

Firebrand 531

Chapter 531: The Coming of Spring

The Coming of Spring

The next several fivedays passed without incident. Martel had no further encounters with Khivans on his patrols, and life in camp continued with the usual routines. He sparred with Eleanor in the mornings and went to Esmouth in the afternoons, visiting Henry, the barber, the different craftsmen and traders, and making use of any other way to spend a few coins doing leisurely activities.

Every trip back and forth, he passed by the Tyrian enclave, as he had privately named it. They had chosen a cluster of houses near the harbour, despite the ruined state of those dwellings. Hides had been strung up to act as doors or walls where needed. They clearly hunted, as they brought back game at times; due to the stench, they usually cleaned the furs and tanned them outside the town, going to the river.

Other than that, Martel knew nothing about the band of mercenaries, including the services they provided for the legion. On occasion, he noticed them leaving in the morning or returning in the evening, going east, but he had not initiated any conversation with them; he was not sure if they spoke Asterian, other than perhaps the berserker, their presumptive leader.

Something of note finally happened a month after the saint's feast. Leaving camp to visit Henry, Martel saw the mast of a ship, and he felt a flash of excitement. The crowd of soldiers by the harbour suggested that others shared his sentiment. This was the first vessel to arrive since the Red Emerald, discounting the Tyrian longship. Martel wondered if his purchases would be aboard; given it had been months since the Red Emerald, the demand for various supplies from the entire camp would be great.

Pushing through crowd, Martel continued on his way. It would take a while for them to unload the ship and distribute all the supplies; he might as well go to see his friend and check with the quartermaster later.

"Oh, did you hear? A ship arrived." Martel accepted a cup of wine, grabbing a pitcher of water to dilute it.

"I didn't, but that is welcome news. I'm just about on my last jar," Henry replied, motioning towards the wine.

"I do hope they were able to bring me the things I ordered. I got plenty of alchemy to do, just as soon as I can get the right tools."

"A battlemage who does alchemy. You really are the strangest sort." The stonemage gave a wry smile.

This tale has been pilfered from Royal Road. If found on Amazon, kindly file a report.

"A broad set of skills never hurts. Especially not in a place like this."

"I grant you that." Henry sipped his wine and let out a deep breath. "So, the ship of death has arrived. You've had some lenient days in camp, but you should prepare for that to change."

"Wait, hold on. Ship of death?"

"You haven't heard that before? It's the soldiers' nickname for the first ship that arrives once winter has ended."

Martel frowned, confused. "Why? What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. But its arrival heralds the end of winter, the beginning of spring and renewed offensives. The war is about to heat up for you lads," Henry warned him. "I've seen it every summer since I first came here."

"I would ask you what to expect, but I don't suppose you know."

The stonemage shook his head. "I stay within the walls, thank you very much. What little combat I was taught back at the Lyceum, I have all but forgotten. At best, I suppose I can hurl rocks at the enemy."

"I'll suggest to the legate that we bring you along as reinforcements."

Returning to the camp some hours later, Martel went to the quartermaster, who handed over a small crate full of items. "I haven't checked if everything you requested is in there," came the admission, "but if not, it'll be there by the next ship."

"That sounds fine," Martel assented, still impressed by Imperial logistics that allowed all of this with such relative ease. Looking into his box of new belongings, he saw that at the very least, his basic tools for alchemy had arrived. He would be able to grind and prepare ingredients, and he also had a small cauldron as well. He could have used the pots that the legion had issued, but it was probably best to keep alchemy and cooking separate.

Returning to his tent in quick stride, Martel considered what to make first. It would be nice to have a general supply of remedies at hand, but maybe he should prioritise what he was most likely to need in the near future. Glancing down at the crate in his arms, it did not look like the more specialised ingredients had been included, which prevented him from making most of his alchemical recipes. He might be limited to only making the simpler items that any apothecary could do.

Just as he reached his tent, Eleanor intercepted him. "We got orders. Tomorrow at second bell, down by the bridge."

"Patrol?" Tomorrow was not their regular day for that activity, but maybe that was about to change with the arrival of spring.

"I was not told anything more than this, except we should bring provisions for two days. I suppose we shall find out tomorrow." She looked at the crate in his arms. "You got everything you wanted?"

"Not quite, but a start."

"I will go myself hopefully the quartermaster was able to get at least some of my requests. I will not last another month without proper soap. The stuff from the soap maker in Esmouth leaves me feeling dirtier than if I do not wash at all."

"I better get to work." Entering his tent, Martel dug out his lightstone and put it on his desk. Unpacking his new supplies, he made a small workstation for himself, though he had less space

than desirable. He would have to figure something out eventually; his desk was adequate for writing letters and missives, not cutting and grinding ingredients with room for tools and jars.

Solving that issue would have to wait, though. For now, he would get to work. Moving around his cramped tent, he began plucking herbs from the drying rack.

Chapter 532: Priorities

Priorities

As second bell rang from the distant temple tower in Esmouth, Martel and Eleanor walked through the gate of the camp. On the small stretch of land between the wall and the river, they saw a gathering of soldiers. Too many to easily count, but Martel imagined it was a full centuria, as he noticed both a centurion and two optios nearby. He wondered what task lay ahead that required a hundred soldiers.

The mageknight Avery approached them, giving a greeting which they returned. She was among the older prefects, being somewhere in her forties. She looked typically Asterian, except her hair had a lighter shade of brown. Her features were stern, like someone accustomed to military life and giving orders.

"Is this your first mission?" Avery looked from one mage to the other.

"Other than patrols, yes. What is the task?" Eleanor asked.

"Sir Lara will send us off, but we can discuss the details once we are on our way."

The sight of about thirteen Tyrians crossing the bridge to their side made everyone fall quiet. The mercenaries appeared in good mood, talking in their own tongue while laughing. Martel noticed nearly all of them were armed with a bow. Curiously, as they continued past the legionaries, moving northeast, one of the Tyrians peeled off and remained with the soldiers. The look she gave Avery, and the lack of surprise on the mageknight's face, suggested this was preordained, making Martel wonder what exactly the plan was.

Moments later, the legion prefect appeared. "Attention!" The legionaries jumped to, moving into formation, and the three mages already present straightened their backs. "Your task today is the destruction of a Khivan encampment. The area has been scouted extensively, and you will attack under the cover of night. Sir Avery has command." She glanced at Martel and Eleanor as she spoke the last sentence; apparently, the comment was for their sake, as the soldiers presumably were part of Avery's cohort and already under her leadership. "Malac preserve you all. Aster Invictus! Move out!"

Avery nodded to the centurion, who saluted and barked orders. The Tyrian mercenary swiftly walked to the head of the column, joining the centurion, while the mages took position in between the two halves of the centuria, each led by an optio. With another command shouted by the centurion, the column set into motion.

