

Firebrand

Chapter 6: Shadi

Shadi

Solday did not bring any lessons with it, but instead the obligation to assist the artificer in the workshop for a full bell. While Martel did not know what this entailed, he had helped his father often enough around the smithy. He wondered if magic would be involved; he imagined how one might use sorcery to improve crafting or even weave spells into the items.

Once the breakfast bell had ended, Martel made his way to the workshop. He entered a large room filled with numerous tools, workbenches, a forge, and more things he could not recognise. Beyond that, doorways opened into other chambers. The noise of people at work permeated the space. Tools cutting or grinding, hammers clanking, the hiss of fire being awakened.

A handful of other students arrived at the same time as Martel, novices and acolytes alike. They obviously knew their duties, as they all continued past him to take up a workstation or move deeper into the complex. After a short while, only Martel remained.

Eventually, he was approached by a middle-aged man with imposing forearms, wearing a leather apron. Martel recognised a smith when he saw one, and he could only assume this was the master of the workshop.

"You're new?" asked the smith. "Tall for a novice."

"Yes, master, today is my first day here. I'm Martel."

"Hah, good name!"

Martel laughed a little, feeling more at ease. "My father thought so. He was a smith."

A heavy hand fell onto Martel's shoulder, but the gesture was not unkind. "Well, let's put you to work. I'm Master Jerome. If you're new, I'm guessing your magical talents remain raw."

"Yes," Martel admitted, a little embarrassed.

"No bother. There's plenty of mundane work to be done. When you become an acolyte, depending on your gift and your interest, we may find better work for you, even teach you a craft."

His ears pricked up at that. While being a weathermage remained his ambition, learning a craft, perhaps like his father's, sounded useful. "I would like that. I was hoping maybe I could work some more bells besides the one I'm scheduled."

"Your family far from here, boy?"

"Up in Nordmark, yes."

"And your pa ain't around anymore."

Martel shook his head. "Caught a fever last winter. My brother has his forge now."

The artificer nodded a little to himself. "I'll see if there's an opportunity for you to earn a few coins. For now, go through that door." He pointed. "That's the washery. You'll help with laundry today. The servants will show you what to do."

"Will do, master."

Master Jerome winked and pushed the boy in the back towards the washery before returning to his own work.

~

Washing clothes proved to be dull and tiring labour, but Martel did not mind. He was accustomed to helping with chores from home, and like in the kitchen, the servants proved friendly, if distant. Martel began to understand a divide between the servants of the Lyceum and students like himself. Even if he did not see it, at least not yet, they knew; he was but another in a long line of novices passing through their home and work area. They spoke of people and made jests known only to themselves and not him. When the bell rang, Martel bid them a polite farewell and left the washery.

Before he could depart from the workshop itself, the artificer called out to him. "Martel, boy, one moment."

"Yes?"

"I have a letter that needs delivery to a craftsman in town. Would you like to earn five coppers?"

Although generally ignorant on the monetary value of labour, even Martel knew that was good payment. The idea of being helpful to Master Jerome also suited him. "I'd be happy to, master."

"Good. This letter is for Farhad the watchmaker." He waved a piece of parchment around. fr(e)webnov(e)l.com

Martel mouthed the name, as unfamiliar as the trade this master apparently plied.

"He lives in the Khivan enclave, southeast in the city. If you go to the harbour and turn east, you'll find it. He has a shop on the big street near the fountain square. I'm sure if you ask for Master Farhad's workshop, you will get there easily enough." Extending his hand with the letter, the artificer gave Martel a serious look. "Five coppers when you return upon successful completion of your task."

"Yes, master," Martel agreed, taking the letter.

Master Jerome grinned. "Excellent." His smile vanished. "Make sure you are back before nightfall. Don't be out in the city after dark, especially not in the southern districts."

"I'll be back before then, I promise."

"Good. Off with you!"

~

After a quick detour to his room for his scarf, Martel braved the city once more with the letter safely tucked inside his robe. Relying on Master Jerome's instructions, he went south towards the harbour. It was easy to find. In the distance, the tall masts of ships rose, animal trains of goods moved to and from that location, and the smell of salt lay in the air as the wind blew towards him.

Approaching the harbour, he noticed the change in surroundings. Not simply the buildings, which seemed to be dominated by warehouses and public houses. Rough-looking sailors congregated on the streets, some of them inebriated despite the early hour of the day. They seemed quick to both laughter and anger, and Martel kept his distance. Various women, who despite the cold did not appear warmly dressed, shouted propositions at him and laughed at his embarrassed demeanour.

Not eager to continue further, Martel followed the next part of his instructions and turned east. After a while, the area changed again. No warehouses lay here, nor did caravans of donkeys and servants traverse the street with goods. The inhabitants wore a greater variety of clothes, some of it clearly of foreign origin. He encountered more beggars, and the buildings were old and often in need of repair. Unlike the great insulae that filled the other residential districts, these homes were far smaller and often built of wood rather than stone.

It occurred again to Martel that he did not know what a watchmaker did. Watching was something one did; he could not comprehend how one might craft the act. Thankfully, simply asking for Farhad's workshop gave him further directions from the locals, in particular to look for a shop sign with a sundial on it.

He walked down the main street of the district, such as it was; in comparison to elsewhere in the city, it ran narrower, and the paving was in poor condition. Furthermore, he noticed an increase in unusual garments, and words of a foreign tongue could be heard on occasion. Given Master Jerome's instructions, he could surmise both people and language were Khivan, at least in origin. Martel knew nothing about them except that the Empire was currently at war with Khiva; he had never met any before as their people seldom came as far north as Nordmark.

Continuing deeper into the enclave, he saw his destination; a sign above a shop door depicting a sundial. As he approached, his expression turned apprehensive. In front of the workshop stood a girl about his age, with hair cut short. She was not the cause of his apprehension; that stemmed from the three boys, also around fifteen or sixteen, who jeered at her. She in turn replied with a furious voice, using words that would have earned Martel a cuff on the head from his father.

