "But teaching a lesson to some overconfident rascal is quite different from battle magic. I hope you can tell the difference."

"Of course! I don't want to hurt anyone. Just keep them from hurting me."

Master Alastair nodded. "That seems fair. Most of my experience, mind you, comes from the battlefield, where fire is most useful. Setting the hilt of a sword or axe ablaze will quickly make your attacker drop his weapon," he chuckled.

"What about other ways besides fire?"

"Well, a clever mage always considers his surroundings. A rock on the ground can be flung to hit someone. A pool of water can be frozen to make the terrain impassable."

Good suggestions, except all Martel could do was summon a harmless flame and move drops of water. "Thanks, master," he spoke, trying to keep his voice neutral.

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Back in his room, Martel thought about his choices. He could refuse to appear and hope he got away with it. It carried the risk that he did not know how Cheval might retaliate, or how long. He might sell an hour of pain only to buy months of torment.

Martel could simply appear and take the beating. He had done so during class, even if tonight promised to be worse. His shield was slowly improving; it might take the brunt of it.

He could attempt to use fire. It was the only magic he possessed that might accomplish anything. He could bring a torch and direct its flame towards Cheval, deterring the mageknight from fighting. Of course, that might invite suspicion, running the risk of exposing his abilities with fire, which would be the worst outcome of all.

Walking over to his window, Martel had a view of the eastern yard, where the amphitheatre lay. Soon the bell would ring, gathering the students for supper. Once it rang after that, Martel could not postpone his decision any longer.

The sound of thunder caught his attention. In the distance, dark clouds swept across the horizon. A storm approached.

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Darkness had fallen when last bell rang. Usually, students would filter towards their dormitory towers, seeking sleep soon after. Tonight, many of them streamed to the gymnasium, mostly the acolytes. The storm had arrived, and they had to sit in the rain, using cloaks to keep away both water and winter cold. Candles made little sense in the stormy weather and would not have done much to illuminate the space regardless; the students had to rely on their nocturnal vision once their eyes adjusted to the dark. Any starlight from above remained hidden beneath dark clouds.

While his peers sat on the stone benches, Martel stood alone in the centre of both arena and attention. He had his leather armour under his robe to protect against blows and his cloak to protect against rain. As the spectators chattered excitedly among themselves, Martel hoped that for one reason or another, Cheval might have abandoned the idea.

It did not take long to prove his hopes in vain. Cheval entered, wearing a chain shirt much like an actual knight would. A symbol of his family's wealth and his sense of self-importance. He came alone; if any of his friends attended, they sat in the audience. With him he carried two staves.

He threw one to Martel. "Ready to begin, scarecrow?"

Martel had already begun. It took all his concentration to work his magic without making it apparent. He normally moved his hands to help his power flow, but now, he had to use them to wield the staff. Martel assumed the stance shown to him by Jerome, hoping his feet remembered while his mind remained occupied.

Cheval grinned and lashed out with his staff. A quick but sloppy strike, intended for the crowd. Martel parried and held his position. Meanwhile, the rain showered over the arena, and Martel felt himself sweat with magic exertion.

Cheval launched into a quick series of blows, empowering himself to move faster than Martel could keep up with. The mageknight's staff struck his shoulder, which thankfully the armour resisted. After that, he hit Martel on the shin, making him wince, but he did not retreat nor allow his magic to slip. Cheval continued to wear his obnoxious grin while increasing his attacks, building up to finishing the fight.

Despite the name, the arena floor of the Lyceum was simply ordinary dirt. Old phrases such as fighting on the sand hearkened back to days of more violent spectacles elsewhere; the gymnasium at the prestigious seat of magic had never seen such use, thus alleviating the need to layer the ground with sand. Instead, Martel and Cheval

stood on common earth, which worked in the former's favour. All his labours gathering the rainwater finally came to fruition, sending it into the earth to mix into mud.

Cheval attacked again, and Martel finally withdrew. As the mageknight took a forceful step forward in pursuit, his heavy frame promptly slipped, falling flat on his back.

Martel kept the flow of water coming, melting it into the ground to make it even more muddy.

Wearing his steel armour, Cheval struggled to escape. He could not push himself up to stand while holding his staff, but if he let go, he would be defenceless. He tried to plant the weapon in the ground to support himself; seeing this, Martel struck.

His own staff hit Cheval's hands, again and again until the mageknight finally let go, falling back with an outburst.

As lightning tore the sky, Martel stood towering over his tormentor. The crowd had gone quiet, and he knew he had their attention. Temptation suggested to repay Cheval blow for blow.