As they marched, side by side, Avery addressed the other two mages. "Our target is a Khivan encampment of about fifty, though it could easily be ten or twenty more. It is the staging point of their patrols in the area."

"Defences?" asked Eleanor.

"Very little. They have dug ditches and earthworks to create a cauldron-like formation, but no palisades or the like, choosing secrecy over fortifications. From afar, it simply looks like a part of the landscape, while their camp is hidden inside the ring," Avery told them. "At least, that is how the Tyrians have explained it."

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

"This is based on their knowledge?" Eleanor almost sounded neutral.

The other mageknight nodded. "They were brought for this purpose, acting as scouts. Snow and cold weather do not trouble them, after all, on the contrary. It only made the task easier."

"Will they participate in the assault?"

"Not directly. They will be positioned further out, intercepting any Khivans that might escape. They have gone ahead to catch any patrols that could notice us and prevent them from warning our target."

"Very well." From her remark, Martel could not tell whether Eleanor considered it good or bad to have the Tyrians absent from the actual fighting.

He thought about his own role. From afar, he might be able to start a fire in the camp, distracting the Khivans and making them night-blind as the Asterians snuck up on them. But if their camp lay secluded and surrounded by hills, it could prevent him from being able to target their tents or belongings with his magic. With a clear sky above, he could not summon lightning from any clouds either. Perhaps best to defer to experience. "Sir Avery, what will our role be?"

"I will lead the attack," she replied. "You and your protector stay close to me and provide support as you can. But do not use any fire until the enemy has discovered us. We shall approach as closely as we can and charge once we are discovered. Understood?"

"Understood."

They walked for hours before taking a rest, eating provisions and replenishing their water in a nearby stream of meltwater. While snow still covered the ground, the days had grown warmer, promising to remove the white blanket in the coming fivedays.

Chewing on bread, Martel looked around. The legionaries appeared relaxed, all things considered; some talked and laughed among themselves. It was strange to think they were marching towards a fight, and that not all could be expected to return. Glancing from one face to another, Martel wondered who might end up being carried back. The young lad over there, whose armour looked too big for him? The veteran next to him, perhaps old enough to be his grandfather? Maybe both, and others as well.

A skirmish this size, there was nothing Martel could do about it, regardless of his powers. Someone would die, and at most, Martel could ensure it was not him.

They marched on for the remainder of the day with the occasional break until their Tyrian guide finally made a variety of gestures. Signalling a halt, the centurion approached his superiors. "Based on all the flailing, we must be approaching the Khivan camp."

Avery gave a slight nod. "Wait here. Tell the men to rest and get ready. The scout and I will assess the terrain. Upon my return, as soon as it is sufficiently dark, we attack." She left along with the Tyrian, and the soldiers sat down to catch their breaths.

"Any thoughts?" Eleanor looked up at Martel.

"I'm not sure there's anything clever we can do. From the sound of it, that hill they're inside will keep them shielded. My magic won't be useful until we get up close. I'll have to be over the slope to find good targets."

"I feared as much. That will make you rather vulnerable. No matter what, you stay behind me," she impressed upon him. "I will shield you, and if at any point I tell you to turn and run, you do so immediately."

It seemed that Eleanor agreed with him in terms of prioritising survival over victory. "I will."

They waited a while longer, the mood growing tense. Nobody spoke, let alone laughed or made jest. A few ate or drank, but none of the younger soldiers, which Martel understood. The knot in his stomach did not encourage imbibing anything.

After half an hour or so, Avery returned. "It is as described," she told the other mages and her junior officers. "From afar, it looks to be a hill. The Khivans are on the inside, like a primitive ringfort. We will approach from two sides. Those under my command attack first." She looked at the centurion. "You charge from the other side when you hear the noise. Is everything clear?"

The centurion and both the optios slammed their fists against the chest in response.

"Everything is clear," Eleanor responded.

"Good. Move out."

Chapter 533: In His Element

In His Element

Fifty soldiers along with one optio and three mages moved through the landscape, using the darkness to cover their approach. Finally, Avery raised her arm, and they all stopped. "It lies right ahead. Everyone, prepare. We will sneak forward, but once they raise the alarm, charge."

Martel could not see the hill as such; it was lost in the dark. He let his magic sweep out, and before his inner eye, two flares appeared. Sentinels, crouching on the ridge. Beyond them, more little lights from other guards watching the other direction. "Two watchmen on the hill," he muttered.

"Probably same number facing every other approach."

Avery whipped her head towards him. "You can sense them?"

"Like flames in the night."

"Very well. Once they spot us, they are your first targets. The rest of us, over that hill at once." She looked at the optio, who nodded, and they cautiously began moving.

It was a cold and crispy night. The moon was new, providing scarcely any light. As quietly as they could, more than fifty warriors moved forward while crouching. All eyes stared ahead, as the contour of the hill slowly took shape. No sounds reached them; the Khivans practised discipline keeping their camp hidden. With every step, Martel's heart beat faster. Battle was imminent, and while he had experience fighting, he did not know what to expect. How would the Khivans fight back? What numbers did they have? How would it feel to be shot by one of their muskets?

Commotion ahead at least, Martel thought so. He kept his breath even as he closed his eyes, switching to sight by heat. It was partly obscured by Avery and Eleanor right in front of him, but he looked beyond the warmth of their bodies to find the Khivans on the steep hill. One of them was standing up.

"They're suspicious," he whispered. If the mageknights ahead of him took note, he could not tell; their progress continued at the same slow pace.

A cry went up from the hill, followed by shouts and sounds of movement.

"Attack!" Avery yelled. With a battle roar, the legionaries charged. Even as he ran forward, staying within the circle of Asterians, Martel flung fire bolts to either side. The Khivan guards stopped shouting and began screaming instead as they were struck.

With empowered speed, Avery outran everyone else. She leapt across the ditch and up the hill. Martel saw a flare of magic as she activated her shield. Streaks of heat came from below, striking the mageknight, though her spell kept her safe. Martel realised those were bullets, looking like they rode on fire through the air.

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

Despite her own magic, Eleanor held back and kept pace with the legionaries, and Martel remained right behind her. As they crossed the ditch and came up the hill, in the dark, they looked like any other soldier; no reason why the Khivans should target them. That would change once he began blasting fire, though.

"Down in the ring," he called out to Eleanor. "I'll attack when we're down!"

She moved at the same speed in agreement with his, and as they reached the top of the hill, she continued down. Martel paused only a moment to take in the sight of the enclosure. It was bigger than he had imagined, almost like a small fort, surrounded by a sloped ring. The dark barely allowed him to see anything, but he imagined tents everywhere, and of course, Khivans. They had begun fighting back; shots rang out repeatedly, and legionaries screamed even as they ran into the cauldron.