Martel could not determine the reason for the argument, but it seemed clear that one party sought to offend, and the other was on the defensive. His heart began to beat at twice the pace; he had never been much for fighting, nor did he have any skill. His bruises from the other day proved as much. But he could not stand aside and let three harass one, even if everyone else on the street seemed indifferent.

"Hey!" he called out. This got their attention; it occurred to Martel that he had not considered what to do next.

"What do you want?" came the sneering question from the tallest of the boys.

"I got a letter to deliver, and you're in my way." Martel tried to send them his most intimidating glare.

"Look at this scrawny scribbler," snorted another of the thugs.

"Little feather boy strayed far from home?"

"Here to help the Khivan bitch, are we?"

Martel possessed no magic that could help him in a fight. The magelight he might summon could not hurt anyone. But, he realised, they did not know that. "I'm not a scribe," he said in the calmest voice he could command while extending his hand. A flame appeared out of nowhere, hovering above his palm. "You shouldn't mess with a mage."

The boys stared at the flame with wide eyes before they turned tail and ran. As Martel let the flame disappear, the girl bent down to pick up a rock. She flung it with a sure aim, hitting one of her tormentors in the back of the head, and he almost stumbled before continuing his flight. *freewebnovel.com*

She turned towards Martel. "Just so he remembers it tomorrow." Her angry demeanour vanished in the blink of an eye, changed into a bright smile. "That was amazing. You can do magic?"

"Just a little," he replied with a shrug, trying to dress the truth up as modesty. "I study at the Lyceum."

"That's so great! I've never met a wizard before."

"If you come to my school, you'll see lots."

She laughed. "I'll keep that in mind. I'm Shadi, by the way."

"I'm Martel."

"Are you hungry?"

"I suppose. I'll probably have to go back to the Lyceum now or I might miss lunch." The idea of missing a meal put a fright in him.

"Nah, come with me. I was on my way out when those yokels came by. There's a tavern close by that's got good food."

Martel's only experience with taverns was the one in Engby, which his father had forbidden him from entering. But the prospect of a friend free from the entanglements at the Lyceum enticed Martel to such a degree, Shadi could have suggested they opened a portal to the Netherworld and he would still have followed. Another issue presented itself, though.

"I don't have any coin. On me." He hurried to add the final words so she would not think him penniless, even if that was the case.

"It's not much, I'll pay this time. Consider it my thanks for helping me out." She winked.

The prospect of a second time pleased Martel; especially as he might at that point have coin to return the favour. He suddenly remembered his errand. "First, I need to deliver this letter to Master Farhad's workshop." He looked up at the sign hanging over the door. "Is that here?"

"Master Farhad," Shadi giggled. "So funny to hear someone refer to dad that way. Yep, you found it."

"That's lucky." His fingers fumbled inside his robe and dragged out the letter.

"Let me take it," she suggested. "I'll go inside and leave it, grab a few things, and we'll go eat."

"Sounds good to me." Martel gave her the parchment and watched her scarpers inside. As the door opened, he caught a glimpse of a workshop full of strange tools, small bits of metal formed into odd shapes, and large wooden casings he could not grasp the use of.

Quickly, Shadi returned with a smile and a large piece of cloth she swaddled around her neck. She locked the door. "Old man's asleep. He needs his nap," she explained with a wry smile. "Let's go!"

~

The place in question proved to be a small house with an open wall providing access to a kitchen. Even from a distance, Martel could smell the food. It was a strange mix of meat and spices; upon approach he realised the place served lots of items, which accounted for the unusual blend of scents. "Two fish in bread," Shadi told the man who accepted her money. He stood behind a counter that Martel now saw was hollow; a fire burned slowly inside, keeping it heated along with the bowls placed upon it. Deftly, the seller grabbed two pieces of flatbread and wrapped them around some fish. Shadi grabbed them both and gave one to Martel.

Back on the street, he took a careful bite. He could not recognise the fish, which had a strong flavour; yet hunger always proved the best seasoning, and he ate it with delight. The bread, freshly baked, provided a satiating feeling as well.

"I've never seen a place like that," Martel admitted between mouthfuls. "Back home, a tavern is a place for drunkards. That's what my dad said, anyway," he quickly added.

"If you go to the harbour, that'll probably be the case," Shadi admitted with a grin. "But most places in Morcaster, a tavern's just a place that'll sell you food. Or drink. Where are you from?"

"Nordmark. I've only been in Morcaster a fiveday."

"Hey, I can show you the city! There's lots of places to see all over."

Finishing his lunch, Martel smiled even as he still chewed. "That sounds great."

"You can come by the workshop when you want. Dad doesn't need me there all the time anyway."

"Alright. I don't have much to do on Mandays or Soldays."

"And you can show me more magic!" Shadi suggested.

"Certainly." Hopefully by then, he would have learned some.

They continued for a while through the Khivan enclave, talking and walking until Martel remembered Master Jerome's admonishment about being out after dark. The winter sun already hung low on the horizon, so he told his new friend farewell to return home to the Lyceum. It was only on the way back he realised that he never found out what a watchmaker made.

Chapter 7: Dormant

Dormant

Martel's first fiveday at the Lyceum did not feel like a success. He had hardly shown any talent in his classes; after four lessons in elemental magic, he did not feel any improvement. As he finished breakfast on Pelday, waiting to have his fifth, he steeled himself for a conversation with Master Alastair.

"Martel! Come in, boy." The Master of Elements greeted him with his usual fervour and a smile behind the greying beard.

"Yes, master." Martel cleared his throat, stepping inside the Hall of Elements. "Master, I've been reading in the library."

"Oh ho, is that so? Reading is a dangerous affair, but I'll keep your secret." He winked at the novice.

"I read about the methods of learning magic. If I understand, you're teaching me through focus? The tranquil method, the book called it."

