

Firebrand

Chapter 21: The Roads to Friendship

The Roads to Friendship

The next morning, Martel had a headache. Perhaps he had not slept enough; it had been after last bell when he and Maximilian returned to the Lyceum. Another time, he would be sure to get home earlier.

It took him a while to remember the existence of hangovers and how it pertained to his situation. He concluded that he disliked the experience, and drinking was not worth it.

Fortunately, he did not have to help in the kitchens for breakfast, allowing him to sleep another hour before he stumbled out of bed, did his rudimentary washing, and finally descended to the dining hall.

He caught the tail end of breakfast, forced to eat the crusty ends of the bread and scrape the last porridge into his bowl. It made little difference to Martel, who ate any kind of food with relish.

Afterwards, he returned to his room and dozed for another bell.

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The extra rest helped, and he arrived at his lesson in reasonably good spirits with only a dull ache. Still, Martel found the magic harder to control, making it seem like he had made no progress since the last fiveday.

"Are you feeling ill?" Master Alastair asked as Martel lost control of a column of water. "You have improved well these last days. I would not expect that to slow down."

"I didn't sleep so well last night," Martel explained. Partly true, at least.
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"Up late?" his teacher asked with a knowing look.

"Maybe a bit."

"Well, I can't fault you for making friends. But your time is scarce compared to theirs, Martel. You have less than a year before you must pass the novice exam."

"Of course, master. I'll be more careful with my time."

"Good. Speaking of care... I have seen you with the mageknights in the dining hall?"

"Just one, really. Maximilian, we have astronomy and combat lessons together."

Master Alastair nodded. "A friendly fellow, from what I recall. But remember, Martel, all mageknights are destined for the legions or the palace. Often, their parents are already involved with those Imperial institutions."

Martel frowned until he caught on. "You're worried he'll find out my secret."

"He may be a trustworthy sort," his teacher began to say.

"He's been nothing but a friend to me," Martel interjected, feeling the need to defend his compatriot.

The Master of Elements raised his hands. "I am sure. But you cannot know if he'll protect you until you do trust him with your secret, and if he does not... well, it will be rather too late. Best not to chance it."

"I don't plan to," Martel declared.

"Good. As an elemental mage, there's nothing strange in you knowing a bit of fire magic. But don't let anyone see you do anything complex. A good rule would be to avoid anything more advanced than what you can do with water magic."

"I understand, master."

"Alright. Let's try that pillar of water again."

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Still feeling a little worn, Martel made his way to lunch. Searching the crowd, he did not spot Maximilian, but a table full of colourful robes caught his attention instead; a single spot remained empty.

Walking over to the elemental acolytes, one of them in green clothing looked up at him. "Oh, now we're good enough for you?" Jasper sneered.

"What?" Martel asked stammering.

"Did the sword snobs get tired of you, and now you come crawling back?"

"I'm not crawling," the novice said, confused; he could not understand what offence he had caused.

"Then you better sit with them, since you prefer their company to ours," Jasper told him and demonstratively looked away.

Crestfallen, Martel quickly walked away just to escape the situation. He found a seat in the back by an empty table, eating alone as had been his fate before.

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The Master of Elements crossed his arms. "Martel, I understand you may not be feeling well. But you really must do better."

His second elemental lesson had begun to scarcely better effect than his first. Watching the water refuse to obey him, Martel chewed on his lips. "I'm sorry, master. I'm feeling fine. Just got distracted by something at lunch."

"Well, there'll be plenty of distractions out in the fields when your magic is all that prevents crop failure and starvation," Master Alastair chastised him. "That is why we practise focus. To keep our minds on the task at hand."

"Yes, master." Martel pushed other thoughts away and stared at the water, lying in its channel around the Hall of Elements. Unconsciously clenching his hands together, he let his magic flow into the blue liquid. Raising his fists, he practically pulled the water into the air, raising a column upwards. It strained against his will, protesting against this double violation of its nature; it neither wanted to move up nor be pressed together.

Finally, his will faltered, and the water splashed down. The drops stopped just before Master Alastair, hitting an invisible shield. Martel got soaked.

"Sorry. It's really difficult."

"That is the point," the Master of Elements explained. "You must exercise full control of water, even against its own nature. Only then will you have mastered it."

"I'll keep practising. Outside of class too, of course."

"See that you do." The teacher cast a look at him and patted his shoulder. "Do not be discouraged. This will take time. Some of the novices only learn this towards the end right before their exam."