Once down from the ridge and less exposed, Martel began. His ability to see heat allowed him perfect aim even in the dark, and he unleashed fire bolts in every direction. Figuring that further chaos would only help, he aimed a few to ignite the tents, providing his comrades light and vision of the enemy.

Shimmers of magic told him that Eleanor was busy as well. Every now and then, she leapt forward to strike at an enemy before retreating back, standing in front of Martel like a human shield.

As for the Khivans, they fought with ferocity and any weapon at hand. While some stayed back, using their muskets, others ran forward while shouting, wielding blades, axes, or even pikes. One armed with such a long weapon came straight at Martel, clearly having identified the main threat; Eleanor intercepted him, striking him down.

Crouching down, just to present a smaller target, Martel continued to fling fire from the ruby atop his staff. Small flashes of heat told him where the Khivan gunners were, and he retaliated every time. If they managed to duck before he could strike, he set their cover on fire instead, flushing them out.

Martel's heartbeat had quickened to become a constant drumming, but not from fear; he was in his element, literally. Fire surrounded him, exhilarated him, elevated him. He stood up straight, letting flames fill his free hand. He did not have to bind himself or restrict his power; he could let loose. And nothing came close to the power he wielded. No hostile mages, no cannons, no conflagration that strained him to his limits. He was destruction incarnate, and the entire camp burned in a blaze like a bonfire in his honour.

Suddenly, it was over. The sounds of fighting ebbed away. No more firing of muskets or shouts of pain, no clashing of steel. The other half of the centuria had arrived from their side, surrounding the Khivans.

Martel relaxed. He had restricted himself to basic spells, preserving his strength; although he felt as if he had to catch his breath, he was in rather good condition. He could have continued fighting like this all night if need be.

Something whistled through the air. Martel was pulled back, and he fell to the ground. Looking up, he saw Eleanor step in front of him, raising her shield arm, and something struck the wooden guard. "Summon your shield!"

Martel swiftly did so, still on the ground. He glanced in every direction, but he saw nothing. Around them, legionaries filled the space as they began rummaging through the camp and the dead. Considering himself safe among them, Martel got on his feet. "What is it?"

Eleanor turned her arm to show her shield. An arrow sat embedded into it. As she grabbed the shaft and pulled it loose, she held it close. In the light of the smouldering flames scattered around the camp, Martel saw what she meant to show him; just below the arrow tip, a rune had been carved.

Chapter 534: A Broken Threat

A Broken Threat

Eleanor broke the arrow in half and placed the part with the rune in her belt. "We shall discuss back in camp," she mumbled, to which Martel nodded. "Stay surrounded by legionaries. I will take a look around."

She disappeared, but Martel was scarcely left alone before Avery arrived. "Well done, Sir Martel! I was uncertain of what aid you might provide tonight, but your spellcraft proved most useful!"

"Thanks," he muttered, distracted. "Is the fight over? Our task?"

She nodded. "I think we got them all, and our casualties are light. All in all, as successful as can be. The legate will be most pleased. I shall be sure to mention your prowess."

"No need," Martel told her. He had a feeling his only reward would be further missions. "This was your accomplishment."

"Modesty is good, but honour where it is due is even better!" Avery's demeanour, which had been almost dour whenever Martel met her in camp, had clearly been brightened by their success. "But we need to finish clearing this place. I hope you have some spellpower left in you. We will need more fire."

They gathered the Khivan bodies and all the weapons that needed powder to work, placing it all in a pile, which Martel ignited. Any equipment or provisions worth salvaging was spared the fire. Once stretchers for the dead and the badly wounded had been made, the Asterians began the march back to camp.

Eleanor appeared by Martel's side, falling in next to him. Twilight illuminated their surroundings as they walked, bringing up the rear of the centuria. "I spotted a handful of Tyrians after the fight, in the nearby woods, including our scout. Any of them could have shot the arrow they all had bows."

"It could have been an accident," Martel considered, though his voice carried no conviction.

"You know the Tyrian signs as well as I do. That was a rune of guidance, ensuring that arrow would hit its mark. It was aimed straight at you." She reached out and grabbed him by the arm, even as they continued walking. "If I had not stepped into its path, it would have struck."

"I know, I know. Obviously, I'm very grateful to you."

"Shove your gratitude where Sol cannot see," she hissed. "I do not care about that. Someone tried to murder you, Martel, one of our supposed allies."

The battlemage slowly exhaled, unable to refute her words. "Yes. You're right. My talent for making enemies is so great, even people I've never met want to kill me."

"This is no jest!" Eleanor raised her voice enough to make the legionaries in front twitch their heads, though discipline kept them from looking back.

Stolen content alert: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

"I didn't mean to make light of the situation. I just " Martel gave a sigh. "What do we do? We have thirty possible suspects, and no knowledge of why they would do this. Finding the guilty party seems impossible."

"I will inform Sir Lara. An attack was made upon a prefect. This must be investigated and the culprit punished."

Based on past experiences, Martel had his doubt that anyone in authority could be of help, considering they could not point out the actual perpetrator. At best, the Tyrians would be expelled, but since Martel still had to leave the camp on patrol, the would-be assassin might simply wait for another opportunity. "Did you see the berserker nearby after the fight? He is their leader, right?"

"I did not notice him, but he could have been there. Why?"

"He doesn't use a bow," Martel mumbled. "I think I know a better way to handle this."

She shot him a look. "You understand your life is at risk? This is not the time for half measures."

"There won't be anything half about it."

Once they reached the camp in the early morning, everyone dispersed to seek sleep, including the mages. When Martel woke, half the day had gone. He prepared a simple meal, cooking meat and vegetables; when ready, he woke up Eleanor, and they ate in silence.

"What is it you want to do?" she finally asked, as they had finished.

"We won't find the archer who shot at me, but I don't think we need to as well. You still got the arrow?"

"On my desk. It is evidence."

"Bring it, and we'll go to the Tyrians."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do I need to be in armour?"

"Not for this visit, but maybe the second."

Crossing the bridge into Esmouth, Martel and Eleanor turned left to reach the Tyrian enclave. The residents raised their heads, seeing the visitors; presumably, Asterians rarely came here. One of the Tyrians interrupted his chore, sewing up a hole in a shirt, to turn his head towards the nearest house and call out in his own tongue.

Moments later, the berserker emerged from behind the animal hide serving as a door. "Ah, honoured visit! Mage of fire and furious lady. Have you come to share our cup?"

Martel threw the broken arrow into the berserker's arms. "Last night, somebody shot that at me."

The Tyrian glanced at the arrow and looked up with a smile. "In the confusion of battle, such can happen. I see you stand before me, not a hole in your body! No harm done?"