"Yes, that's right."

Martel hesitated, not eager to criticise the one person meant to help him accomplish his dreams of magic. "I just don't feel like it's working for me," he finally admitted. "The book mentioned other paths to sorcery. More about emotions than the mind."

"No," Master Alastair said quickly. "Boy, I'm teaching you the way I think is best. You'll have to trust me."

"Of course," Martel hurried to reply.

"If I feel the need, we'll change our approach. But for now, sit down, close your eyes, and focus."

~

When the lesson ended, Martel made his way straight to the kitchens to help make lunch. He did not mind this chore; it gave him an excuse to eat in the kitchen rather than brave the dining hall. While a few of the acolytes did not seem to mind his presence,

most of them cared little to include him in conversation. The alternative, sitting with novices several years younger than him, did not entice Martel either.

The kitchen staff kept their distance, much like when he had worked in the washery yesterday. Here as well, the difference between servant and student was clear, even if invisible to the outsider. Martel's only friend in Morcaster remained a Khivan girl who had much higher expectations of his magical abilities than he could meet.

He remembered the astronomy lesson and the rumour mentioned by the acolytes. How he was so inept that even with private tutoring from Master Alastair, he showed no progress. With a heavy feeling, Martel finished his chores and went to his room. He rested for a while, staring out of the window at the sky. When the bell rang, he walked with slow steps towards his next lesson in elemental magic.

~

Master Alastair exhibited his typical enthusiasm at Martel's arrival, even if they had seen each other only hours prior. The novice felt a tingle of suspicion that the Master of Elements placed some effort into displaying good cheer, and perhaps he was less assured of Martel's success than he let on.

"Master Alastair, may I ask you something?"

"I'd be a poor teacher to say no. What's on your mind?" (f)reewebnovel

Martel bit his lip before he spoke. "I heard some of the other students. They said you're teaching me in private because I'm so untalented. I'm worried they're right."

Master Alastair frowned. "Boy, if you did not have the skill for magic, you wouldn't stand before me right now."

"I can create a small flame that can't even light a candle." Martel exhaled, trying to keep his frustrations under control. "I'm the furthest thing from a weathermage."

"All beginnings are hard," his teacher claimed. "You'll get there, trust me."

"I've seen the other novices around the school. Younger than me, but none of them seem as slow to learn as me."

The Master of Elements took a deep breath. "I didn't plan to tell you this yet, but I suppose you should know if it will restore your faith in yourself."

"Know what?"

"The gift of magic takes many shapes. Some excel in shaping earth or commanding wind, others can empower their bodies to incredible feats of strength and endurance.

Many have a touch of everything rather than a singular talent. But in every generation, there's a few with an innate mastery of fire. Someone so naturally gifted, even without instruction, the flame will heed their call."

Martel summoned the flame in his hand. He did not think about it or clear his mind; he simply did. It shone brightly, though it felt cold.

Master Alastair smiled. "Like that. They call us fire-touched."

"Us?" Martel's eyes widened a little.

The master nodded. "You and I were born the same, Martel." The mage extended his hand. He let a flame erupt, floating over his palm, much like Martel could do; yet even from a few feet away, the boy could sense the heat emanate. It felt like standing in front of his father's forge on a swelting summer's day, and he wondered at how it did not burn the mage's hand.

"What does this mean?"

"Many things. Most importantly, your gift is not in doubt, and the overseer was right to grant you entry. It is important you learn to control your gift, boy."

"Well, yes, otherwise I won't be able to do anything."

"More than that." Master Alastair shook his head a little. "Those of us with fire in our blood have a tendency to let our passions take sway. Without discipline, magic may end up ruling us rather than reverse. Two centuries ago, one such undisciplined fire-touched lost control, and half of Morcaster was torched."

Panic spread across Martel. He had been excited for a moment to have confirmation of his gift, but this did not seem like a gift after all. He thought about the wooden buildings of the Khivan enclave, built closely together, and how easily a fire would devastate the entire district. "So that's why you want me to learn via focused methods."

Master Alastair nodded. "This is also why I teach you away from prying eyes. None must know of your nature, Martel."

"Because they'd fear me?" He already felt like an outcast; he could not imagine being ostracised even further.

"Not as such." The master swallowed. "Martel, all mages with an aptitude for fire are trained as battlemages. Someone like you, a fire-touched? The Imperial legions would relish getting their hands on you."

"But I don't want to learn magic that kills people!"

"Of course not. But you are part of the Empire, Martel, as is this school. If anyone finds out about you, nobody can prevent the legions from laying claim to you." Master Alastair licked his lips. "Trust me. I spent my twenty years of service as a battlemage. They will force you as they did me."

"You were a battlemage?"

He nodded. "Before I came here to teach. And this school is filled with the sons and daughters of nobility or soldiers from the legions, Martel, who would gladly betray your secret."

Martel looked at his teacher with different eyes. He knew nothing of what being a battlemage entailed, but he could not imagine the short, jovial man before him killing others on the fields of war. It also occurred to him that his master, in whose authority he trusted, had concealed truths for him, even if such deceit was born of benign reasons.

"I was fortunate," Master Alastair continued. "My years were spent in relative quiet, protecting borderlands. But you will be sent to the Khivan front, boy, to the siege of Nahavand or worse, the Savena delta."

"I don't want to go to war!"

"For good reason. The Khivans have a bounty on all battlemages, and their sharpshooters rarely miss. Most war wizards last a year or two before a Khivan bullet finds them." Master Alastair placed his hand on Martel's shoulder. "Whatever you do, boy, never let any suspect that you are fire-touched."

~

Once the lesson had ended, Martel went straight to the library. After washing and drying his hands thoroughly, he approached the librarian. The latter sat at work copying manuscripts as usual; sensing Martel's presence, he exhaled a little sigh, placed the quill in its inkwell, and turned his head to give the novice an expectant look.