The moment passed. Standing in the rain, Martel knew the wiser choice. He would prove himself no better by beating on a defenceless opponent. He would simply grant Cheval the sympathy of the spectators; make him the victim and Martel the villain. Even worse, he would endanger himself to accusations of attacking another student, risking expulsion. And this, everyone seeing the proud mageknight utterly humiliated in the mud, was a blow to the young nobleman's pride worse than any blow to his body.

Martel walked around to place his staff against Cheval's cheek, who flinched and raised his hands to protect his head. "Thanks for the sparring," the novice spoke with a voice as cold as the winter rain, making sure everyone in the amphitheatre could hear. He let his staff fall on the ground and walked away.

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Chapter 17: Friendly Conversation

Friendly Conversation

The next day at breakfast, Martel experienced something strange. He was used to getting stares when entering the dining hall; his height did not allow him to be inconspicuous. Usually, the looks conveyed indifference, scorn, or amusement. This morning, as he met their eyes, some of them nodded in return. And once Martel had filled his plate, a hand rose in the air, waving for his attention.

"You can sit here," said Jasper, the earthmage who worked the desk at the entrance hall.

Although a little baffled, Martel did not question it; at his age and in his circumstances, few things held such value as the respect of his peers. He took the empty seat by the table with the elemental acolytes, who gave him a nod and otherwise continued their conversation.

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Martel's elemental lesson went well, as his confidence in controlling water kept growing, and Master Alastair commended him for his progress. At lunch, he sat with the acolytes of the same age as himself, some of whom excitedly brought up the duel from last night. Almost embarrassed at the attention, Martel mutely replied to their questions, and the conversation steered elsewhere.

Afterwards, having a free bell before his second lesson, Martel went to one of his favourite spots. Taking a seat underneath the statue of Atreus, he practised his focus and control over his magic when he was rudely interrupted.

"You, half-breed. I suppose you think you are very clever."

The words and voice gave the speaker away; Martel opened his eyes to find Cheval standing over him. No longer afraid, Martel stood up. "I think I'm a good mage," he retorted, "who earned my place in this school. I gave you the duel you wanted. You have only yourself to blame for underestimating me."

Behind the mageknight, Maximilian appeared. "Guillaume, leave him be. We are late for practice already."

"Stay out of it!" Cheval shrieked, whipping his head over his shoulder to glare at Maximilian before he turned his gaze back on Martel. He poked the novice in the chest. "You cheated! You used tricks rather than fight with honour!"

Like a snake, Maximilian's hand shot out to grab Cheval's offensive finger and twist it. The latter cried out in sudden agony. "You lost," the tall mageknight growled. "You challenged another mage to a duel, and he beat you with his superior magic."

"Let go!"

"He could have beaten you to a pulp, but he left you with no wounds but to your pride. If you had any honour, you would accept your loss," Maximilian continued. "If I see you harass the northern boy again, I will put you in your place myself." With a final squeeze around Cheval's finger, who winced in response, Maximilian finally let go.

His eyes full of hate, the duke's son stalked away while rubbing his hand.

"Thanks," Martel said. He glanced at the remaining young noble, unsure what this meant.

"He was tiresome," the mageknight replied. "His father is a powerful man, so I have suffered his company for that reason. But we all have our limits."

"We do." As the son of a smith, Martel could not quite relate to fathers that ruled lands and commanded vassals.

"Your name is Martel, right?"

"Yeah. And you're Maximilian."

"That I am. I will see you in class, Nordmark," the mageknight said with a gleam in his eyes before he left.

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The thought left Martel with near dread, but he could not keep postponing. As much as he disliked arithmetic, he had to finish the star chart for Master Fenrick's class. His lessons done, Martel decided to get it over with; he had already calculated and drawn Malac and Perel onto the map, leaving only Glund.

With heavy steps, he ascended the astronomy tower to enter the classroom. He found it empty, which was to his preference. Collecting his things, taking care with the heavy tome containing the equations, Martel unfurled his map in progress.

His heart sank. Large blots of ink stained the parchment, and his work was ruined. He could easily guess the perpetrator.

Noise alerted him to someone else approaching. Looking at the door, his eyes met Eleanor's as she entered. It struck him that she was the only other one he had seen working on the assignment.

"Are you nearly done with yours?" she asked in a neutral tone.

"Don't think I will be," he mumbled.

"You have three days," she argued.

In response, he turned the map around to show her.

Dismay flickered over her face. "I guess we both know the guilty party."

"Yeah." Martel tried to calm himself. If he showed it to Master Fenrick, perhaps he could get an extension. The course continued for a few more fivedays beyond this one, after all, so there was no reason for this assignment to be delivered on such strict time.

"I am glad you beat him," Eleanor spoke quietly. "He deserved it. And more."