"The battle had ended, and the arrow was marked with a rune to steer it straight. One of your people aimed at me specifically and let loose." Martel spoke slowly, both to impress each word on the berserker, but also to be sure he understood. "Attempted murder of a prefect is punishable by death, which extends to anybody who helps the killer." Martel did not actually know this for sure, but it seemed a reasonable guess. "I could go to the legate, but I don't have the patience for that. I expect you to find whoever is guilty and deal with them, or I'll return and burn down all your houses, no matter who is inside. Do you understand?"

The berserker observed Martel for what felt like the longest moment. The muscles on his arms tensed, but finally he spoke. "I understand."

The two mages turned around and left. Once they were out of earshot, Eleanor gave him a glance. "You really think this is a better approach than actually reporting it in? Instead of one Tyrian, you may have made enemies of all thirty. Our superiors cannot protect you if they are unaware of any threat to you."

"I'm sure," Martel told her. Eleanor approached this like an Asterian and a soldier, expecting hierarchy and discipline to settle the affair. But Martel suspected these Tyrians were more like the gangs in Morcaster, men and women living by their own rules outside regular society, respecting

only wealth or strength. "If an Asterian tried to interrogate them, they would close ranks. Now, they have motivation to do something about it."

They made their way back into camp. For all of Martel's confidence, and though the Tyrians were not allowed inside the legion's enclosure, he still took the time to surround his tent with runes of warning.

Chapter 535: As One Life Ends

As One Life Ends

Morning had barely arrived when a soldier arrived outside Martel's tent. Half dressed, the mage went outside. "What is it?"

"Sorry for the hassle, sir. That big Tyrian with the axe is by the gate, asking for you. Seemed important if he is here first thing in the morning."

"Tell him I'll be with him shortly."

"Sir."

The soldier left while Martel walked over towards Eleanor's tent. "Time for that second visit."

Soon after, Martel and Eleanor appeared by the gate to the camp, both of them in armour. The guards gave a few odd looks at the smiling berserker and the two prefects, but nobody dared make a remark.

"Soldier," Martel said, "Sir Fontaine and I are going to the Tyrian part of town. If we do not return soon, raise the alarm."

The legionaries widened their eyes, and one of them mumbled in acknowledgement. If the berserker understood what the exchange meant, he gave no sign of this. Looking happy as ever, he motioned for the two mages to join him, and together, they crossed the bridge into Esmouth.

Martel felt a touch of apprehension as they approached the Tyrian homes; he was betting more than his own life that he had read the situation correctly. The berserker went inside as the first, and Eleanor stepped ahead to enter as the second; Martel noticed her magic flare up as she summoned her shield. Keeping himself ready, he passed through the threshold.

Inside the house, several Tyrians stood around the room. None of them had weapons in hand, which made Martel feel more at ease. Due to the darkness, it took him a moment to notice another person, on her knees with her hands behind her back. Looking down, he saw that she had been gagged as well, and the other Tyrians stood to keep her prisoner; one on either side, a third by the backdoor.

The berserker walked over to the bound woman. "This is Gunhild," he explained. "You recognise her, I'm sure. She led your soldiers to the fight."

He was right, Martel realised; while the other Tyrians had gone ahead of the centuria, this woman had been their guide to the Khivan camp.

"It took some effort, but I finally learned she is the one you seek. She tried to kill you," the berserker continued. "She is not of our number originally. She arrived more than a month after,

claiming she wanted to work for your legion as a scout, so we allowed her to join us. I did not realise her true purpose."

It seemed a little convenient that the Tyrian had discovered the culprit to be the outsider to his band rather than one of his own people. "I should like to hear from her own mouth why she wanted me dead," Martel declared.

One of the Tyrians removed the gag, and the bound woman looked up at Martel. "What do you want from me?" she asked with a sneer.

"You tried to kill me. Why?"

"You killed my brother. He was a fool, unworthy of the powers given to him, but he was my brother. I couldn't let his death go unpunished."

The story has been illicitly taken; should you find it on Amazon, report the infringement.

Martel frowned. He could not recall killing any Tyrians except the berserker all the way back during his first months in Morcaster. Searching his memory, the name came to him. "What was your brother's name?"

"Bjarki," she spat.

"I didn't kill your brother. The authorities did." Martel had never actually found out what had been done to the berserker after he and Maximilian overpowered him, but execution made sense. A dangerous magic-wielder who assaulted two students; both the Inquisition, the Lyceum, and the Imperial administration would want him dead.

"I can't take my revenge on them, can I?" the woman asked. "And the other mageling was in the palace of your king, beyond my reach. So it had to be you. But when I finally discovered your identity after learning of my brother's fate, you were gone, and I had to follow. May the wolf and the raven curse you, black-hair, and everyone else who stole my revenge from me!"

The gag was returned to her mouth, and with a gesture from the berserker, the Tyrians dragged her away. "What will you do to her?" Martel asked.

"She placed us all in danger. She will not be seen again, unless you go swimming in the deep sea," the berserker declared. "I trust that this satisfies you?"

Martel hesitated only briefly. "It does." He looked at Eleanor. "Let's head back."

"Yes, before your entire legion storms our little home, looking for their missing mages," the berserker laughed. As the pair left the house, he followed them outside. "Thank you, mage of fire, for letting us deal with this on our own. Tell me your names, that I may know you better."

"I'm Martel."

"Eleanor Fontaine."

The Tyrian placed his hand over his heart. "Starkad. I am pleased to consider you friends and not foes."

Martel inclined his head while Eleanor narrowed her eyes. "You know, your command of the Asterian language has improved immensely. Not just over the last few months. Since yesterday."

Starkad's smile turned sly. "The less that people think you understand, the more they underestimate you."

The two mages walked away, returning to camp. The soldiers at the gate glanced at them with questioning looks; Martel simply nodded to them passing by. As they walked along the main road back to their tents, he tried not to think about how he, however justified, had just condemned a woman to death.

Still tired from not just this morning but the ordeal of the nightly skirmish, Martel sat down on his cot. He was tempted to make an attempt at further sleep Eleanor had mercifully agreed not to spar today when he caught a letter lying on his desk. It must have been delivered while he was out.

My dear boy,

I know it has been a while since the last letter. I wanted to wait until I could be sure what news to bring you. Your brother was married in late harvest, and it was a great celebration. Your sisters wept, and I did as well. Keith even smiled on a few occasions. William tied a rope to the tail of the weaver's cat and one of our lambs, and as the animals ran through the town square, they toppled several people and one table, making apples spill everywhere.

Now to the important news and the reason this letter was delayed. You remember I told you that Clara, your brother's new wife, was pregnant. The child was born only three days ago, a healthy girl. Had it been a boy, he would have been named after your father. But a girl, we are not sure about. Hopefully by the next time you get a letter, we will have decided on something.

The house once felt empty after both you and your father were gone, but it only took one small child to make it feel full again. Of course, Clara is also here, so we are as many as we used to be.