"I understand." Martel nodded a little, his thoughts still thinking about earlier. He had reached the point of feeling annoyed rather than hurt.

"So, what's got you in a knot?"

The novice turned his head to look at his teacher. "Just some of the other students. They're hard to be friends with."

"At your age, I bet." Master Alastair allowed himself a faint smile. "Though you did choose an unusual way to garner them."

Martel gave him a questioning look.

"I refer, of course, to your fight against the Cheval boy."

"Oh. You know about that?"

"I watched it. From a window."

Martel cleared his throat. "Am I in trouble?"

"You broke no rules," Master Alastair replied. "Since I saw no sign you used magic to deliberately harm another student. Though I caution you against ever doing that again."

"Oh, I don't intend to!"

"Training matches like that should be overseen and sanctioned by a teacher. You don't want to give them any excuse for expelling you from the school."

"Of course not. Them?"

"Ahem." Now it was Master Alastair's turn to clear his throat. "Anyway, you did well. Used the terrain rather than brute force. A valuable lesson."

"I did enjoy it," Martel admitted.

"The legions don't employ any weathermages – too few of them, I suppose. Ensuring food is grown is more important, after all."

"Yeah, certainly."

"But I've known a weathermage or two in my time who would be a great help for any soldier," Master Alastair told him. "Once, my regiment was trapped during a harsh winter in our camp by the Tyrian border."

"What happened?" asked Martel, his interest growing.

"The Tyrians, never as troubled by snow as us, decided we would make good trophies. Or perhaps they wanted to send a warning. Those were different days when the Empire wasn't busy fighting with Khiva."

"They attacked you?"

"A war party did. Young men, I suppose, out to prove themselves. They besieged us, testing our defences. We had a temporary camp only with palisades, and we found ourselves under constant threat."

"What did you do?"

"By chance, a weathermage had been passing the same way and, avoiding the Tyrians, taken shelter with us. He and I concocted a plan."

"What?" Martel asked eagerly.

"He created the most terrible blizzard to cover the area. Meanwhile, I surrounded us with heat. Under the cover of the snowstorm, with my fire blazing a trail and keeping us warm, we snuck out under their noses. Thirty miles we walked without rest! Right past the Tyrian sentinels."

Martel thought about the magic involved. Not only the power to summon such a blizzard, but also the strength and skill to keep the snow at bay and protect a whole group of people from the cold, all while avoiding detection. "That sounds incredible."

"Aye, it may not sound glorious, but it's one of the more difficult feats of magic I ever pulled off. I can tell you, that weathermage earned some respect too, from all the legionaries."

"I wish I could meet him! And hear how he did it."

Master Alastair smiled. "You did. His name is Ogion."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. He would be a man of a certain age when he arrived at your town, but in his youth, he was well-travelled and full of energy. One of the best wizards I've ever met, and I've met quite a lot. Not to mention, a good friend." The old mage's smile lasted for another moment. "Enough chattering. Back to the exercise."

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Chapter 22: Choosing the Battle

Choosing the Battle

For his first combat lesson on Malday, Martel began as he always did; he retreated to a solitary part of the arena to practise his shield. The other novices practised their staff fighting with the lapses in discipline that one might expect from children their age.

Testing his shield, Martel found that it held with ease when he threw a pebble up in the air, repelling the small stone before it could land on his hand. He knew that Reynard could not be expected to check on his progress or initiate more advanced training. Martel would have to figure that out for himself. *freewebnovel.com*

He called out to the nearest novices, a boy and girl around twelve. They stopped whacking their sticks against each other to look at him.

"Pick up a rock and throw it at me, as hard as you can," Martel asked them.

The children needed no further encouragement. They eagerly did as he wished.

To Martel's satisfaction, the stones fell down a few inches in front of him. He felt cold sweat on his brow from the effort, but his shield held. He thought of how useful this would be in a fight. Though, if that were to occur, his adversaries would probably use more dangerous weapons than pebbles.

He got up and walked over to them. "Hit me with your staff."

The boy needed no further encouragement. He struck his staff straight against Martel's shin.

As it turned out, Martel's shield still required refinement. It broke under the attack, and the staff connected with his leg. With a wince, Martel fell down on one knee.

"Again?" asked the boy.

"No thanks," Martel croaked.

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At first, Martel's second combat lesson promised to be uneventful as usual. The wooden dummy awaited his attempts to use empowering magic to push it around. As the two hours slowly passed, he did not feel any progress. He suspected this method was useless, at least for him personally, and he would have to think of another way. Perhaps trying at night might work; his magic seemed to flow better when the stars were out. Or possibly he needed his emotions flaring rather than feeling absolutely numb and bored out of his mind as he did currently.