Martel realised that asking for books about fire-touched would do the very thing Master Alastair had told him not to do. "I was looking for books about how mages have different talents," he began to say, his mouth feeling dry. "Such as if someone is very good at water magic or the like."

The librarian raised an eyebrow but gave no objections. "We should have a tome on that. Let's see." He rose to stalk down the shelves, his sharp eyes surveying the books like a hawk searching for prey. Quickly, his fingers snapped a victim and gave it to Martel. "The more advanced topics are not available to you, obviously, but this should do."

Mumbling his gratitude, Martel took a seat away from the librarian's line of sight. He flicked through the pages until he saw a title related to his inquiry. Unfortunately, the information was sparse and mostly echoed what Master Alastair had said. There was no strict scale for how to categorise children with magical gifts, but the term fire-touched was usually applied to those so talented with fire, they could conjure a flame innately.

The remaining reading did not prove encouraging. Fire-touched mages, unskilled or in the clutches of their passions, had on more than one occasion been the cause of terrible fires and great destruction. They were viewed with distrust, not only by the common populace, but often by their fellow wizards. The fact that their unique talent was primarily utilised for war only served to further these fears.

Closing the book, Martel returned it to the shelf and left the library. He walked the corridors of the Lyceum, which seemed different to him. For the past five days, failing to learn magic, he had felt a fraud; as if he had only been admitted by mistake, and sooner or later, he would be found out. Now he knew beyond doubt he had earned his right to be here, but it did not comfort him; if his secret was discovered, rather than be expelled, he would be forced to stay and do the Empire's bidding on the battlefield. He wondered if it were better to feel a prisoner than an unwanted guest.

Yet as Martel reached his room, a sanctuary in a hostile world, he could not shake the sensation of the power emanating from his master, who had used but a thought to summon a flame hot enough to melt metal. The same power lay dormant within himself. He knew he was expected to follow Master Alastair's instructions and practise his ability to affect water. Instead, raising his hand, Martel watched as the cold fire awakened to dance in the air.

Visit for the best novel reading experience

Chapter 8: A Parent's Protection

A Parent's Protection

Although he only had one five day to base his opinion on, Malday had already become Martel's least favourite day. Two lessons with a teacher who treated him with contempt, and the opportunity to add fresh bruises to his sizeable collection. They had barely healed from the last round.

After helping with breakfast, Martel walked into the gymnasium. It was a cold morning to be outside, even for a northerner like him, and his hands felt stiff. He looked at the benches hewn in stone that surrounded the arena, wondering what events might take place to necessitate an audience.

The other novices streamed in, and Master Reynard soon followed. He gave a few brusque commands for them to resume their practices, which the children did with various degrees of delight.

Martel, who had yet to manifest a shield of any kind, did not. No matter how uncomfortable the thought of approaching his teacher, he needed help. Taking a step towards Master Reynard, he cleared his throat.

The teacher turned his head at the sound. "What is it?"

"Is there another method for learning this?" Martel asked. "I don't think trying to focus works so well for me."

Master Reynard stood for a moment, observing him while stroking his moustache. "There are some who learn to conjure the shield on instinct, protecting themselves. I suppose it can be helpful for those weaker students who cannot discipline their minds." Some of the nearby novices laughed.

"I'd like to try," Martel said, doing his best to ignore the others.

His teacher gave an ominous smile. "Very well. Fury and fear seem the best emotions to release magic on instinct. In your case, I think we shall have to contend with fear." Without further warning, Master Reynard gave Martel a powerful shove that sent him flat on his back.

As he towered over his student, the teacher raised one foot to stomp on him. Martel pushed himself away, awkwardly crawling on his back. Reynard pursued, his great boots smashing into the dirt again and again.

Finally, he caught up to Martel and grabbed him by the collar, lifting him up with one hand. Martel squirmed and wriggled to no avail. As all the novices watched, Master Reynard raised his fist and swung. Barely an inch before hitting his face, the teacher stopped.

"You certainly seemed afraid. I guess it did not prove the motivation as needed," he remarked, dropping Martel to the ground. "Focus your mind if you wish to learn. Assuming you are capable."

Getting to his feet, Martel noticed the stares and smiles that surrounded him, full of ridicule. He was tempted to march away, but he did not know if he was even allowed to leave. Regardless, he did not wish to give Master Reynard the satisfaction. As the teacher growled for his students to resume their practice, Martel retreated a few steps. He picked up a pebble and began the monotonous task of throwing it up as he focused his magic to shield himself, hoping the stone would strike a barrier and fall away. Yet every time, it landed in his hand.

~

Passing through the entrance hall, Martel decided to make his routinely check for post, and he waved at Henry behind the desk. "Any messages?"

"Let me see." The acolyte walked over to the cabinets to open one up and flick through its content. "Got something for you." He returned with a letter flapping about in his hand. fre(e)webno(v)el

"Thanks." Martel accepted it and let his eyes run over the envelope. At the top stood his name, and below, that of his mother. He wondered who had written it for her; growing up on a lone farm, she had never learned her letters. Probably his brother, or else the priest in Engby.

He felt moved, not so much by the letter itself, but rather by the reminder of home. The house where he grew up with his father's forge. The sound of a hammer striking anvil rhythmically, audible from a distance to call him home when he had been out in the forest gathering fruits and nuts. His younger siblings playing on the floor or running through the street, screaming and laughing due to some mad scheme they had concocted.

Swallowing, Martel took the letter and went to his room. Once in solitude, he opened the message to find long rows of neat script – the priest then, not his brother.

My dearest boy,

It has only been a few fivedays since you left, but by the time this letter reaches you, you should have been at your school for some days already. Master Ogion assured me that you would be accepted, after all. You must be busy learning your trade, but write your mother back when you get the chance and tell me about it. Does it have floating beds and broomsticks that sweep themselves? Are your lessons going well? Have you made friends with the other students? You must have. You were always a sweet boy who got along well with others.

