

# Firebrand

## Chapter 3: Getting Physical

### Getting Physical

When Martel woke on the morning of Malday, he quickly washed and dressed; on this day, he was to help in the kitchens with breakfast. Fortunately, yesterday's skirmish did not repeat, and he got through the chore without incidents. Once the bell had ended, his first lesson in empowering magic was to begin.

The outdoor gymnasium lay near the dining hall, and Martel arrived as the first. He discovered it had been built to allow for spectators, resembling an arena. Stands ran along the outer ring, providing seats. It had no roof, and a gentle sun shone down upon the area.

Other novices appeared, all dressed in brown robes like Martel. Their conversation ended as they noticed his presence, giving him stares. All of them looked at least a few years younger; the difference was only exacerbated by his height.

"You're the scarecrow," one of them remarked.

Martel grumbled on the inside, but kept his frustrations from surfacing. "My name is Martel."

"Why are you so old?"

"Because I was born before you," he replied.

"Quiet," came the command from an authoritative voice. A man dressed in the black tunic of the mageknights strode into the arena. In his forties, he did not appear particularly impressive, looking neither tall nor strong; yet he walked with a straight back and a stern demeanour, underlined by his moustache. "Fall into pairs and do the exercise from last time," he told them.

The novices quickly complied except for Martel, who sent the teacher a questioning glance.

He in turn gave Martel a scrutinising look. "You must be the new boy," muttered the mageknight. "I am Reynard, the Master of War. I have been given the unenviable task of teaching you the basics of shielding and empowering yourself in half the needed time."

His tone of voice did not invite remarks, so Martel simply remained quiet. He was also distracted by the sight and sound of the other novices, who had paired up to merrily throw rocks at each other.

"I have severe doubts that some northern peasant boy, already too old, can be taught this. But I suppose I must try." He sighed. "Do you know anything about empowering magic, boy?"

"Not really," Martel stammered.

"Whereas Master Alastair teaches how to manipulate the elements around you, I teach how to use magic to strengthen your own body. Useful for combat and thus mageknights, but I am required to teach it to all."

While Martel accepted that he would not necessarily have much use for this in his chosen profession, he nonetheless looked forward to learning. His mind flashed back to yesterday when that other student had pushed him back with ease.

"I will save that for your next lesson later today," Master Reynard continued. "The other thing I am required to teach everyone is how to summon a magical shield to protect your body. Even though it is a waste of my time, since you will never need it for anything other than to stay dry when you are out summoning rain for all the other peasants."

It began to dawn on Martel that this teacher fundamentally disliked him for reasons beyond his control. It did not seem fair, but he had little idea what to do about it. And he felt intrigued by the notion of a magical shield, so he kept his mouth shut while trying to look attentive.

"Pick up a rock, boy."

Blinking, Martel realised it had been a command, and he hurried to comply. Grabbing a small stone that fitted within the palm of his hand, he looked at his teacher.

"Throw it at me. As hard as you can."

Hoping this was not some pretext for claiming he had assaulted a teacher, Martel threw the rock straight at Master Reynard.

Several hands' width in front of the mageknight, the rock hit something invisible and fell to the ground. "Magic can be willed to surround you like a shield, as demonstrated," Master Reynard explained. "You must focus to imagine it. Some students see an actual shield or wall, others a suit of armour to surround them. Find what works best for you. And hurry up." Several rocks floated up from the air to land in the teacher's hands. Without warning, he flung the first one at his student.

Taken by surprise, Martel felt the pebble hit his arm. He winced. Already he saw Master Reynard prepare to throw the next stone, and he tried to comply with the instructions. He thought about the great shields he had seen soldiers wield when a troop of them marched through Engby to guard the border against the Tyrian tribes. He imagined being behind the shield, protected by it.

The stone flew to strike his stomach, indifferent to his attempts. "Focus!" yelled Master Reynard. "Empty your mind of other thoughts. Think only of your defence!" freeweb novel.co m

Martel considered it would be a lot easier to focus without being pelted by rocks, but he kept this observation to himself. He imagined the shield again, still to no avail. Nearby, he heard some of the other novices laugh each time he got struck.

Finally, the hail of stones ended. "I see your age does not grant you any advantages," Master Reynard declared. "On the contrary, perhaps. Regardless, I cannot spend the entire lesson with you. I have other students who might actually benefit from my supervision. Continue practising on your own."

"How?" Martel blurted out.