"I guess if that's the worst of his revenge, it could be worse."

"He acts like a petulant child. Come on, let us get you a new piece of parchment. I will help you remake it."

"Really?"

She gave a little shrug. "Why not? We are both mages. We should help each other."

He smiled. "Agreed."

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Hearing a knock, the Master of Elements looked up from his desk and bade the visitor enter. As the overseer did so, he set aside the silver-threaded wand in his hand and stood up to greet her. "Something amiss? It's not been a fiveday since our last talk."

"I have heard rumours of a fight happening last night," Juliana replied. "As overseer, I must investigate. I wondered if you knew anything."

"You think the students tell me such things?"

"Most of them, no, but this alleged duel involved Martel. Who might confide in you."

"He told me nothing about any fight. Besides, our students are encouraged to train, aren't they?"

"If that's all it was."

With a coy smile, Alastair sat down. "Let me reassure you. As it happens, I saw the whole thing."

She gave him a tired look. "You could have just told me."

"This way was more fun."

"I thought the students didn't tell you."

Alastair shrugged. "Martel asked me for advice on how to defend himself. I thought it best to keep an eye on him."

"You oversaw this – training match?"

"No, I thought my presence might cause some anxiety." Alastair reached out to touch a Khivan spyglass on his desk. "I watched from a window."

"You didn't think to be present, in case anything went wrong?"

"They fought with staves, Juliana, hardly much threat. Besides, even from a distance, I could easily have intervened."

The overseer crossed her arms, giving him a scrutinising look. "And no rules were broken? Alastair, must I remind you that the headmaster would be happy with an excuse to send Martel away?"

"Nobody was hurt," Alastair declared. "In fact, the boy made me proud. He used water to make the field into mud, trapping his armoured opponent. He thought like a weathermage."

Juliana gave him another look. "Fortunate for him that it rained so heavily last night."

Alastair coughed. "Master Gilbert may have overdone it. But the storm was already brewing. I just asked him to give it a nudge."

She sat down. "Regardless, I thought we both understood to avoid situations like these that might enflame Martel's temper. Or tempt him to solve his problems with fire."

"He needs to learn to handle pressure," Alastair retorted. "Better it happens here, now, where I can keep an eye on him. And I would say he handled it very well."

"As long as it doesn't become habit," Juliana warned. "I do not need all my hair to turn grey."

"I fear you chose the wrong employment for that."fr(e)webn(o)vel

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Chapter 18: Something New in the Air

Something New in the Air

The thought of combat lessons still made Martel uneasy, though for a different reason than usual. He no longer felt worried about getting a beating during sparring, or that Reynard might humiliate him somehow. His leather armour helped with the former concern, and as for the latter, his teacher seemed content with ignoring him.

But it would be the first lesson he spent with Cheval. Two hours in the same arena where Martel had humiliated him. As the destruction of his star chart showed, the mageknight held a grudge.

The morning lesson, with the other novices, passed easily enough. Martel practised his shield to himself, and Reynard did not spare him a glance.

As afternoon came, Martel arrived at his second lesson with a hint of trepidation. He wore his leather armour under his robe, naturally, which helped a little. Yet he made sure, as soon as he entered the gymnasium, to spot Cheval and keep his distance.

A strange tension could be felt in the air, even so. The other mageknights, few as they were, talked among themselves while casting glances between Martel and Cheval. For once, the novice looked forward to Reynard arriving, so that the acolytes would have reason to begin training instead.

In full view, Maximilian crossed the arena floor to approach the brown-robed boy. "Hullo, Martel."

"Hey. Maximilian."

"Are you busy tomorrow?"

"No, except our astronomy class, of course."

"There is a fight in town. A mageknight fights a Tyrian berserker. Want to go?"

"Oh, sure." While perplexed at the invitation, Martel was not going to scratch a gift plough. "That sounds fun."

"Should be. It is in the forenoon. We will go after breakfast bell. Ah, here comes the old man. Time to swing hammers," Maximilian said as Reynard appeared, returning to the other acolytes.

While their teacher set up the mageknights to practise their weapons against each other, Martel idled to the side, waiting to see if he merited Reynard's attention or not.

"You, weather boy, come," said the Master of War.

That answered Martel's question, and he approached his teacher.

"You are done with staff training, since the other students need to practise with actual weapons, and I will not waste their time sparring with you."

Martel was sorely tempted to bring up the events of last night, but he contained himself.

"So we will move on. Part of empowerment magic, as the name suggests, is learning to empower your own body. Lending magical strength to your limbs." Reynard bent down to pick up a stone. He flung it out of the arena with more speed and force than humanly possible.

Watching it disappear against the horizon, Martel hoped nobody would be unlucky enough to stand where it would finally hit the ground.