I suppose by the time this reaches you, you must have learned about your posting? Write back when you know where you will be, and where to send future letters. I hope it is someplace up north, and maybe you can visit. Or at least, it will not take so long for letters to go back and forth.

Otherwise, everyone is in good health. There is probably much more to tell, but with the baby's arrival and not much sleep, I have plainly forgotten the rest. Father Julius sends his regards, and John misses you very much.

Love,

Your mother

Martel's eyes glanced over the text. This had probably been sent long ago to Morcaster, but after he had left, which explained the delay. Martel tried to imagine the house back in Engby, now with another woman and a newborn. Outside, the sounds of raucous laughter resounded, and possibly someone getting into a brawl.

Leaning back on his cot, Martel lay with the letter in his hands upon his chest, and he closed his eyes.

Chapter 536: Flame and Foliage

Flame and Foliage

The musket ball struck the tree, causing splinters to fly past Martel's face. He had dropped his staff some paces away, but it might as well be on the other side of the world, given that he needed to leave cover to retrieve it. Crouching behind the trunk, Martel cursed. The fire in his blood urged him towards reaction, retaliation, retribution, but he took deep breaths to keep his head cool. The Khivan sharpshooter clearly knew how to aim, yet he spent his bullet on a tree trunk. He was a distraction.

Letting his magical sense sweep out in different directions, Martel tried to filter away what he already knew. Eleanor to his left, behind a tree as well. The princeps and another legionary to his right, hiding in the same manner. The remainder of their patrol a few paces behind them, using an overturned log for cover.

An animal on the tree branches squirrel, probably racing away from all the noise. Birds flying up in the air. And more people, moving around. Three of them, closing in.

"They're flanking us!" Martel shouted, pointing to his left. "Twenty paces away, coming towards you in the rear."

One of the soldiers young and inexperienced raised his head up to look. Before Martel could shout him down, the sound of a shot came, and the soldier fell to the ground.

Another curse on his lips, Martel considered the angle. There had to be a second sharpshooter, covering that side. Three Khivans approaching six legionaries, but with the musketeer supporting them, they would have the edge.

"Martel, tell me where he is, and I shall get him," Eleanor declared with urgency in her voice; their situation was rapidly becoming untenable.

"One moment!" Trying to control his breathing, Martel raised a wall of flames to cut off the angle of the second sharpshooter, protecting the legionaries on the ground. This done, he turned his attention towards the first musketeer, somewhere directly ahead. His magic sweeping out, Martel found the target and pointed towards him. "Fifteen paces that way, fairly high up in the tree. One other with him, below."

He saw Eleanor's magic activate to shield her, and she leapt up, sprinting in the direction indicated by him. Martel's instinct was to follow after, but he knew that was folly. Her defensive magic would keep her safe, able to withstand numerous bullets and attacks; his would dissipate after a single hit. And she could handle two enemies.

Turning his attention back to the other side, Martel was stymied by his own wall; its heat interfered and kept him from sensing the Khivans further beyond. "Stay alert!" he shouted, probably needlessly; every Asterian knew the situation.

Their enemy finally appeared from behind, having walked around his wall. With battle cries, they stormed forward. They wielded short spears, same as the legionaries, but no shields, using the other hand to wield their primary weapon more nimbly, or adding a short sword for closer combat. This served them well in the chaotic fight that erupted, man against man. Even outnumbered, the ferocity of their attack and better-suited weapons scattered the legionaries, hard pressed.

The author's content has been appropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Trusting that Eleanor handled the sharpshooter at his back, Martel rose and joined the skirmish. Streaks of fire flew in between the Asterians to strike the Khivans. Screams and the smell of burning flesh filled the air.

Two of the Khivans incapacitated, Martel left the legionaries to finish that fight. He had to deal with the other sharpshooter. Steeling himself and summoning his shield, Martel dispelled his wall of flames between him and the Khivan, allowing him to sense the location of his enemy.

A bullet struck his shield, just as Martel found the man. He summoned his shield again, aware that he had little spellpower left, and advanced. The foliage made it hard to spot the sharpshooter, even if he knew the direction to look. Sweat on his brow from exertion and fear, Martel switched back and forth between his actual sight and his magical sense, acutely aware that the Khivan would have reloaded soon.

Suddenly, a body dropped down from the trees. Confused and wary, Martel approached until he saw an arrow stick out of the corpse. Further ahead, their Tyrian scout appeared. "Dead," the northerner declared. Martel exhaled, wiping his brow.

Although the fight was over, the Asterians did not relax. "You sense anyone, sir?" asked one of the young legionaries.

"Nobody but us," Martel assured him as he fetched his staff. Every other moment, he let his magic sweep out just to be sure.

"You'll keep watch, sir? You promise?"

"Quiet," the princeps barked. "Don't mug the prefect. He knows what he's doing."

"They were fools," another young legionary declared with a brazen demeanour. "Six of them, twelve thirteen of us," he added, looking at the Tyrian.

"We only won because the prefect was with us," the princeps told him brusquely. "These Khivans were experienced soldiers. Two of them with bloody good aim. Without the wizard, all you green boys would have ended up like him." He looked down at the dead legionary.

"Seven." Everyone looked towards the Tyrian scout. "They were seven. I killed one far over there." He pointed towards the direction he had come from.

"Aren't you supposed to know there's an ambush ahead?" the princeps asked. "Isn't it your task to warn us?"

"I would have. But there was the seventh man. I had to kill him first."

Eleanor returned, having made a quick survey of the surroundings. "Nothing suggests other Khivans. It seems a lone patrol, like us."

"Good." Martel looked her over, digging out a jar of blood salve from his belt. "Injuries?"

"No. But it looks like the others have."

He turned towards the legionaries, some of them nursing wounds. Walking from one to the other, Martel extended the salve in his hand. "This will keep it from getting infected."

With mumbled thanks, the legionaries scraped out some of the paste and applied it to their cuts. Turning towards the Tyrian, Martel noticed a nasty gash down his arm. How he had been able to draw his bow and shoot the last Khivan, Martel could not tell; it was fortunate that it had been over such a short distance.

Martel walked over and stretched out his hand. "For your wound."

The northerner squinted his eyes and took hold of the jar, sticking his nose down to take a sniff. Finally, he did as the others, applying the paste to his wound. "Southern magic?" he asked.

"Even better," Martel told him as he took the jar back. "Herbs, honey, and water."

"Let's get back," the princeps declared. "We've done our duty for today." He unclasped his cloak and placed it on the ground. "Help me." Together with another soldier, he dragged the body of the fallen legionary onto the cloth. "Let's get this boy back to camp, and us with him." Two of the soldiers grabbed the ends of the cloak, lifting up, and they began the journey home.

Chapter 537: Shared Knowledge

Shared Knowledge

Henry poured half a cup of wine and placed it in front of Martel along with a pitcher of water. Ignoring the offer of dilution, Martel grabbed the cup and took a healthy sip. The stonemage gave him a look under raised eyebrows. "That kind of day?"