Everything is fine back home. They are repairing the old bridge, you know the one, so Keith has lots of work making tools and nails. The baker's boy has been making eyes at Mira, and she claims she does not like him, but a mother knows better. Juliet has begun working for the brewster, who says she is doing very well. William is causing trouble like always. I had hoped to get him an apprenticeship with the tailor, but we all knew that getting William to sit still long enough to sew a single button was a fool's errand. For the first fiveday you were gone, John asked every day where you were. He has started to learn his letters, and our good priest says he understands them as quickly as you did.

Other than that, there is little to tell. A Tyrian bard came travelling through the area, and I paid him a few coins to sing the lamentation for your father. The whole town came, and everyone agreed it was very touching. Some made a fuss, of course, saying there's witchcraft in a Tyrian's song, and that was the only reason anyone cried. But we all know better. Your father was well-liked by all, and the lament was beautifully rendered. Father Julius assures me the song had no more witchcraft in it than his pig knows sorcery.

Do not forget to write me back. At least so I know you arrived safely, and that they are taking good care of you in the big city. Remember to eat well.

With love,

Your mother

As reading each name summoned countless memories, Martel blinked away his tears. He realised that he had felt homesick all this time without knowing it; all the new impressions and experiences had pushed it to the back of his mind. He imagined his dour brother by the anvil, taking his father's place. Mira and Juliet giggling together during their chores. William running around playing some imaginary game while John tried to keep up. His mother, always working. Making food, curing or pickling to preserve it for winter. Sewing or repairing clothes, or else washing them. Cleaning the house or burning some dried leaves of sage to help them fall asleep at night. Every act expressing her care for her children. And Martel was hundreds of miles away from all these little acts.

He would have to write back soon, maybe today. Thankfully, due to Master Jerome's kindness, he could afford to send his message with the Imperial post. Making himself more comfortable in his bed, he began reading the letter again.

~

Martel still felt in a strange mood when the time came for his next lesson in physical magic. Reading the letter had pushed away the thought of what awaited him; as the bell struck, the realisation hit him. Hopefully that would be the only thing hitting him, but his rising sense of dread told him otherwise.

Back in the outdoor gymnasium, Martel kept to himself while the mageknights chatted freely with each other. His earlier fear was confirmed as Master Reynard arrived, carrying a bunch of staves. "Last day with staff fighting," he said as he threw them on the ground. "Tomorrow, you will begin practising with different weapons to find those that best suit you. Marche," he added, aimed at the acolyte nearly as tall as Martel and much broader across the shoulders, "I think the war hammer for you."

While the mageknights picked up their staves and some of them discussed their choice of weapon with Master Reynard, Martel stood feeling indecisive. He could not imagine he would gain anything by this other than more bruises. But refusal would surely endanger his stay at the Lyceum, Martel feared, or other reprisals from his teacher. Having grown up with kind parents in a small town, Martel had never encountered malign authorities before; he did not know how to handle this.

"Pick it up, scarecrow," came the mocking voice from Cheval. "If you want a chance to defend yourself, however meagre it may be."

Despondent, Martel collected the staff. "Master Reynard," he called out, hoping a last appeal might work. "I'd like to be partnered with someone else."

"You will change opponents at a quarter bell," the teacher replied. "Enough talk! Get to training." He walked away demonstratively, tending to his other students.

With a smirk, Cheval raised his staff.

~

Half an hour later, Martel ached on both arms and his legs. Striking the head was forbidden, and he had been spared that, at least. Still, with his current pains, it did not feel like he had received mercy. As Cheval walked away, whistling, another mageknight took his place. The big fellow with the forearms to favour war hammers.

He cast a look at Martel. "Your grip is poor." He dropped his staff and stepped forward with such haste, a start went through Martel, who raised his staff. "Like this." The acolyte reached out and adjusted Martel's hands, moving them further apart. "You cannot keep them so close, afraid they will get hurt."

"Thanks," Martel mumbled.

"Here. I shall strike high, on your left. Prepare to block." The mageknight followed through, but with a lack of speed that allowed Martel to react. "There. Now strike back at me with your right."

Martel did so, his staff coming close until the other youth parried.

"Maximilian, what is this? Showing charity to a scarecrow?" Cheval shouted from his position.

"It is the duty of the nobility to lead their inferiors." The mageknight shrugged. "Even peasants serve their role in the Empire."

Martel sensed that he had just been insulted. In a way, it felt worse than when Cheval did, for the offence had been spoken without malice.

~ *freewebnovel.com*

Finally released from class, Martel returned to his room. However tiny and austere, the small space between the walls felt liberating to him. The only place where he could be free from the looks and perceptions of others. His eyes fell on the letter from his mother, and he decided to write her back. The sooner she received his reply, the sooner she would be freed of her worries.

Dear mum,

Life at the Lyceum is great. I have learned all sorts of things already. My teachers are kind, and the other kids are nice. I have my own room, all to myself, with a key so I can lock it. There are no brooms that can sweep on their own, but they have water that runs by itself. No pumping is needed. I don't know yet how it works, except that there is some kind of magical symbols that push the water through the pipes. Maybe once I have learned how that works, I can create the same back home. William will never have an excuse not to wash because we will have a constant flow of water.

I'm glad everyone is doing great. It's good they're finally repairing the old bridge before someone fell through. If it gives Keith lots of work, all the better. Tell Robert he better treat Mira right, since her brother is a mage who will turn him into a newt if he misbehaves. That ought to keep him straight.

I don't imagine I'll be able to travel home for the solstice. The journey is too long. You will have to drink Juliet's first brew without me, but I look forward to tasting it when I can. Tell John that there is a library here with more books than Engby has people, and that's just on the first floor. I haven't seen the other floors yet, so I don't even know how many books there are in total. Maybe if he keeps practising with Father Julius, he can become a librarian like they have here, and he'll have his own library to look after. I think that would suit him.