Master Reynard tossed another rock, which the novice managed to catch. "Practise your focus. Try different methods. When you think you have it, throw the rock up into the air and repel it before it hits you. I will return to check on your progress." He turned his back to Martel and began correcting the other novices.

Left on his own, Martel spent the remainder of the class practising as instructed. Despite all his attempts, each time he threw the pebble into the air, it fell right back to hit him on the head. As for his teacher, despite his words, he did not spare Martel a second glance, providing no further aid through the lesson.

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As third bell rang, Martel left the gymnasium quickly. He had next bell empty on his schedule, leaving him with plenty of spare time. He wondered briefly why he did not have more classes, given he only had two years to complete his studies. Perhaps they expected him to practise on his own time, once he had learned the techniques.

With no friends to pass the time with anyway, Martel resolved to continue practising instead. Returning to his room with a pebble he had found, he renewed his efforts to create the shield. He imagined all sorts of barriers to protect himself. None worked.

Eventually, lunch beckoned with another tolling of the bell. He went quickly to the dining hall, ate his meal alone seated in the corner, and returned to his room. Yet despite all his efforts, when the bell rang to announce his next class would begin, he had not made any progress.

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Arriving at the gymnasium, Martel saw the other students already present. Yet they were not the same group of novices from this morning; seven mageknights in training, all around his own age, turned to stare at him, the son of Duke Cheval among them. The latter smiled like a cat watching a wing-clipped pigeon.

This had to be a mistake, Martel assumed. Feeling more and more awkward by the moment until his toes practically curled together, he finally saw Reynard appear carrying eight long staves.

"Sorry, Master Reynard," Martel spoke as he hurried over. "My schedule said I was to attend this class. Could it be an error?"

"No," replied the teacher gruffly. "I teach all novices some basic self-defence as part of magical empowerment. Since you are short on time, you will learn with more advanced students. That should motivate you to catch up," he added with a twist of his mouth.

"I see." Martel swallowed.

Reynard tossed the staves on the ground. "Everybody, pick one."

The students did so, Martel choosing the last one. He quickly examined the weapon. He knew the stories of wizards wielding staves and wands, amplifying their magic.

"It is just a staff," Reynard remarked, glancing at Martel. "About as magical as you, I might add." Snickering laughter could be heard. "But a good weapon in all situations for defending yourself with."

The son of Cheval raised his hand. "I could show the new student the basic techniques, Master Reynard. So you can focus on the other students," came his helpful suggestion.

"Why not," replied the teacher. "Pair up and practise strikes and blocks," he continued, raising his voice. "We will change partners after a quarter bell. Cheval, show the farm boy how it is done."

"Yes, master." The young nobleman's smile turned sinister. He hefted the staff in his hands and took position opposite Martel while the other pairs of students began their own practice. "Imagine meeting you here, scarecrow. Now pay attention."

With a tinge of despair, Martel looked around for a way out. He could not think of any. Reynard, already busy instructing the others, could not be relied on. His fellow students were likewise engrossed with their own training. Fear building up in him, Martel raised his staff in defence.

"This," Cheval said as his weapon struck out to hit Martel on the shoulder, "is a strike." He smiled broadly watching Martel wince at the sudden pain. "Now attack me, and I will demonstrate a block."

Wary, yet relishing the opportunity to return the blow, Martel smashed the staff with both hands against Cheval, wielding it like a club. The latter blocked with ease, stepped to the side, and struck back, hitting Martel on the same spot.

"And that is a riposte," the young mageknight explained while gloating. "Do let me know if I am using words too advanced."

Frustration spurring his anger, Martel struck again and again, yet his undisciplined movements proved as fruitless as could be expected. Each time, Cheval dodged or parried, delivering a strike in return. By the time half an hour had passed and they switched partners, Martel was battered and bruised all over.

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Limping back to his room, Martel felt ready to go home. If his legs had not been hurting already, he might even have considered it. After removing his ill-fitting robe, he lay down on his bed. The relief from relaxing his worn muscles only lasted briefly as the full impact of his bruises hit him. Large blotches miscoloured his skin. It occurred to him that he would have to endure this once every five days, and he could not expect much help from his teacher. The temptation to go home renewed itself.

Taking a deep breath, he sat up, ignoring the pangs of pain from his abused body. Pulling out a small pebble from his pocket, taken after his first lesson, he slowed his breathing and began to focus. Concentrating on conjuring a shield to protect himself, he threw the pebble into the air.