"This is a big part of being a warrior. You will obviously never need this," Reynard claimed, "but you will be taught nonetheless."

Teaching in the loosest sense of the word, Martel surmised.

"Follow me." Reynard walked over to a training dummy meant for weapon training. It stood on a base of solid stone. "This should be too heavy for you to push even the slightest, I imagine. Try."

Martel placed his hands against the wooden warrior and pushed. It did not move.

"As expected. Now, you must imagine your magic flowing to your arms. Imagine you are already strong enough to push it. Try again."

Martel knew it would not help, and he suspected Reynard knew as well, but he did as told. As before, the dummy did not budge.

"You must forget your notions of strength. A little girl could do this, if she commanded her magic," Reynard chastised him. "Practise for as long as needed until you can move it."

With that, the teacher turned his attention to other students. He recognised Reynard's strategy; give him a technique and a goal, and then leave him on his own rather than offer any insight or help. It suited Martel fine; he just wanted to complete this course, and Reynard wanted to ignore his presence. Turning his mind to the task, Martel began practising.

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His second combat lesson ended at fifth bell, meaning late afternoon; typically too late for a jaunt into town, but he had promised Shadi to tell of the duel, and a full day had already passed. Setting a brisk pace, Martel traversed Morcaster to reach the Khivan enclave an hour later.

He knocked heavily and entered the workshop. This time, Master Farhad noticed him and muttered something gruffly, while Martel replied with a polite greeting.

The sound of hasty footsteps across the ceiling told him to look towards the stairs, where Shadi appeared. "Hey! I was a little worried when you didn't visit yesterday."

"Sorry, I had a full day. In fact, I will have to leave soon if I'm to make it back to the Lyceum before dark."

Shadi descended the stairs and gave him an examining look. "Well, your face isn't smashed up, so it can't have gone too bad. Come on, let's take a walk."

She jumped back up the stairs.

"Where to?" Martel called out after her.

From his workbench, measuring the length of a metal rod, Farhad grumbled.

She appeared again, wearing warm clothes. "Let's go to the harbour. It won't be too long for either of us to go home from there. Bye, dad!" She shouted the last part as she hurried out the door, dragging Martel with her.

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They strolled westwards in the fading sunlight, warning of winter's night coming. "So tell me!" Shadi said with excitement.

Martel cleared his throat, suddenly feeling embarrassed. He was not sure how to relate the events of the fight without sounding boastful or pretentious. "Well, it was quite a night."

"Of course it was," she laughed. "Tell me details!"

"I'm getting there," he retorted in a good-natured manner. "Maybe you noticed the weather. Pouring down rain, storm and lightning and everything. I'm basically soaked as soon as I step out onto the arena, as is everyone else."

"Uh, you guys have an arena. Duels happen a lot, do they?"

"It's just for practising," Martel told her. "So, he steps out, wearing full armour and everything. Chain shirt, heavy boots, like he's going to war."

"What a bastard."

"We each have a staff, and he attacks me. Just whales on me, and I defend."

"And?"

"Well, it's been raining for a while at this point. There's lots of water on the ground, sinking into the dirt." They turned a corner and saw the masts of ships in the distance. "So while he's using magic, what little he has, to hit me harder, I'm using mine to make the ground softer. Muddier."

Shadi grinned. "Oh, you clever hound."

"He takes another step forward and falls straight on his back," Martel laughed. The memory appeared vividly in his mind; through the darkness and heavy rain, Cheval lying stuck in the mud, helpless as an infant.

"Amazing!" She looked at him with admiration. "I knew you were a much better mage than that pompous oaf!"

"I didn't," Martel admitted, more candid than he had intended. "I was as surprised as any that it worked."

"Well, I wouldn't have been." The smell of salt and sea reached them, along with the sounds of busy docks. Even in winter, goods required transportation; especially to the front, where supplies were scarce and sorely needed. "Is it true there's wizards aboard the ships?" Shadi asked.

"Some of them, yeah." By luck, Martel had heard some of the acolytes talk about this. "Some airmages or watermages train to become seamages."

"You magic folk sure are imaginative with your names."

"Shut up," Martel laughed. "But yeah, the big ships will all have a seamage aboard, making sure the waters are calm and the wind behind the sails."

"You ever thought about that?"

"No. Until recently, I didn't even think about being a mage." Martel watched as a ship gracefully entered the harbour. Ropes were tossed to let it moor, securing it to the pier.

"How come?"

"My father never wanted me to be one. He told me to hide my gift. So I did."

"Strange. You'd have thought he'd be happy to have a mage in the family."