I'm sorry that I missed the lament for father. I'm sure it was beautiful. I'm earning a few pennies here doing some work at the school. I don't think any of the bards down here know the laments we have up north, but I'll leave an offering at the temple. It's so big, mum. The temple in Morcaster is like a mountain, and so beautiful. I'm sure a gift there will be a fitting honour to father's memory.

Martel

The novice placed the quill back in its inkwell, careful not to disturb the parchment. It would need some time to dry. He moved from his stool to his bed, leaning back. He had an hour or so before supper; his body, with all four limbs aching from bruises, suggested he slept until then.

But while his body craved rest, his mind remained restless. In his letter, he had given the pretence that one day, he would return to Engby as a mage. As it currently stood, that felt doubtful. He had seen the other novices this morning, some as young as ten, conjure the shield with ease. Why did it elude him so? Was he too old, as he knew the other students thought?

He reached into his pocket, extracting a pebble. He had picked it up at the gymnasium, intending to keep training later. By now, he almost despised the exercise. Throwing the stone into the air, watching it land on his hand without the slightest hint of being rebuffed.

Sitting up in his bed, Martel was still trying to convince himself to start practising when his eyes fell on his quill. He considered that perhaps the fault did not lie in him, but the exercise. He knew from yesterday's conversation with Master Alastair that he possessed magic; it just lay dormant in him. Maybe a stone fell too swiftly for him to influence yet, but a quill made from a goose feather was another matter.

He grabbed the feather pen and held it high in the air. Releasing it, the quill began floating downwards. He placed his hand underneath and did his best to imagine a physical shield protecting him, creating a barrier. The feather, ignoring his attempts, swayed down to land in his palm.

Another adjustment. Focusing did nothing for him, but nor did fear help him to protect himself during Master Reynard's assault. He needed a different emotion. Martel thought back to his father's workshop when he was a child. Helping out by manning the bellows while his father worked. To shield Martel from the terrible heat of the furnace, his father had carved a hole through a great stone and led the shaft of the bellow through it; in this manner, Martel could stand on one side of the stone, fanning the flames of the furnace on the other. Protected by not only the stone, but his father's ingenuity and care.

Releasing the feather, Martel closed his eyes and conjured up the memory. The sweat on his father's brow standing in front of the furnace while he himself was shielded behind the stone. Feeling safe.

As he looked, he saw the feather floating a few inches above his hand. Lightweight, it did not possess the force to push through the invisible barrier erected by his magic, however meagre. It lasted a few moments before finally, his powers faltered, and the feather was allowed to finish its descent. Smiling, Martel repeated the exercise.

Chapter 9: An Unexpected Visit

An Unexpected Visit

Despite yesterday's small success, Martel could not translate it into similar gains for Glunday's elemental lesson. The ring of water lay undisturbed in the Hall of Elements despite all his efforts. A gap existed, which his magic could not traverse. He tried to think of memories like he had yesterday, but none came to mind that felt relevant. None that proved to be of an aid.

Lunch proved the usual hurdle of finding a table where he would not be rebuffed or laughed at. Surveying the area, he saw one spot with a group of elemental acolytes; one of them was Jasper, the earthmage who manned the desks in the entrance hall along with Henry. Martel made his way towards them with a questioning expression towards Jasper, as the latter looked up. He shook his head. "Go sit with the novices, boy."

Accepting his fate with a little sigh, Martel sat down next to a bunch of twelve-year-olds, eating in silence as he endured their noise. freeweb(n)ovel

~

After lunch, Martel had a free bell before his second elemental class, and he retreated to his room. He knew he should practice his control of water, or lack thereof, but he would rather improve his shield. At least he had made some progress in that direction, and maybe Master Reynard would treat him with less hostility if he demonstrated a proper shield next Malday.

There was a knock on the door. Sitting on the bed, Martel stared at it. He could not imagine who it might be. Who could have business with him? A little worried, he rose and took one step to reach the door. As he opened it, his expression turned from uncertainty to happy surprise. "Shadi!"

The slender girl reciprocated with a smile bigger than her face. "Hey, Martel! Guess who had to deliver a letter to your master!"

"My master? Oh, the artificer! But how did you know my room?"

"I asked around. Took me a while. Nobody knew any Martel. Guess you haven't been here long enough," she grinned. "I asked for the tallest novice in the school, instead." She looked over his shoulder. "And that's your room?"

"Aye. My kingdom," he added, laughing a little.

"Very austere. Exactly what I expected from a stern wizard. No luxuries or frivolities!"

He laughed again, and it hit him like a punch to the stomach how much he had missed laughing with a friend. "I'd invite you in to show you around, but as you can tell, you've seen the entirety of my room with a glance."

"Show me the rest of the school!" she suggested with a happy expression. "I've walked past so many times but never had a reason to enter."

"Sure! You've seen the workshop, of course, but there's some amazing places. Follow me!"

Martel led Shadi down the stairs. As they passed through the common room on the ground floor, they attracted some stares, which neither seemed to notice.

"What's all the letters between your father and Master Jerome?"

"Well, I'm guessing your guy wants my guy to make a watch. Since my dad's a watchmaker," Shadi laughed.

"Right, of course." They continued down the corridors. "Well, I can't wait to see the result." Perhaps then he would learn what a watch was.

Crossing the entrance hall, Martel soon directed them up a small staircase until he could open the door to the library.

"Look at all these!" He threw his hand out, gesturing to the tall shelves.

"So many! Are they all about magic?"

"Well, I haven't quite read them all yet, but I assume so."

"Such cheek," she responded.

From between the shelves, the librarian appeared like a vengeful apparition. "Only students and faculty are allowed in the library."

"Of course, master," Martel hurried to say. "We're leaving."

"See that you do."

The pair descended the stairs again. "Grumpy fellow," Shadi remarked.

"I get the feeling he's happiest when his only company is books."