## **Chapter 4: Tranquil**

Tranquil

As Glunday arrived, Martel returned to elemental magic. He had practised with the bowl of water in his room, yet despite all his efforts, he could barely cause the slightest change. The various methods shown to him by Master Alastair had not yielded any results; apprehensive, Martel approached the Hall of Elements for his next lesson just as the bell rang.

A handful of novices exited, chattering loudly. From bits of their conversation, Martel surmised that their training progressed well. They glanced at him as they passed, which he had grown accustomed to at this point; standing aside, he let them pass before he entered the hall.

The short Master of Elements stood in the middle. With a sweeping gesture of his hand, the jagged earth floor turned smooth. The water, flowing in its circle, became calm.

"Martel! The bell's barely rung and you're already here," he remarked as he looked at his student with a smile.

"I don't want to waste time," Martel explained simply.

"Good attitude, boy. How's your practice been on your own?"

"I tried my best, master," Martel claimed. "Both Pelday and today before class."

"And? You don't sound enthused."

"I don't think I've made any progress," the novice admitted.

"No matter," Master Alastair declared with an optimistic tone. "Let's try another method. Come, sit down by the water. Close your eyes," he added once Martel had followed his first instruction. He took hold of the boy's hand and held it palm up. Next, Master Alastair placed a few drops of water in the hand. "Do you feel the water on your skin?"

"Yes, master."

"Focus only on that. Shut everything else out. When you have done so, push the water to drip down your hand and fall to the ground. It wants to move. It wants to follow gravity and fall down. You just need to give it the slightest push."

Martel did his best to obey. With closed eyes, he imagined the drop as he felt it in his palm. He was tempted to tilt his hand a little, just to help things along, but he realised this would defeat the purpose of the exercise.

After a while, he opened his eyes, feeling awkward and ashamed. "I'm sorry, master."

"No need to be," Master Alastair reassured him. "How about I leave to take care of a few errands? You can try again without feeling me watching you."

"Thanks."

With a comforting smile, the wizard left the Hall of Elements, and Martel returned to the exercise. Yet as the lesson passed, nothing came of it.

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At lunch, Martel filled his plate with bread, butter, asparagus, peas, and cabbage. He stood for a moment, searching for a secluded place to eat, before he changed his mind. Tired of eating alone, he saw a familiar face and took his chances.

"Can I sit here?" asked Martel after approaching the table.

Henry, the airmage who manned the desk at the entrance hall, looked up. "Sure."

Relieved, but trying not to let it show, Martel quickly took the empty space on the bench opposite the acolyte.

"I didn't know we let novices sit at our table," growled Jasper, the earthmage who shared Henry's occupation.

"It's fine, he's as old as we are." The airmage waved his hand in the air and resumed eating. "Oh, I forgot to tell you," he added between bites, aimed at Martel. "Don't forget to check for letters at the entrance hall. You should do so every other day."

Martel dipped his bread in butter. "Letters?"

"Or just messages. Sometimes from the teachers. Though urgent ones will be delivered to your room," Henry explained.

"Don't you have family that would write letters?" asked Jasper.

"I suppose they will, after some time," Martel considered.

"You do know how to read, right," the earthmage continued.

"You saw him sign the contract," Henry pointed.

"Right."

"If you write any letters, you can leave them at our desk too," Henry added. "We'll be sure they get sent by Imperial post. The riders can reach anywhere in the Empire in three fivedays."

"Don't forget to pay four coppers, though," Jasper said, raising a finger as a facetious warning. "Or they'll use your letter for kindling." He drank from his cup.

"I don't have any coin," Martel admitted. "I'll need to find work. Like you guys do."

"Good luck with that being only a novice," Jasper laughed, wiping his mouth with his green sleeve.

Martel gave Henry a questioning look.

"Most work open to students at the Lyceum require magical skills. Like, you must be able to use Tyrian runes to send messages through the pipes. Being a good airmage helps," the white-clad acolyte explained with a satisfied expression.

"All the mundane work, they just hire servants to do," Jasper added.

"Have you been to the workshop yet?" Henry asked.

"Workshop? Oh, no, not yet. I'm due on Solday," Martel explained.

"Ask the artificer. He may have some odd jobs you can do. He looks big and tough, but he's a real soft touch," the airmage declared before raising his cup to take a hefty gulp.

"I'll do that, thanks," replied the sole novice at the table. Falling quiet, he let the acolytes resume their talks about difficult lessons, stern teachers, girls in their classes, sojourns into the city, and everything else happening in their lives.