"Yeah." The ship looked strange compared to the others in harbour, as did the sailors crawling its rigging. They were Sindhian, Martel realised, from across the southern sea.

"So you'll be going home to them when you're done?"

"That's the plan." As he spoke the words, Martel thought about Engby. Familiar, small, comfortable. And then he thought about the ship, the journey it had completed, and the port on the other side. Sindhu, the land of a thousand princes, where children played with gems and snakes alike.

"It's getting dark. I'll head home, as should you. Thanks for coming to see me."

"Hey, I promised." He smiled at her. She began walking away, waving to him before increasing her pace. He watched her disappear up the street; once out of view, he turned north to walk home.

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Chapter 19: The Berserker

The Berserker

Waking up on Manday, Martel felt the familiar knot of anxiety that had been a rather constant companion since his arrival to Morcaster. Only this morning, he could not remember why. His classes were going well, he had dealt with Cheval, and thanks to Eleanor, his star chart was ready to be handed in. Martel cast a quick glance at the rolled up parchment lying on his desk, making sure it was still there.

As he made himself ready for breakfast, he finally remembered. Maximilian had invited him to watch a fight. Martel had no idea what to expect, where they would go, what would happen, or even why he had been asked along. He would find out, presumably.

Eating his breakfast, he felt the bench sink down under a heavy weight as someone sat down next to him.

"Hullo, Nordmark," Maximilian said, delving into his own hearty serving.

"Good morning."

"Ready? Once we have eaten, of course."

"Yeah. Just need some clothes for outdoors. Where is it?"

"West of the harbour. Bit of a rough place, but nobody is going to pick a fight with me," Maximilian declared. "Just hang close, and you will be fine."

"Sure." Martel felt a little concerned that an intimidating exterior might be needed to deter fighting, but given they were literally going to a fight, he supposed it could not be helped.

"I have never seen a Tyrian berserker fight. Have you?" asked the mageknight.

"No, they tend to stick to Tyrian lands. Is that why you asked me to come? Because I'm from Nordmark?"

"The thought occurred to me you might have insight," Maximilian admitted. "And I wanted company rather than go alone."

"Nobody else here is interested in seeing such a fight?"

"My other friends might not approve of watching a mageknight fight for gold."

"But you don't care?"

He grinned. "I will overlook it. For the rarity of the experience. Alright, eat up, and we will get our things. I better bring a sword, just for the effect."

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The location of the fight made Martel think of how he always imagined a tavern, except far bigger than he ever thought it might be. Above the entrance hung a sign showing a broken crown. Despite the early hour, people were already drinking outside. The building itself was tall, at least two floors, and made from timber. As they entered, they found a simple room filled with chairs and tables, some of which held patrons.

"Come along," Maximilian told him, making his way through the room. He aimed for a door in the back, where a surly-looking man stood with a sword strapped to his side.

Crossing his arms, the guard glanced over them. "Two silvers to enter. Each."

As Maximilian opened his pouch, Martel panicked a little. "I didn't bring any coin," he admitted.

"No trouble." Maximilian tossed four silvers on the nearby table, and the guard stepped aside.

They entered a strange room, the same size as the one before. Yet here, the middle had been dug out three or four feet down, leaving a large hole about thirty feet across. Floorboards lay around the pit along with a frail-looking railing, and stairs led up to a kind of balcony that likewise revolved around the hole.

After a moment, Martel understood; this was a primitive arena, allowing as many spectators as possible to look down and watch where the fight took place. Already, plenty of others had arrived in anticipation.

"Come on, let us get upstairs. Better view." Maximilian, apparently familiar with the experience, walked up the stairs, and Martel followed. They found a spot to watch by the railing, which Martel tentatively tried to shake. Best not to lean too much weight on it.

While he did this, Maximilian had stepped away. Suddenly anxious, Martel looked around, wondering where the acolyte had gone. He soon spotted him, thanks to the other boy's height, and relaxed a little. Shortly after, Maximilian returned bearing two mugs.

"We cannot watch with a dry throat," he said with a quick grin. "And I placed a bet."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Ten silvers on the berserker." He handed one tankard to Martel.

"You feel that sure he'll win?"

Maximilian shook his head and took a sip. "I think the mageknight will. His training and magic should prove stronger."

"But – why bet against him?"

"If he wins, I get to be right. If he loses, at least I won my bet." Maximilian grinned, dipping into his ale again.

Martel did the same. The taste was strong, but crude in a sense. It burned more than anything compared to the ale brewed back in Engby. He looked at Maximilian, who seemed at ease. Not only with this experience, but also paying silvers for his friend to enter, and betting on a fight expecting to lose that coin. The gap between them was even wider than Martel had thought, making them seem like the unlikeliest of friends; yet friends they might still be.