"I guess I could see that. Where to now?" she asked as they reached the hallway.

Martel frowned in thought. "Oh! I know!"

~

Up and up they went another spiral staircase, sneaking past classrooms. Finally, Martel could open a hatch, allowing them to step onto the top of the astronomy tower. Meant for observations of the night sky, it was the tallest tower among the spires. In every direction, the great city of Morcaster spread out before their eyes. The dazzling temple of the Sun, the marbled Imperial palace, the great harbour with its forest of masts, and countless houses in between.

"Amazing," Shadi breathed. "I knew the city was big, but I never imagined this."

"It's staggering to think about how many people must live here."

"And this tower is used for astronomy? Have you been here at night?"

"Not yet. Master Fenrick said we'd go at some point when there'd be something interesting to show us. I, uh, don't remember what that was."

"Martel, Martel, not paying attention in class!"

"It's a lot to take in!" he said in defence. "Some fivedays ago, I couldn't tell one star apart from another. Now I got to chart them all out."

"At least it's the heavens and not the city you got to map out," Shadi considered, turning away from him to lean over the parapet. "I'm still amazed at how far it stretches on."

"Yeah." He joined her. "Back home, I couldn't imagine this many people in the world, let alone in the same city."

"Did it take you long to travel here?"

He nodded. "Several fivedays."

"I've never left Morcaster."

"You were born here?"

"Yep." She gave a little nod of her own. "I never thought about leaving it either. It feels like the whole world can be found here."

"It does," Martel replied, but even as he spoke, he considered the long journey from Nordmark to Morcaster, and everything he had seen travelling. He thought about the ships in the harbour, crossing the ocean to reach Sindhu, so different from the northern lands. Even as his plan was to return home a weathermage, his mind turned to all the places one might experience.

"I better get home. But thanks for showing me around." Shadi gave him a smile.

"I'll take you to the entrance."

~

In the evening, the Master of Elements made his way to the overseer's chamber, gaining admittance after a few knocks. As he entered, she gestured towards a goblet of wine on the table. "I took the liberty of pouring one for you." She raised her own cup.

"Another vintage?"

"Might as well try them all."

"It's good," Alastair remarked after sitting down and having a taste.

"It's decent at best, but you were always too polite to tell the truth."

He smiled wryly. "It's – not bad?"

"That rings closer to the truth. How is our student?"

"No progress," Alastair admitted. "I could try to teach him fire first, given how fast he should pick that up. But I fear it will dominate him at the expense of the other elements. He may never be a weathermage in that case."

"Is it safe to teach him how to improve his capabilities with fire? Even if he can control it and does not burn down the Lyceum, what if he decides to impress his peers with his abilities?"

"I told him," Alastair revealed. "He knows that he is fire-touched and to keep it a secret."

"Was that wise? If he does not feel your methods work, he might be tempted to pursue another path."

"He was disheartened by failure. He needed encouragement."

Juliana emptied her cup. "I suppose you know the boy best. But time is not infinite, Alastair."

"I know."

"He has less than a year now to prove himself worthy of becoming an acolyte. Imagine if he is expelled. An angry young man with more fire potency than anyone else in his generation."

The Master of Elements took a deep breath. "I know."

Chapter 10: Sage Advice

Mandays were quiet. Martel only had his astronomy lesson at sixth bell and kitchen chore at seventh. Until then, his time remained his own, though he was meant to practise his magical exercises, however fruitless that often seemed. But he would go mad staying in his room all day, so he grabbed his scarf and left.

He did not leave the Lyceum, but simply ventured to the western courtyard. In the winter weather, most students avoided the small greenery and stayed indoors. To a northerner like Martel, this felt like a typical day in late harvest season. He walked over to the statue that dominated the centre.

It reached twice his own height, depicting a mage wielding a staff. He wore a kaftan rather than a plain robe, richly adorned. The marble had been hewn with great skill, showing the wizard in an active position, striding towards some unseen goal.

Martel bent down to read the inscription on the pedestal. "Atreus the Spellbreaker," he mumbled, "who saved Morcaster from the fiends of the Nether." He looked up again at the determined demeanour carved into the face. Impressive, though Martel was glad he would never have to tangle with such dangers.

With a thin layer of frost covering the grass, water was easy to come by. Running his hands through the green blades, the little crystals became caught on his skin and soon melted thanks to his body heat. Closing his eyes, Martel emptied his thoughts and reached out with his magic to manipulate the drops of water on his palm.

After the usual disappointment, Martel opened his eyes and looked up at the statue of a real mage. Even in Engby, he had heard the tales of Atreus. Among the greatest and last heroes of Archen, dead in the calamity that claimed the city. He remembered Fenrick had spoken of how the Archeans had studied astronomy to learn magic. Perhaps that could prove an avenue; he had nothing left to lose.

~

His hands washed and dry, Martel stood before the librarian. "Any books about how the Archeans taught magic?"

A pair of narrowed eyes examined him. "Most books on Archen are above, but there may be one downstairs. I will look."

Martel patiently followed him, keeping a few paces of distance as he searched the shelves. Finally, he pulled his selection down and placed it in Martel's hands.

"Thanks," the youth mumbled, hurrying to a reading desk. He began leafing through the book, looking for anything useful.

There did not seem to be any concrete details, though. The book was written after the fall of Archen and discussed theories on how they unlocked their magical powers, but nothing useful for Martel. As he knew nothing of the constellations mentioned – he would not even be able to point out the Triumvirate in the night sky – he could not understand much of it. Perhaps after a few more astronomy lessons; the next one was this afternoon.

~

Martel made sure to arrive early for his class, allowing him to choose a desk in the back corner. He spent the waiting time staring at the star chart on the opposite wall, dazzling with its countless geometrical figures. After the bell rang, the mageknights soon filtered in, arriving in groups of two and three according to their social circles. Martel noticed that the broad-shouldered boy, Maximilian, seemed entrenched with Cheval, whose first name he still had not learned. The only other name he knew belonged to the pretty girl, Eleanor, who arrived with the other two female mageknights, as could be expected.