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After lunch, Martel followed Henry to the entrance hall, where it turned out a message did wait for him. It was from the quartermaster, informing him his new clothes could be picked up. The message was already a day old, and Martel realised he could have been spared teasing about his ill-fitting robe, had he only known. But no sense in crying over rusted iron, as his father had often said, and Martel hurried through the Lyceum to reach the quartermaster's small domain.

Soon, he could hand over one robe in exchange for two others, made to fit his taller frame. Relief went through him as he dressed in his new garments, feeling as if a vulnerability had now been armoured. People might still look because he appeared too old to be a novice, but at least his clothes no longer gave them further reason to ridicule him.

Feeling optimistic, he practised in his room until the time came for his second lesson in elemental magic that day, which unfolded much like the previous one.

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In the faculty wing, Alastair knocked on the door and waited until a voice inside bid him enter. "Juliana," he spoke in greeting as he stepped inside.

"Something to drink?" she offered with a gesture towards a bottle. "I just filled it today."

"I'll never say no. What cask?" Alastair sat down, grabbing a cup from the small table between them.

"Not Asterian. From Sindhu, I assume, since the seller is that little Sindhian man. You have seen him, I am sure."

"Right, the wine seller who comes around. I have never tried any of his fare before." Once Juliana had filled his cup, Alastair took it to his lip and gave it a taste. "Not bad."



"I have grown quite partial to it," she admitted.

Alastair took another sip before he placed his cup on the table again. "I'm guessing you didn't ask me here just to sample wine."

"How is our newest student?"

The Master of Elements scratched his neck. "I'm trying to teach him through the tranquil methods rather than emotional. It's not going well."

"To be expected, given his nature."

"I suppose if there's no breakthrough, I'll have to try another approach."

"Have you told him anything?" asked the overseer.

"Not yet. I will, soon enough. Certainly before I try to teach him anything with fire."

Juliana exhaled. "I hope I did the right thing."

"You did." Alastair nodded. "Protecting him from the Empire... and the Empire from him."

"Perhaps he would have been fine on his own."

"I imagine someone else thought the same two hundred years ago when half of Morcaster burned." Alastair grabbed his cup. "Or would you have entrusted him to some hedge wizard?"

Juliana emptied the bottle into his cup. "No. But I wish we would not have to face such choices."

Alastair gave a little shrug. "We do the best we can, no? The rest is up to the Stars." He emptied his goblet in one swig.

## **Chapter 5: The Meeting of Stars**

### The Meeting of Stars

As Manday came around, Martel woke feeling hopeful. His bruises from two days ago had turned various shades of blue and purple, and they only hurt on occasion. He had most of the day to himself except for one lesson, allowing him to do new things while still having time to practise his magic. As for the lesson, it concerned astronomy; a topic that Martel knew nothing about, but he could only imagine it would be intriguing if it dealt with magic.

After breakfast, he threw his scarf around his neck, put up the hood on his robe, dug his hands into its pockets, and ventured outside. Morcaster was deep in winter, but it lay far south of the borderlands to Tyria where Martel had spent his whole life; while others hurried past, cursing the cold while rubbing hands together, he strolled down the street feeling comfortable.

The Lyceum lay in the heart of the city, being the oldest building. Every district was within close reach, though Martel would be less welcome in some than others. While he had never been to a city the size of Morcaster before, or any size for that matter, his mother had given him plenty of warnings. This in mind, he kept to the wide streets, often patrolled by the city guards.

On his first arrival to the capital of the Asterian Empire, Martel had gone straight from the gate to the Lyceum. Anxiety and eagerness had kept him from taking in the city itself as he scurried straight to the school to find out whether he would be accepted or not. On this morning, he could leisurely walk down the paved road that stood flanked by tall cypress trees.

Asking for directions, Martel found his destination with ease. In fact, he could soon see it rise against the horizon. The great temple of the Sun took up as much space as the Lyceum or the Imperial palace, with tall towers that stretched towards the sky.

Standing on the square before the impressive building, Martel could scarcely fathom its grandeur. He had heard of it, but no description could have prepared him for the beauty and elegance laid into the massive structure. The spires seemed so thin that the wind could break them in twain, even as they glistened golden against the rays of the sun.

A pair of inquisitors walked past Martel. On the receiving end of their scowl, he immediately felt guilty, as if they could smell magic on him. It took him a moment to realise that scowling was probably just their typical expression. They continued into the temple, whereas Martel turned away. A few more inquiries about directions steered him on his final steps.