"Here they come," Maximilian declared, excitement sneaking into his voice. Martel leaned over the railing, carefully, to look down at the ground floor and its pit. fr eewebn ovel.com

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Two men appeared, and a short ladder was lowered into the pit, allowing them to descend. Separating, each of them took position in one end of the fighting ring.

The mageknight looked typically Asterian. A chain shirt provided protection along with his surcoat and an open helmet used by legionaries. As for his weapon, he had a large sword, to be wielded with both hands. All in all, he looked a capable warrior, though his true power lay in the magic he wielded.

Martel had only heard of berserkers before; they rarely left Tyrian lands in his understanding. Yet the man in the pit looked as could be expected. In height and build, he resembled the mageknight and might likewise appear as an ordinary warrior, except for his garments.

Rather than steel, he wore what seemed to be leather and hide, all of it marked with strange symbols. They seemed similar to those used at the Lyceum, albeit for entirely different purposes. The same markings also covered his skin in places. His helmet was the northern style, with rings to protect the eyes, though it must have failed in the past; before he placed the helm on his head, Martel noticed the berserker had one milky eye with a large scar running across his face. Lastly, he carried a fearsome hammer covered in strange markings.

Excitement and anticipation began to boil in the room. The spectators called out encouragements to their champion, disparaging remarks towards the other party, and for the fight to begin.

The two warriors nodded at each other and gripped their weapons. One held the hilt of his sword raised high, ready to defend and retaliate. The other had his hands apart on the haft of his hammer, waiting to deliver a crushing blow. Meanwhile, his lips could be seen mumbling something. Prayers, perhaps, though the earth below his boots seemed to crack.

"Fight!" yelled a commanding voice, cutting through the noise, and so they did.

~

Martel gripped the railing with both hands, watching the berserker advance. The great hammer came swinging, and the mageknight stepped back to evade. He sent his own sword flying, but it struck the leather armour to no avail.

An exchange of strikes and parries followed. The reach and speed of the berserker allowed him to plant several blows on his opponent, hitting with such force to crumple metal. Yet the Asterian held, and Martel observed a soft shimmering where the hammer struck; the mageknight's shield did its work.

The great blade seemed to fare better, striking into the berserker, who had no such shield. Despite this, he did not seem hindered or even wounded. Martel began to watch his feet closely; where he walked, the sand became pushed asunder. If forced back by a powerful blow, the Tyrian seemed quickly invigorated, as if drawing strength from the very ground itself. To his fascination, Martel realised that he was watching magic of an entirely different kind than the Asterian art.

~

As the fight dragged on, the warriors' powers began to fade. When the hammer struck, it broke through the magic shield to make the chain shirt groan, as did the mageknight. Likewise, the sword began to leave cuts, and the berserker bled. Yet this only spurred him on; the more he became injured, the harder he struck.

Finally, Martel felt the air tinge with magic. Both the warriors had retreated a few steps, measuring their adversary. Swifter than should be possible, the mageknight leapt forward, and his sword came thundering down.

It struck into the berserker's shoulder, cutting him deeply. He roared in pain and began to swing his hammer. The mageknight, who clearly had thought the battle over, retreated with his sword and attempted to parry.

Yet the onslaught that came proved beyond his power. The berserker wielded his hammer with unmatched ferocity. The more he bled, the harder he struck. A blow straight onto the chest sent the mageknight sprawling to the sand, his sword cast aside.

"I yield!" he called out. "I yield!"

The berserker, a terrible sight as blood and sweat covered his body, finally halted his attacks. He pulled his helmet off, revealing his milky eye as all red. Letting his hammer drop, he stretched his hands up and yelled loudly in Tyrian.

~

Like a storm long underway, the pressure broke, and emotions erupted. Most of them negative, as many had bet against the berserker. Feeling uncomfortable, Martel looked around to find Maximilian gone from his side. Remembering his words about people out to pick a fight, Martel started to feel concerned. In his brown robe, he seemed like an ordinary clerk and out of place in a tavern such as this, where every man was at least armed with a knife. They looked like sailors or dockworkers, accustomed to hard life and able to give a punch while taking one.

Maximilian returned. "Just had to collect my winnings," he grinned. He glanced around, apparently making the same observation as Martel. "Guess they lost. They might not look fondly on anyone who resembles a Tyrian," he said, his eyes darting to Martel's with their blue hue. "It seems time we leave."

Using his broad figure to cut a swath, Maximilian pushed through the throng while Martel followed after closely. Once outside the tavern, the novice took a deep breath and exhaled with relief.

"Exciting!" Maximilian declared. "I have never seen any fight that way."