Master Fenrick appeared as the last. Before he could speak, Martel quickly raised his hand. With one raised eyebrow, the teacher nodded at him. "Yes?"

"Master, could you tell us about how the Archeans used astronomy to learn magic?" Martel cleared his throat. "I tried looking in the library, but I couldn't find anything useful."

Some of the other students sent him disdainful looks, presumably for having the audacity to speak.

"A novelty. Someone who knows where the library is located," Master Fenrick muttered with a glance at the mageknights.

"Books are not much use against swords," mumbled Cheval.

"You ask the question everyone has asked in the last three hundred years," the master continued. "No texts survive to tell us. It seems to have been as much intuition as knowledge. That the influence of the Stars had to be felt rather than known."

"How so?" Martel asked as his interest grew, disregarding the glances thrown his way.

Master Fenrick shrugged. "Who can tell? The issue is that any mage who has investigated the Archean methods has already learned their magic using our methods of discipline. They cannot unlearn what they know and start anew, experimenting with the astronomical method. Alas, for it might unlock far more powers than currently at our disposal."

"But what –"

"Enough," Master Fenrick interjected. "To the lesson. You should not underestimate the amount of work it will take to create your star maps. And since I assume many of you paid little attention to your tutors in the subject of arithmetic, we have much ground to cover."

~

Once the lesson ended, Martel had to do his kitchen chores for the day. As soon as he could, he returned to the astronomy tower. He knew that making the star chart with the Triumvirate would be a challenge for him, to say the least, and losing his place at the Lyceum because he could not complete the astronomy course would be foolish. Best to get started, especially now with the lesson fresh in mind.

Walking back into the classroom, he found it occupied. By one of the desks sat Eleanor, already at work with her own chart. Feeling awkward, Martel gave half a nod and quickly looked away before he could see her response.

He collected his materials from a shelf. A writing set, a large piece of parchment to serve as his chart, and smaller pieces for making calculations, all of which he placed on a desk in the empty half of the room. Finally, he went for one of the great tomes that contained the needed knowledge for the map; Eleanor likewise had a copy by her station, using it for that purpose.

Pulling it down, his muscles twinged under the sudden weight, sore from the other day's combat practice. "Careful!" came the hurried reproach from the other student. Steadying the book in his hands, he looked over at Eleanor, who spoke again. "You do know how valuable that book is?"

"I know," he muttered, irritated. She spoke as one who had grown up with wealth; he dared say he knew the value of coin better than her. Trying to push his annoyance from his mind, he sat down and opened the tome to read over its explanations and equations. Master Fenrick had gone through this material just hours earlier, yet staring at it now, Martel felt no comprehension. Numbers were one thing, but some of the symbols did not look familiar anymore. Perhaps Master Fenrick would take pity on him and provide him with extra lessons.

"Do you require help?" *freewebnovel.com*

Surprised, Martel looked at Eleanor. "You want to help me?"

"It is my duty to give aid where needed."

He recalled Maximilian's words during physical training and their casual condescension. "Because you are nobleborn?"

"My family traces its ancestry from Aquila with the right to become legates," she replied. "But even if I was not, mageknights are sworn to protect others and lead. That is why Master Reynard calls us first among equals."

"Equals. Generous of you to call us that." Every word she spoke to Martel felt like flint striking sparks.

"Well, all mages serve a purpose in the Empire." Eleanor shrugged. "But surely you must admit that mageknights hold a unique position, given that we risk our lives to defend the realm."

"Unlike us mere elemental mages." Sparks to ignite his temper.

"Nobody would dispute the value of your service, but they cannot be compared to fighting in wars." She gave a slight laughter born of disbelief.

"Seven years ago, my town had no weathermage. Dreadful hailstorms came and destroyed the harvest. My sister, Tora, was only two. I was fond of her above all others.

So I starved myself that she might have a little extra to eat." Martel felt the lump in his throat at the memory, and his voice grew thick. He struggled to keep it steady as he continued. "Sometimes, I didn't eat for days. It didn't matter. One winter morning, she never woke up." He knew he could not keep his composure any longer, and the last thing he wanted was to let her see his tears. "I would have given my life's blood for a weathermage back then," he finished and turned his back on her.

With angry motions, he cleared his desk and stormed out.

~

The astronomy tower lay opposite the quarters for male students, and Martel knew he had to cut a ridiculous figure as he stalked across the Lyceum. A lanky figure in a coarse, brown robe with tears brimming in his eyes. He went through the western courtyard, disregarding the cold to buy himself a few moments of solitude. They lasted briefly before he had to head inside, and he was aware that he drew stares passing through the boys' common room.

At last he reached the sanctuary of his room. Locking his door, he threw himself on his bed and ceased to fight the tears. They did not last long; he had cried his grief out for Tora years before, and only a reminder remained. Sitting back up, he sniffled and looked outside. His window had glass, not just shutters, which meant even in cold winter, he could peer through without losing heat. Another luxury that would be unthinkable to a smith's family in Engby.

The sun had long set; nor did the moon shine. A dark night lay beyond, though it did allow the stars to shine in their brightness. Walking over to the window, Martel wiped his nose and gazed up. Despite the lessons, he still knew nothing about what he saw; he could not name the stars. But seeing their light, he felt oddly comforted. Despite the misery on the ground, nothing could dim their brightness, shared for all.

One star in particular seemed to shine, as if it gave its light especially for Martel. Without thinking, keeping his eyes upon that bright spark, Martel raised one hand to point at the bowl of water on his commode. Still without thought or consideration, dried tears on his face, he felt magic flow in him just as the star's light flowed onto him. From the bowl, a drop of water rose into the air.

Martel did not know it, but the star that shone upon him was Glund, the Sage.