"Yesterday. Third patrol in a row we got attacked. Lost one."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah." Martel took another sip.

"At least spring festival is just around the corner. In fact, be prepared for things to get rowdy. The soldiers usually make the most of this opportunity for revelry."

"I heard them talk about it. A bit late, isn't it? It's been spring for quite a few days now."

Finally picking up his own cup, Henry leaned back in his seat. "You can't have a festival without supplies. We have to wait until ship traffic resumes after winter. It's usually a jovial affair. With luck, some entertainers will have found their way to Esmouth as well."

"I suppose it can only be better than our current options for merriment." Martel emptied his cup and placed it back on the table, pushing it away from himself to indicate he was sated. Another round would go straight to his head. "How is the business of earth magic? Come across any nice stonework recently?"

"You mock, but I have in fact received new orders, which happens maybe every five years. So, for your humble resident stonemage, this is quite the turn of events."

Despite his mood, Martel felt the inclination to smile, probably aided by the wine. "And what fascinating tasks have our glorious leaders bestowed upon you?"

"Well, enchanting stone. So more or less what you might expect. But not the existing walls, no. I am to prepare an entirely new lot."

"What for?"

Henry gave a shrug. "As a lowly civilian, I am not privy to strategic decisions. If I were to guess, they intend to build new fortifications north of here make it easier to defend the bank from crossings. Given how much stonework they want, it could easily house a cohort."

"I pity whichever mageknight gets that posting." Martel got on his feet. "I need to get back. Between spring festival and my next patrol, I should rest up."

"See you at the festivities."

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

Making his way through Esmouth, Martel had almost reached the bridge when he was hailed by Starkad. The berserker, wearing his big smile as always, approached him. "Mage of fire, a pleasure to see you."

Martel did not feel up for idle conversation, but it seemed foolish to insult the Tyrian. "Starkad," he spoke in greeting.

"I hear your patrol yesterday was rough," Starkad spoke in a quiet voice; his pronunciation improved markedly as well, now that only Martel could hear him.

"It was. I don't blame your man we got ambushed if that's your concern. These Khivans, they're more like hunters than soldiers. Hiding in the bushes, laying traps, and all of them with sharp aim." Frustration took hold of his voice.

"Something I learned that you should know. Of all the patrols that my people have shared, only those with you present have been ambushed of late." Starkad gave him a knowing look. "Three times in a row, is it?"

"You think it's not a coincidence."

"I know your Empire loves everything in its place, predictability, doing it the same way every time. These fire eaters don't strike me as the same," the berserker considered. "I don't think they've elected one day to always be the day they hunt for Asterian game."

"Thanks," Martel mumbled. The thought was unsettling.

"My man says you had salve to heal him. His wound has closed fast. Very effective," Starkad continued. "Where did you get it? We should like to buy for ourselves."

"I'd suggest you ask in the infirmary, but they won't let you inside the camp. Other than the physician there, I think I'm the only one who knows how to make it."

"You created this healing mixture?" The berserker gave him a discerning look.

"I did." Martel reached into his belt and took out the jar. "You can have this. I got another ready."

"Much appreciated. I thought your Empire teaches mages like you to kill. I didn't think such lore of herbs would be part of it."

Martel could not suppress his sarcastic laughter. "You would be right about that. I learned this on my own time, you might say. I wasn't always destined to be a battlemage."

The berserker gave him another scrutinising look. "Truly? I am surprised. Fire has no place in our traditions, so I know little of it. Yet what I have seen in your Empire, that seems to be its only purpose."

"Yes, it seems to be that way." Martel thought about his enchantment work. Light and heat were essentials; if he had no other obligations, he might improve his skill to such a degree, his enchantments would be near permanent. All the homes that he and other firemages could provide with heating to chase away even the coldest winter instead, his gift was used to turn Khivans into torches. Feeling bitter, Martel almost missed the opportunity in front of him. "Actually, I could teach your people how to make the salve."

The third look that Starkad gave him was born of surprise. "You would share such knowledge?"

"For something in return. One of the empty buildings around here" Martel looked at the ruined part of town where the Tyrians resided. "That'll serve as workshop." Bringing his herb rack and tools down here would alleviate the cramped space in his tent. "Get it ready for tomorrow. Somewhere dry and shielded from sunlight. Can you do that?"

Starkad smiled, and for once, it seemed almost genuine. "Consider it so!"

Back in his tent as evening swept the camp, Martel knew he had to share Starkad's suspicions about their patrols with Eleanor. But it would be another four days before their next trip beyond the camp; he could do so tomorrow. For now, he would spend the last hour before sleep creating an enchantment; his new alchemy workshop would need the best lightstone he could make.

Chapter 538: Setting Up Shop

Setting Up Shop

The following day, once he had sparred with Eleanor, Martel went to the small Tyrian quarter of Esmouth. He carried his drying rack for herbs over his shoulder with one hand, the other hauling his crate of tools and ingredients. It was awkward and heavy, but with a little empowered strength, he reached his destination and could place the rack on the ground. "I'm here for Starkad," he told the nearest Tyrian, who sat plucking a goose.

The northerner got up, stuck his head inside the nearby building and yelled out the name before resuming his decision and work. Moments later, the berserker emerged. "Mage of fire! We are ready for you. Come, let me help." He went over and picked up the rack, leading the way.

"You don't have to call me that. Especially since we both know you speak better Asterian than that."

"Why break with tradition?"

Starkad moved to a small house built right against the city wall, with an animal hide for a door, and Martel followed him inside. Lacking windows, the place was rather dark, and Martel dug out the lightstone he had enchanted last night. It easily illuminated the space, giving him a chance to evaluate it.

One wall had clearly been repaired, perhaps a bit hastily; the stones did not quite fit together. Since Martel would not live here, it did not matter; he could always ask Henry to take a look and perhaps improve the repairs. Most importantly, the roof was intact, and the room was dry.

Turning around, he saw Starkad holding the lightstone, almost transfixed. "You created this?"

"I did."

"You are full of surprises. I have seen such a one at the house of the harlots, but I didn't expect it came from you." He looked at Martel with a sly smile. "They let you pay with one of these?"

Martel was not inclined to explain the truth, so he chose not to reply. Instead, he began unpacking his tools on the table, the only furniture in the room. "Did you provide this?"

"Of course. You can't work on the ground." Starkad placed the lightstone on the table. "I have chosen whom of my people will learn from you. I can send him to you now if you wish."

"In a moment." Martel turned from the table towards his companion. "I should ask something in return for sharing this knowledge and my work with you."

"I wondered when you might. What is it?"

"I've seen your arrows. They are marked by runes. I wish to learn what I can about them."

