

Firebrand

Chapter 28: Small Steps

Small Steps

Martel spent his first lesson in combat magic practising his shield as usual, employing the other novices to test him. His second lesson turned out differently. For the past while, he had tried to empower himself to push the wooden training target. So far, he had yet to succeed. But as he stepped up to it again, he thought about yesterday. His need to run faster, his will driving his magic. He called upon that feeling of urgent need again and placed his hands against the dummy.

Straining himself to the limit, he felt it begin to tip on its stone foundation. He finally let go, gasping for breath. It did not matter how little he had pushed it; it had worked.

This brought on a choice. Martel imagined that if he simply stuck with this routine, Reynard would leave him alone for the rest of the year. At first, he had been content with this. Now it seemed unwise. He was wasting precious time. Rather than lie low for the next many months, Martel decided to take matters into his own hands. He needed to learn all he could.

It was clear that Reynard's methods did not teach Martel anything. He had to be challenged, and he had to figure out how by himself.

He went into the small armoury that lay by the gymnasium and fetched himself a staff. Returning, he approached Maximilian sparring with another mageknight.

"Hey," Martel called out, doing it a few times before the acolytes ceased fighting. "Maximilian, would you spar with me?"

Maximilian looked at his current partner, who shrugged. "I can take a rest for a minute if you need to deal out a few bruises."

"Alright then." Maximilian raised his hammer and shield, turning towards Martel, who held his staff ready with some trepidation.

"Halt." Reynard's voice rang out as the teacher strode over to them. "You train as I command. You, back to your exercise." Looking at Martel, he threw his head towards the dummy.

"I can push it, and that won't teach me any more. I need a real challenge." Martel swallowed under Reynard's intense gaze, but he stood his ground.

The teacher glanced around the ring. The other mageknights had stopped to watch the spectacle. "The weather boy thinks he is ready to play with the big boys and girls. Who will prove him wrong?"

Martel glanced at Cheval, knowing who stood ready to volunteer. But before any could speak, Eleanor stepped forward. "I shall gladly do it, Master Reynard. It will let me practise my swings."

Reynard smiled. "Have at it." The other mageknights wore the same expression, though Maximilian's seemed of a different nature.

Eleanor leapt forward and struck an impressive blow with her sword. Martel swiftly raised his staff and managed to catch the strike, holding it back; despite how powerful her movements appeared, Martel easily stood his ground.

This continued for a while. Eleanor struck again and again from different angles, but never with greater speed or force than Martel could defend against.

"Enough." Reynard's voice separated them.

Gasping a little for breath, as if she had exerted herself, Eleanor stepped back.

The teacher glanced at the novice. "If you want to practise weaponry, the target serves that purpose. The rest of you, back in your pairs."

Hefting the staff in his hand, hiding the smile from his face, Martel walked over to the wooden dummy and began practising. One small step at a time.

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"Listen, Martel, I will not be joining you tonight." Maximilian looked up from his supper.

"What? We planned to go."

"And then we went yesterday, despite our plans. Look, I cannot stomach a poorly performed play twice in as many nights," the mageknight declared. "Besides, I would only get in your way."

"Shadi might be disappointed," Martel considered.

Maximilian snorted. "Doubtful. You got enough coin to impress her? Pay for seats and such."

"Uh, I hadn't thought about that." He had enough coin until his encounter last night, giving it all away to the street children.

"I suspected as much." Maximilian shook his head and turned his purse around. "Pay me back when you can."

"Promise!" Martel picked up five coins before he finished his meal. Tonight felt promising.

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The play had all but started when Shadi arrived. Martel had spent the last quarter hour constantly looking in every direction, trying to protect his two seats that had cost him four silvers in total. He felt a touch of relief at seeing her short, dark hair making its way through the crowd.

She grinned. "Nice seats, magic man!"

"Only the best for you," he replied. "You can look forward to it, it's a great play!"

"How do you know?"

Martel blinked. "I saw them rehearse earlier. They even got a mage creating effects!"

She gave him a wry look. "I see. Sounds interesting."

A crack of thunder sent a start through the crowd, even those who knew to expect it. With all attention on the stage, the storyteller of the play appeared.

"I bid you welcome, good folk of Morcaster! Tonight, you shall witness a tale older than time yet never seen like this before!"

Martel leaned forward, already enthralled. Next to him, Shadi grinned.

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Martel knew the ending, yet seeing it unfold nearly brought him to tears. All of Roland's trials at an end, the wyrm slain, and the hero reunited with his love. As the storyteller ended the tale, none applauded louder than Martel.

"I told you it would be great," he reminded his companion.

"I never doubted your opinion," Shadi claimed. "Want to walk around a bit? See what else we might find around here."

"Sounds good."

The crowd spread in all directions, which revealed Master Farhad. "Shadi, we go home now."

"Dad? What are you doing here?"

"You go out late to see play. You think I let you walk home alone?"

"I'd not allow that, Master Farhad," Martel interjected. "I'd take her home."

"I am her father, I know best," the watchmaker declared. "Come along, Shadi." He turned around impatiently, already walking away.

"I'll see you later, I suppose," Shadi called out before reluctantly following her father.

"Not what you planned," remarked an aged voice.

Martel looked to find Regnar, the hedge mage. "Oh, you."

The old man grinned, revealing the gaps in his row of teeth. "Me. Here I thought I was busy. One lady last night, another tonight."

"They're my friends," Martel claimed.

"Certainly. Say, how did you like my thunder?"

"Oh, very good. You seem like a good weathermage."

Regnar took a drag on his pipe. "Just a bit of skill with the elements. Don't look at me if you need rain."

"But you did make it rain," Martel said confused. "I saw it on the stage."

Regnar laughed. "That was the idea, but the truth is simpler. Say, come by tomorrow for the evening performance. I'll show you how I do it."

Martel was intrigued. "I'll be there!"