"There are tales of berserkers who scorn iron and fire," Martel related as they began walking. "But this one, he seemed to have magic of his own. As if the earth itself made him stronger."

"Could very well be. Who knows what sorcery those barbarians possess?"

"And taking wounds only seemed to spur him on."

"Now that I had heard," Maximilian said. "I just thought it was an exaggeration. An old wives' tale to frighten people."

"Well, I'm glad I won't be fighting anyone like him."

"Hah, same. When I am done, no legions for me. I will be a royal protector and spend my years in the palace getting fat," the mageknight proclaimed, making Martel laugh. "Alright, let us hurry up. We got an assignment to hand in."

~

The boys returned in good time, eating lunch together and discussing the fight. Afterwards, Martel returned to his room and checked his star chart. Thanks to Eleanor's help, it looked decent, and he might even pass the course.

As Martel arrived in the classroom, he found most of the mageknights there. He ignored Cheval, who sent him a withering look. As his eyes met Maximilian's, the latter nodded at him, which Martel reciprocated. He sat down at his usual spot in the corner, but he did not feel invisible or worse, treated with contempt; for the first time, he felt as if he had a friend at his school.

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Chapter 20: The Golden Goose

The Golden Goose

After assisting Master Jerome for a bell, as was his duty every Solday, Martel worked for another bell, this time getting paid. The task was even interesting, at least at first. Using a strange liquid, and wearing gloves, Martel washed away ink from parchment. Before Jerome showed it to him, the novice had never even suspected this could be done. He simply assumed once spent, the parchment was of no further use.

Yet with careful work and the right tools, the ink could be scraped and removed, leaving the parchment almost as good as new. After instructing Martel and overseeing his work for a while, Jerome left him to it.

While the novelty of the task soon faded, Martel discovered another interesting facet of this task. It gave him a unique view into the Lyceum. So far, he had only received a few notes himself; most of the scraps of parchment were of this variety, summoning students to tasks or meetings.

Yet now and then, he got a glimpse of teachers leaving frosty messages to their colleagues, or students making jests. One in particular held a drawing of Master Fenrick, accentuating some of his less fortunate features. Martel was almost sorry to remove it. In this manner, he earned a silver piece in the most entertaining way yet.

~

Adding another coin to the first, Martel went for lunch. With a tight grip on his silver – owning money was still new to Martel, and he felt uncomfortable walking around with it – he grabbed his bread, fruits, cheese, and slice of mutton and looked around.

As before, Jasper waved for him to sit with the elemental acolytes. Martel nodded in recognition but kept looking, wanting to handle his errand first and be freed of the coins burning in his hand. Finally, he saw Maximilian.

Approaching the table of mageknights while balancing his plate of food, Martel spoke his name quietly.

"Hey there." Maximilian gave him a nod.

"I just wanted to repay you. For the other day." Shuffling his food a little, Martel extended his palm with the silver coins.

Maximilian blew out his breath. "Mate, I invited you along. Do not insult me. Save your coin."

"Oh. Well, if you are sure."

"It never crossed my mind."

Martel was reminded of their differences again; he had thought about those two pieces of silver constantly from the moment Maximilian paid for his entry at the tavern.

"Are you going to sit and eat or what?" asked the mageknight. "You are making me nervous, standing there. Sit down." **freewebnovel.com**

A little stunned, Martel looked at the other mageknights at the table, who clearly did not share Maximilian's attitude. Yet he did not feel he could reject the invitation and risk upsetting who might be his only friend at the Lyceum. Since a spot was open opposite Maximilian, Martel felt compelled to take it.

As he did so, the nearest mageknights rose quite demonstratively and left. "Sorry," Martel mumbled.

"What for?" Maximilian looked at him with a frown. "We need to get you some confidence, mate. You already put one mageknight on his back."

"I guess." Martel began to eat slowly after shoving his coins into an inner pocket.

"I got an idea. How are your classes looking today?"

"Oh, I don't have any duties for the rest of the day."

"Great. I got weapon practice after lunch, so let us meet at sixth bell."

"Alright... to do what?" Martel patted his pocket, just to check his coins had not fallen out.

"You want to pay me back?" Maximilian grinned. "You are buying first round."

~

At sixth bell, the pair of tall boys left the Lyceum. Going south, they passed the great marketplace that drew people from the entire city. Reaching the point where the market district transitioned into the harbour, Maximilian finally stopped and turned right. He steered towards a large building of several floors, built in stone. Over the door hung a sign with a goose in golden feathers.

Martel had passed by it once or twice, but never paid any attention to it. Now he followed his friend inside. Compared to the tavern yesterday, this seemed more orderly. Besides drinking, some people sat at tables, eating food. The staff wore clean clothes with barely any stains. While the clientele did appear mostly male and forty years or older, the mood and patrons seemed less raucous.