For once, the berserker did not smile. "These are bold words. Such knowledge is not to be easily shared, not even among our own people. Nor do I think you could make use of them, any more than you could teach me how to conjure flames from nothing."

Stolen from Royal Road, this story should be reported if encountered on Amazon.

Silently, Martel walked over to the wall. Extending his finger and using it almost like a feather pen, he burnt the rune of warning into the stone. "*Vara*." The symbol glowed briefly, and Martel stepped away.

With an incredulous expression, Starkad crossed the room to touch the wall. Immediately, Martel felt as if something pulled at him, demanding his attention, as the sign did its work. "You know the lore of runes?" Starkad asked in disbelief.

"I was taught this, yes." Martel avoided the specifics; the Tyrian might not be pleased to know that a teacher at the Lyceum share this knowledge with every student, even if most of them never grasped it.

"If the runes speak to you, I will not deny that judgement. I can teach you what I know, though I am no loremaster."

"You're the one who knows the runes in your flock?"

The berserker nodded. "Of my company, none are touched except me. But I'm not a skld, and you may already know the runes that I do."

"We'll find out."

"Very well. Once my companion has learned to make your salves, I will teach you in return."

Martel inclined his head. "Acceptable." As the berserker left, he began setting up his workshop.

The Tyrian fellow chosen by Starkad was a dour sort, who spoke little. At first, Martel thought perhaps it was from a lack of understanding Asterian, but he followed all of Martel's instructions and even knew the names of the tools and herbs. He was several years older, which could be why he

said little to Martel; perhaps the thought of being taught by someone younger bothered him. But if so, he did not express this, and Martel had no reason to complain about his behaviour. He also appreciated having someone else to help with many of the tedious tasks of turning plants and herbs into usable ingredients. He did learn that the man's name was Egil.

Having made one jar of blood salve, showing his new apprentice every step of the process, Martel left his work to thicken overnight and called it a day. Walking back to camp, he remembered Starkad's warning from yesterday, which he had yet to tell Eleanor. Best to get it done now.

"Eleanor?" he called out, standing outside the tent.

"Enter."

Walking inside, he found her sitting in her chair, reading a piece of parchment. "Letter from home?"

She nodded with a smile. "From my sister."

Sitting down on the cot, Martel thought back on the girl he had met a few times. It was a pity they had to leave Morcaster so soon after she was healed, giving Eleanor little time with her.

"Is something on your mind?"

"Yes, sorry. I got a warning from Starkad, the berserker."

"A warning? You said you wanted to ask him about runes. Did he not take it well?"

"No, nothing like that. He pointed out a pattern that his warriors have discovered. Apparently, it's only when you and I are on patrol that the Khivans ambush us."

Eleanor folded the letter in her hands looking at him with concern. "You think he is right?"

"I don't see why he would lie about it. Besides, doesn't Sir Lara keep records of this? It must be easy to verify."

"It should be, yes. How did the Khivans discover this? Not just your presence in the legion, but the very day you are outside of camp and vulnerable."

"We are not fighting an enemy in open field. The Khivans are more like the Tyrians. Scouts, hunters. They're not here to engage us in battle, they are here to tie us in place and slowly whittle us down," Martel considered. "Regardless, it would be preferable if we could change our routines."

Eleanor nodded. "I shall speak to Sir Lara. She will see the wisdom of this."

"Thanks."

"How about your little workshop?" she asked. "Is it to your liking?"

"It'll do."

"So we shall continue our flower-picking, I surmise."

"I couldn't think of a nobler pursuit." Martel leaned back, forgetting he sat on a cot rather than in a chair, and he almost fell over, to the sound of Eleanor's laughter.

Chapter 539: A Day in Spring

A Day in Spring

Spring festival was a day of revelry and joy, except for those soldiers, who had one way or another angered their commanders and thus been volunteered to do guard or patrol duty. This did not include any prefects, and Martel was free to make his way to Esmouth and experience the merrymaking. Together with Eleanor, he walked into the transformed town. The main road was lined with stalls and entertainers, all of them travellers who had arrived over the last days. For once, nearly everything could be found in Esmouth, whether something to sweeten the tongue, wear on the right occasion, or thrill the eyes and ears.

His purse full, Martel threw pennies at every performer, and sometimes a silver piece if he felt impressed. Anything that looked tasty or smelled delicious, he gave a try. He made sure to buy two every time, in case Eleanor could be tempted; if not, he had no qualms about eating both treats.

"Your stomach will hurt," she cautioned him.

"I accept this pain."

They continued on their leisurely stroll, taking their time to investigate anything that caught their attention. Eventually, this brought them to a small section by the wall, which had been cleared. Ropes and posts had been erected to fence off an area, creating a small archery range. Using the wall as background, a cow's hide had been strung up. The middle of the hide had a sheepskin on top of it, which itself had the pelt of a squirrel in the centre, thus creating concentric circles to act as target.

At the other end of this improvised range stood several Tyrians. "Any archer dare try against Bjorn?" one of them asked, gesturing towards a lean hunter with long, sinewy arms. "One silver to shoot an arrow, and if you do better than him, you get five back!"

Egged on by friends and by-standers, the legionaries familiar with a bow gave it a try. Many of them were excellent shots, often striking the innermost pelt. Yet every time, the Tyrian struck better, hitting the empty eyehole of the squirrel serving as target.

Having a little more knowledge about the Tyrian scouts and their arrows than most, Martel noticed how this Bjorn had this own quiver, while they gave a different set of arrows to the challenger.

"Eleanor, why don't you give it a try?" he suggested.

"I may be a decent shot, but I doubt I can do better than him," she admitted.

Martel dug out two coins, one of gold and one of silver. He gave the latter to Eleanor. "I'll be happy to patronise your entry. I have faith in your abilities."

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

"Alright, why not?" Eleanor assented, and she pushed her way towards the Tyrian in charge of the spectacle.

Meanwhile, still holding the other coin, Martel also moved through the crowd, but he went for the archer. Avoiding attention, he let the golden coin brush up against the Tyrian's quiver.

Eleanor went first. Her arrow struck the squirrel, just below the head. After her, the Tyrian archer took position demonstratively, slowly nocking his arrow and pulling back the string. After spending time taking aim, he released his arrow. It struck just outside the squirrel pelt, hitting the sheepskin instead.

Grumbling, the Tyrian in charge of the game paid out five silvers. Eleanor looked around and found Martel, approaching him with a smile. "I won!"

"As I said, I have faith in you." As she tried to give him her winnings, he raised his hands in rejection. "That's yours."

She gave him a look born of suspicion. "How did you know he would miss?"

He grinned. "I'll tell you if you buy me something to drink."

"I suppose that's only fair."

Once they each had a cup of wine, the pair sat down on some of the logs and debris used as seating in the main square. Before long, the resident stonemage joined them, likewise equipped with a drink. "My favourite wizards in this town. Granted, the field is narrow." Henry laughed at his own words. "How is the festival treating you?"