Down an alley, squeezed in between two mansions belonging to members of the nobility, lay a small garden. Despite the location near the wealth of Morcaster, it lay desolate and overgrown. A shrine took up most of the small space, also being the reason why few would be seen in this place. All citizens in the Asterian Empire held with the Faith of the Sun. Adherence to the Stars in addition was considered quaint, at best; at worst, it might be considered the first step on the path to heresy and darker violations of faith.

Martel did not know why; the priest in Engby had never delved into the topic. Yet he knew from the stories that mages worshipped the Stars rather than the Sun, especially in the days before Archen fell. With cautious steps, Martel approached the shrine. It was a small pavilion with statues on three sides, leaving the entrance open. He stepped

inside so that all three marble faces might look down on him. The Warrior, the Jester, and the Sage. The Triumvirate of the Heavens.

"Help me," Martel spoke. He looked from one statue to another. "Let me learn magic. It's all I have. I'm just a burden to my family without it." He swallowed. "Please."

Silent, unmoving, the Triumvirate stared down upon him. With the tall buildings surrounding the shrine, it lay in darkness even during the day. Martel did not know if anyone had heard his plea; the shadows revealed nothing. Having done what he could, he turned around and left.

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Although he had plenty of time before the day's lesson, Martel did not spend any more time in the city. He returned to the Lyceum to enact the next step in his plan. So far, he had trusted in Master Alastair to know best and introduce the right methods for learning magic. But with little progress to show for it, it seemed prudent to seek out other counsel. Once back at the Lyceum, Martel steered straight to the library.

As the librarian sent him a stern look, Martel hurried to wash his hands in the small basin provided therefor. He dried his hands meticulously; the thought of leaving a stain on the books mortified him. If they were part of the Lyceum's collection, he imagined they cost more than most people could earn in a lifetime.

Glancing around at the shelves, he realised he had no clue how to proceed. There had to be hundreds or thousands of books. Steeling himself, he approached the librarian. "Sorry to disturb you. Can you help me?"

The scribe looked up from his work, creating a copy of an existing book. "What do you need?"

"Books on learning magic."

"Rather broad," the librarian scoffed. "Given you are a novice, I assume you are not interested in theories on the intrinsic nature of magic, or the now defunct sorcery of Khiva, or the galdr of Tyrian bards. As for Sindhian alchemy, such a topic is restricted to acolytes." He wore a superior smile seeing Martel's confusion. "Something more basic, I take it. Follow me."

He led the novice to one of the shelves. His finger ran across the spines of the books until it stopped. "Here." The librarian pulled out his choice, placing it in Martel's hands. "The Asterian Methods for Learning the Noble Art."

With a nod to convey gratitude, Martel went to the nearest reading desk and opened the book. He spent the next bells reading, trying to understand the complicated explanations offered in the tome. He quickly realised the obstacle. He could not attempt

any of them while inside the library, where his flailing magic might cause damage; nor was he allowed to take the book with him to practise elsewhere. His only option was to memorise them and try them at a later stage. He was still busy with this when the bell rang, summoning him to his lesson of the day.

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Appropriately, astronomy was taught in the tallest tower of the Lyceum. It allowed for observations of the night sky when standing atop, though the classes were taught in the room just below. Martel arrived as the last, having had trouble finding his way. Rushing up the stairs and into the room, his heart sank upon finding seven mageknights already present. It seemed that his fellow students during physical combat magic would also accompany him during astronomy. At least this class did not involve sticks.

Various looks met him. Contdescension, pity, indifference. Every acolyte sat at an individual writing desk. Martel made his way through them to reach an empty one in the corner. Shortly after, the teacher stepped inside.

He wore a purple robe as could be expected, while the rest of his appearance gave a less grandiose impression. His beard grew uneven and according to its own desires, barely touched by scissors. His eyebrows likewise seemed eager to expand beyond their allotted space, perhaps compensating for a reverse lack of hair on his balding head. What struck Martel as most curious were the two pieces of glass in front of his eyes, held together by some kind of thin metal frame. He had never before seen anyone wearing glasses.

"Good afternoon," he spoke, somehow making the greeting sound like grumbling. "You all know me from previous years, of course, except for our new pupil." He turned his eyes, enlarged by the glasses he wore, towards Martel. "I am Master Fenrick."

Already feeling awkward at being singled out, Martel kept quiet.

Almost with a flourish, Master Fenrick turned on his heel. On the wall opposite the students hung a complicated star chart, which he approached. "Astronomy is among the shorter classes you will learn. If you complete one single task, you may be finished as swiftly as six fivedays."