Around him, the mageknights practised as usual. Besides training weaponry, they used their empowering skills and magic shields with ease to land and withstand powerful blows. There was something odd about watching the lithe Eleanor being struck with a hammer straight on the chest and not even flinch. Throughout the lesson, he could not help but notice her, amused by seeing how her magic made her best other mageknights physically stronger. He especially enjoyed watching her gracefully evade Cheval's sword and retaliate with such force, it sent him sprawling on his back.

The lesson was near its end when Reynard called for his students to assemble; Martel stayed put, knowing the teacher only meant the mageknights.

"By now you should be comfortable with your chosen weapon. If not, you have chosen poorly and may want to reconsider."

Some of the acolytes whispered to each other, making jests about those less competent.

"I encourage you to take this seriously," Reynard continued. "Less than two years, you may find yourself on the field of battle, taking Khivan bullets."

"But will our shields not hold them back? How can they harm us?" asked one acolyte.

"It may hold back ten, twenty, or a hundred bullets. But the hundred and first?" Reynard asked rhetorically. "Use your magic only when needed. Every enemy killed with your weapon is magic saved for the next one."

"How can the Khivans be a threat?" asked another. "They do not even have magic!"

Reynard's head whipped around to look at the speaker. "Because they are many, boy, and they keep coming. You want an example? Go southeast from here, and you will find a whole nest of them. If they cannot defeat us in war, they will overrun us through deception." The old mageknight scoffed. "If you ask me, we should get rid of them all."

"No one did," a voice interjected from outside the circle. The acolytes all looked at Martel. "We didn't ask your opinion about Khivans."

"The half-breed is a Khivan lover," Cheval sneered.

Reynard marched over to stare Martel directly in the face. Without warning, he slapped the novice across the face.

It stung. Martel had been struck a few times by his father, but never with force like this, nor with cold malice staring at him.

"If you cannot respect your teacher, boy, you have no place here."

The bell rang. Turning on his heel, Reynard strode out of the gymnasium.

Martel stared at his back with rising anger, wanting to retaliate while knowing he could not. A month ago, before he ever arrived at the Lyceum, the thought to fight back would not have occurred to him; he would never have spoken up in the first place. But he was learning more than magic.

"Martel," Maximilian said quietly, having stepped up to him. "You have to be careful."

He shot his head around to look at his friend. "I thought you wanted me to learn confidence."

"Now I want you to learn how to pick your battles," the mageknight cautioned.

"You heard him! I was supposed to overlook that?"

"Yes," Maximilian stressed. "He is a teacher. What good does challenging him do you?"

"I'm tired of being quiet."

"Well, think about the situation beyond your own nose tip. We are at war with Khiva. Do you think defending them will gain you any friends?"

Martel stared at him. "I didn't need more than one." He turned away to leave in a hurry, accompanied by contemptuous looks from the mageknights.

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Normally, Martel would spend the free bell before supper practising his elemental magic. The western courtyard always proved welcoming to him, being quiet and with all the materials he needed to practise at hand. Yet after the last lesson, Martel went to his room, locking the door. With solitude ensured, he stretched out his hand. It was not enough to learn weather magic, using guile to make a mageknight slip. The air above his open palm began to heat until a flame appeared. If Martel wanted these people to respect or even fear him, he had to play to his strength. The flame, barely warm, began to grow in intensity. Martel had to learn fire.

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When supper came, Martel collected his food and resigned himself to sitting alone at one of the outer tables, furthest away. He dug his spoon into the rice with little enthusiasm.

The bench opposite him croaked under the sudden onslaught of a heavy weight. Martel looked over to see Maximilian with his own bowl and cup of weak ale.

"I thought maybe you were annoyed with me," the novice admitted.

The acolyte glanced up to look at him with a wry expression. "We had a disagreement, Nordmark. Hardly the end of friendship."

"Alright." Stabbing into his rice, Martel could not help but ask. "Why are you friends with me? I'm not much like your other friends."

"Stars, Martel, that is a heavy question to throw at a man during his supper." The mageknight's relaxed attitude took the edge from his words. "I guess it is easy. You have no pretensions, no big demands. Nice for a change."

"I'm glad."

"Now, as compensation for forcing me to admit that, I demand we do something leisurely on Soliday, like last fiveday. Your schedule the same?"

"Yep."

"Alright. Sixth bell it is, we go out."

Martel smiled. "Alright."