"I beat the Tyrians at their own game," Eleanor related with pride. "At the archery contest. Martel helped a little, perhaps."

"How so?" Henry looked from one to the other. "I wouldn't have thought his magic could help with shooting arrows."

"It wouldn't, but the Tyrians were winning because they used arrows with runes to help them hit their mark. A touch of gold brushed against those arrows, and their advantage evaporated," Martel explained.

"I would never have thought of that," the stonemage admitted, "but I don't know anything about Tyrians either, or runes, for that matter."

"They didn't teach them to you at the Lyceum?" Eleanor asked.

Henry shook his head. "I don't think any of the teachers had such knowledge back when I attended."

"You must recall, our good friend Henry finished his studies sometime in the previous century," Martel helpfully pointed out.

"I'm not decrepit," the stonemage protested. "Didn't you just ask for my help the other day, fixing up that shack where you brew your little potions? And now you mock me."

"But think of all the good that my elixirs and balms could do for you," Martel replied. "You know, given how much your health is bound to suffer from old age."

"No respect for elders." Henry shook his head at this sad state of affairs.

"Master Henry, Master Henry!" A gaggle of children appeared. "Show us something!" they shouted as they practically surrounded him.

"What, am I some marketplace jester, performing tricks on command?" Despite his indignant words, a pillar of earth shot up from the ground in the midst of the children. They recoiled in confusion that quickly turned to laughter.

A blanket of fire appeared, enclosing around the earthen pillar, and the children reacted with appropriate awe. "Master Henry, you've gotten better!"

"Hm. Indeed." Henry looked at Martel as they both dispelled their effects. "Now run along, you little scoundrels!" The children did so, to the sounds of loud laughter. Around them, the festival continued.

Chapter 540: Second Shot

Second Shot

Martel sprinted through the forest. The sound of a musket firing reached him, and the bullet did a moment later as well, aimed at his back. His magical shield protected him, and he jumped to the other side of a small mound, providing him with cover. Evidently, changing the day of their patrols had not made much difference.

"How many?" Eleanor asked, hiding in the same place.

"Three ahead of us." Martel pointed in the different directions. "Another three or four coming from that angle, against ours." He gestured to the left. "And another marksman that way." To the right.

"I kill near me," came the rusty Asterian from their Tyrian scout, hiding nearby. He took off, creeping through the undergrowth.

"You have to help our soldiers," Martel urged her. Once the Khivans went into close combat and drove the legionaries out, the sharpshooters in the trees would take them down with ease. "My wall won't stretch far enough to blind them all."

"I cannot leave you with three sharpshooters aiming at you!"

"The others will die if you don't help them. And you'll draw their attention," Martel pointed out. "I'll deal with them from the other side."

The mageknight at his side exhaled, slowing her breath. "Stay alive," she told him quietly. With a sharp inhalation, she leapt up and ran through the forest.

Trying to stay calm, Martel told himself this was no worse than the other patrols. The scout would deal with the one to his right. Eleanor would handle those outflanking them and draw at least one sharpshooter's attention. That just left two. He had plenty of spellpower. He would not die in this forsaken forest.

Steeling himself, Martel summoned his shield and got on his feet. Using his magical sense, he knew where to find his enemy and ran straight towards him. At the same time, a wall of flames shot up to block the line of sight for the other marksman nearby.

A bullet rang out, striking Martel's defensive spell without causing harm. A ray of fire flew from his staff to strike the Khivan, and it continued to burn; Martel was not going to give him a chance to survive the first blow. Once he felt certain the soldier was dead, he summoned his shield again, dismissed his wall, and went for his next target.

As he came close enough to strike, he sensed rather than saw the Khivan drop down from the trees. His enemy drew a pistol from his belt and aimed it at Martel's head, just as the battlemage released a ray of fire. The spell struck first, and the Khivan fell backwards with an agonising scream, even as he still pulled the trigger.

Unauthorized reproduction: this story has been taken without approval. Report sightings.

The bullet flew past Martel, making him flinch despite knowing he had his shield to protect him. He kept his spell going until the Khivan lay still on the ground.

Letting his magic sweep out towards the third sharpshooter, he found the heat of a person. As he summoned his shield and moved forward, he nearly released another ray of fire until he recognised Eleanor.

"It is over," she told him, and he let out his breath.

Three of their small band were dead. Two killed as the Khivans unleashed the ambush, another in the subsequent fighting. As the soldiers tended to their wounds, Eleanor went from corpse to corpse, smashing every Khivan weapon.

Eventually, she returned to Martel, who stood by the body of the second sharpshooter he had killed. Something was odd about that fight, and the feeling nagged at him.

"What is it?" Eleanor asked.

"I can't quite put my finger on it." Frowning, Martel moved around to make the same approach as during the fight. "I run forward here. He doesn't fire his musket, but drops down from the tree maybe thinking I'm aiming up high, and he'll dodge my spell" Martel stepped forward. "He still doesn't fire his musket. He draws his pistol, wasting valuable moments, and I kill him before he can take proper aim."

"Thankfully. You had your shield up, I take it?"

"Of course. The bullet didn't hit me, anyway. It flew right past me." Martel remembered flinching, the strange sensation of surprise at the bullet, even though he watched the Khivan fire his weapon. "I didn't feel it."

"If you were not hit, why would you?" Eleanor asked absentmindedly, snapping the Khivan's musket in two.

"No, the bullet. I always sense them. They're like the fire bolts back in the Circle of Fire. Even if they're too fast for me to evade, I sense them. But I didn't this time" Unnerved, Martel looked around until he saw where the projectile had hit. Missing him, it had buried itself into a tree behind him. Taking out his knife, he dug it out. As he held it in his hand, he felt dread. Not just because the ball was cold, like death, but because of what it signified.

"Martel, what is it?"

He turned around and let it fall into Eleanor's hand. "It's gold. That's a mage killer bullet."

"It is not just a suspicion then. They are hunting you."

Martel nodded slowly. "We must expect this from every Khivan who wears a pistol in his belt."

"Sir," the princeps interjected. "The men are restless. All that noise will have attracted any others that might be nearby."

"There is none," the Tyrian scout declared. "If more, I would see. That's why few numbers. Only way to make ambush."

"Sir," the princeps spoke while studiously ignoring the northerner, "there seems to be little reason to linger."

"Alright," Eleanor said, and she unclasped the brown cloak they wore for patrols. "Create stretchers. We will make our return." She glanced at Martel, speaking in a lowered voice as she continued, "We need to tell Sir Lara. Changing the day of our patrol clearly did nothing."

"We'll talk with her when we're back," Martel assented, even as he feared it would not do much. The Khivans had caught his scent, and they appeared to be relentless in their pursuit.