The new arrivals walked up to a counter. Behind it stood an older man in work clothes, and several large barrels were stacked on top of each other with a tap inserted. "Two," Maximilian declared, holding up two fingers. "From that barrel over there." He pointed to towards the end.

"Four pennies," mumbled the tavernkeeper as he grabbed two mugs.

"That is your cue," Maximilian told Martel.

"Right, right." He began digging into his pockets to find four copper coins. As the proprietor returned with two full mugs, Martel placed the payment on the counter.

Maximilian grabbed them both, and they turned to search for a place to sit. The room looked full, but the mageknight located a small table pushed to the side with a small lamp providing illumination. Scavenging some chairs, the pair sat down and took their first draught of the drink.

"You've been here before," Martel remarked.

"For sure. It is a modern place, serving food also. And you can even rent rooms on the upper floors."

"That sounds expensive. Who would want that?"

Maximilian shrugged. "Sometimes a room away from home can be useful." A sly grin spread across his face.

Martel hurried to drink from his cup, hiding his blush.

"When you are the son of a count, a mageknight, and as handsome as me, you learn such things." The acolyte laughed.

"I'm sure," the novice mumbled.

"Where is it you are from? Where in Nordmark?"

"Town called Engby."

"Leave someone broken-hearted in Engby?" Maximilian's grin increased. "Or waiting for you to return."

"No, nothing like that."

Emptying his tankard, Maximilian set it on the table, crossed his arms, and leaned back. "Are you telling me that those blue eyes never ensnared anyone? Or perhaps they are locked on someone here in Morcaster, huh?"

"Well," Martel admitted, "there may be someone I like."

"Hah! Someone I know?"

The novice shook his head. "I doubt it." He hesitated. "She's Khivan. Lives in their quarter."

Maximilian nodded a little, his expression unreadable. "You do not see many of those in Nordmark, I imagine."

"Never, really."

"Well, I am glad you are not wasting time. Wait here, I will get the next round." The mageknight grabbed their mugs and left for the counter.

Feeling awkward by himself, Martel glanced around the room; at the same time, he did his best to avoid actually looking at anyone, lest he might invite any kind of trouble. He shifted his gaze to the small lamp on the table, providing scant light.

As the moments dragged on, he began feeling uncomfortable. He looked towards the counter, but could not spot Maximilian.

Finally, two men approached him. In their fifties or so, they looked like day-labourers or such, with rough hands and sinewy arms.

"Look, you can't sit here alone, taking up tables and chairs. Let us have it," one of them demanded.

"My friend is coming back. Sorry, you'll have to find another," Martel replied.

"Listen to this whelp. Bet he has soft hands. Never worked a day in his life," the other labourer spat; he had a vicious scar running down his face. "Now he thinks he's a big man." f(r)eewebn(o)vel.com

"Look, don't make trouble. You and your friend can go elsewhere," the first one suggested.

"What is happening here?" asked Maximilian, returning with two ales.

The two men gave the mageknight a look, noticing his black tunic and the sword by his side. "Who is this? Your bodyguard?" sneered the scarred man.

Maximilian laughed. "As if! Rather, he provides protection for me. Tell them, Martel."

Martel, having no clue what he was meant to say, opted for a delaying strategy. "Should be obvious. Doesn't need saying."

"Indeed." Maximilian's smile turned to an overbearing expression. "My friend here is a mage. He could turn you inside out with just a look."

The labourers exchanged looks. "Horseshit! He's some scribbler's boy, nothing more."

"Show them, Martel."

Having to act fast, Martel pointed his finger at the small lamp with its flame. He poured his magic into the fire, and it shot upwards like an arrow. Startled, all of them stumbled backwards, even Maximilian.

The mageknight recovered first. "Anything else?"

The labourers hurried away, eyes cast down and muttering to themselves.

With a satisfied look, Maximilian sat down, placing one cup in front of Martel. "Well done."

"That was a little intense."

"I doubt they would have dared much. But we should get you a staff. Good for defending yourself, and it sells you better as a mage," the acolyte laughed.

"Good idea." Being armed in some way or another did make sense in a city like Morcaster.

"I knew someone would try to make trouble," Maximilian admitted. "Just had to wait a while."

"You knew? Wait, did you stay away on purpose?"

"Guilty." Despite his admission, the mageknight did not seem burdened. "I told you, Martel, you need confidence. Look how you sent them off! It will take you far."

"I suppose."

"You want that Khivan girl of yours to like you? Confidence," Maximilian claimed, raising his mug.

Martel grabbed his own and did likewise. "To confidence."

"Cheers to that!"