"What task might that be?" asked an acolyte whom Martel did not know. It struck him that among his fellow students, the only name he knew was Cheval.

"You'll be making a star chart."

Martel's eyes widened, staring at the complex map on the wall. Scores of geometric figures filled the parchment in various circles, interweaving with each other in countless places, all to show the patterns of the stars moving across the sky.

"Not like this," Master Fenrick added dryly, seeing the collective reaction among his class. "Most of you could spend a lifetime studying astronomy without ever gaining the knowledge to complete a map of this complexity. No, I only require a map showing the movement of Perel, Malac, and Glund. I trust someone here can explain why?"

One girl raised her hand. Martel turned to take a closer look at her; she had not been partnered with him during his repeated beatings in Master Reynard's class, where he had been too occupied receiving bruises to think of much else. He noticed that she was more attractive than any girl he had ever seen, whether in Engby or Morcaster. He could only imagine the amount of attention she received from her peers.

"Yes?" asked Master Fenrick.

"The Archeans believed that those three stars influenced magic above all. Our own methods in the Asterian Empire are based on those pioneered by the Archeans," she replied with the confidence born of knowledge.

"Correct." If the master felt as impressed by her reply as Martel did, he did not let it show. "Unlike here, where astronomy is considered an afterthought, the Archeans considered it the prime subject to learn upon which all their knowledge of magic rested."

"Not that it did them much good," mumbled Cheval, causing a whisper of laughter from the boys nearest him. Martel looked at them both; he recognised one of them, who had gleefully used his staff on Martel during Master Reynard's lesson. The other had the same height as Martel, but he was twice as broad across the shoulders.

"Silence, boy," Master Fenrick all but sneered. "Don't forget you must pass all your classes to graduate from the Lyceum. From what I recall, you have plenty of need to pay close attention."

Martel leaned back in his seat and turned his head away, so nobody would see the grin on his face.

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Almost two hours later, Martel's head felt dizzy. Master Fenrick had demonstrated the equations and how to draw the patterns of the stars on their own individual maps, but arithmetic had never been a strength of Martel's. He knew enough to trade on the market faire, calculating silver and copper coins as needed. Nobody had prepared him for anything more rigorous; unlike the mageknights, who all seemed to be nobleborn and would have grown up with tutors.

The bell rang. "All you need are in these books," Master Fenrick declared, letting his hand brush over the spines of several books on a shelf next to the star chart. "You are expected to work on your maps in your own time." He quickly left.

Martel suddenly remembered he had to help in the kitchens for the evening meal. He did not enjoy the thought of pushing past all the mageknights, however. Better to arrive a little later. So he sat, waiting as they filed out of the room.

Cheval and his friends departed first, immediately making Martel relax. His shoulders visibly untensed. Still he waited until the three girls of the class had gone as well. They were already busy talking and giggling.

"Eleanor, have you heard?" said one of them in the kind of whisper intended to be loud. She cast a look over her shoulder at Martel, who in turn noted that the pretty girl reacted, informing him of her name.

"What is it?" she asked as they reached the door.

"Our new novice is so inept, he receives private lessons from Master Alastair, yet he has nothing to show for it." The gossip was accompanied by laughter, though at this point, they had passed through the door, and he could not tell who laughed. Not that it mattered; embarrassment filled him, and he waited a while longer until he could be certain they had left the tower. Only then did he make his way to the kitchens.

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The overseer moved through the quarters of the faculty until she reached her destination, knocking on the door. A curt invitation to enter followed from inside, which she did.

From his chair, where he sat reading, the Master of War looked up at her over the rim of his reading glasses. "Juliana," he muttered in greeting.

"Reynard. I wanted to ask you about your new student."

He shut his book and removed his glasses with a weary gesture. "I told you beforehand it was a mistake, and I remain convinced. He has shown not the slightest indication of talent."

"Some children take a few fivedays before they find the way to channel their power," Juliana argued.

"He is not a child," Reynard retorted. "His mind is too old to learn. My best mageknights start training at half his age."

"He is not meant to be a mageknight. You only need to tolerate his presence until he can be made an acolyte." Juliana placed her hands behind her back, staring down at her colleague.

"I will not turn a blind eye simply because you have taken some fancy to this northern peasant," Reynard sneered. "If he cannot complete my challenges to my utmost satisfaction, I will see him leave this school."

"Has the headmaster instructed you in this?"

"He had no need. If that was all," he added while returning his glasses to his face. The overseer narrowed her eyes but did not speak, leaving in silence.