

## Firebrand 551

### Chapter 551: Fires of Solstice

#### Fires of Solstice

Unlike the last time he was invited to the legate's house, Martel kept his expensive clothes in his chest. Instead, he simply dressed in one of his red robes like he would on an ordinary day. Leaving his tent, he waited outside until Eleanor joined him, likewise clad in her usual black tunic.

"Sir Martel, not wearing your finest today?"

"Borrowed feathers. This is who I am."

"I find you look rather dashing in a doublet, but given my own choice of attire, I shall not chastise you. Shall we?"

Together, they left the camp.

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Reaching Esmouth, they found the locals had begun their own celebration. A bonfire was built on the town square, though it would not be lit until nightfall. Judging by the singing, the townspeople had not exhibited the same patience with regards to drinking. Watching the pair of prefects cross the square, some of them even had the courage to raise their mugs and shout their well-wishes for a merry solstice.

Entering the legate's house, they discovered the mood inside to be of the same cheer as outside, perhaps aided by the same means. In the atrium, tables filled with drink and food stood prepared, and the other prefects had already begun sampling the delicacies.

"The last sheep of our herd arrived, joined at the hip as usual!" Lucius, the oldest prefect present, appeared a few steps ahead of everybody else in terms of imbibing.

They each received a goblet to help them catch up. Eleanor was quickly spotted by their hostess, the legate's wife, who grabbed her by the arm and led her over to the other women, all of them mageknights. As for Martel, a handful of the male prefects include him in their circle, which also included Henry.

"I thought you were at the outpost," the stonemage said to Lucius. "That's where I saw you last."

"Our month was up just before solstice," the mageknight grinned. "Did Theodore grumble about missing it?" he asked of Martel.

"I couldn't say. He only arrived a few days before we left for this little get-together, so I barely saw him."

"Too busy setting Khivans on fire!" Lucius roared, to which Martel gave a polite smile.

He was not keen on discussing their recent battles or dwelling on the war itself, and in his mind, he retreated from the conversation, letting the others talk and jest. He was not uncomfortable, though; the mageknights seemed to treat him as one of their own, and he appreciated being included. Even if not all shared the sentiment.

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Looking across the room, Martel saw the legate, the legion prefect, and decurion in a conversation of their own. While the latter did not hold overall command of the legion like the other two, he was considered a leader in their absence and would be deferred to in an emergency. Fortunately, as he commanded the mounted cohort, Dominic Char would never be sent to man the outpost; that was for the infantry. Martel's exile to their place had that advantage, at least; he was unlikely to run into the decurion again until winter solstice.

Perhaps the mageknight thought the same, as he approached Martel's group, clearly intent on interacting with the battlemage. "Our firemage returns to civilised company. I notice you have yet to buy that shaving knife."

Martel resisted the urge to touch his face. It was true, stubble had been allowed to settle; Martel had not given it any thought, failing to see how a clean-shaven chin would affect his performance in combat. "Very true, decurion. Between all the actual fighting we do, I just never find the time." He met the mageknight's gaze without blinking.

"Strange. From what I hear, you have plenty of time to do other sorts of work. The Tenth must be the only legion blessed with its own apothecary among the prefects!"

Laughter from the others could be heard, though Martel took it as good-natured, and something he could turn to his side. "Such remedies are most useful for those injured in battle. If you ever went on patrol, as I do every day, you would learn such things."

Dominic gave a condescending smile. "I am the decurion. My soldiers are not wasted on such efforts."

"I suppose all the trees would get in the way of your little ponies," Martel considered, his expression showing the same emotion as the mageknight. "A pity. Fortunately, all our infantry is more than up for the task."

"Hear, hear!" yelled the other mageknights, raising their goblets in salute of Martel's words, drowning out any response that the decurion attempted.

The conversation quickly took a different turn, and Martel lost interest again. Instead, he looked over to find Eleanor in conversation with the legate. The noise prevented him from hearing any words spoken, but by her demeanour, she seemed unhappy. Just as he wondered whether he should walk over to support her, the legate moved away from her abruptly and addressed the small crowd. "Night has fallen! It is time for the ritual."

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The entire gathering filed outside into the garden of the residence. It was a pleasant summer night. The wall of the mansion shielded them from the noise of the town, with its own celebration taking place. The guests spread out to surround the bonfire prepared, waiting for the ceremony to begin.

"I tried talking to the legate," Eleanor whispered as she appeared next to Martel.

"And?"

"He categorically refused changing our orders. In fact, we are to leave immediately tomorrow morning. By his estimate, we are inflicting thrice the casualties we are incurring," she practically hissed. "Can you believe it? A war of attrition, using us as the means!"

Martel could believe it. This legion would not be fighting battles on a large scale, not in this terrain against this enemy. The legate had no use for a battlemage other than this, wearing down the enemy as much as possible until a golden bullet inevitably put an end to him. Which would also be pleasing news to Duke Cheval, a friend of the legate.

He was spared coming up with a response by the arrival of the local priest, carrying a torch. It occurred to Martel he did not even know the name of Esmouth's clergyman. He knew the town possessed a temple, of course, as he heard the bell ringing. But he had never once gone to pay his respects or leave an offering. He knew Eleanor had been a few times, and he had meant to join her. Perhaps a prayer to Sol and a gift would be a wise investment for a soldier to make. He might try to do so tomorrow, though Martel's magic along with Eleanor had so far proven sufficient. Perhaps he should put his trust in that instead, he considered, watching the priest light the fire.

## Chapter 552: An Intelligent Suggestion

### An Intelligent Suggestion

As Martel woke the next morning, he spent a moment pulling himself together before he finally got up. He did not look forward to three days of horseback riding, or the thought of being back at the outpost with the daily patrols once that journey ended. At least he would have a few days alone in the company of Eleanor, and last night had been pleasant, save for his brief encounter with the decurion.

Once they were both ready, they made their way towards Esmouth and the stables. This time, knowing he would be at the outpost indefinitely, Martel had packed as many of his essentials as he could. He left his tools in the workshop, as Starkad had promised to ensure Martel remain supplied with remedies as needed.

"Can you give me a few moments? I'll meet you by the horses," he told Eleanor as they entered town. She gave a brief nod, and they separated. Acting on his thoughts from yesterday, Martel went to the temple for the first time.

It was a simple building, not too different from the shrine back in Engby. A single room containing an altar along with an adjoining building behind for the priest to reside in. A novice was up and about, probably him who had rung the bell this morning; the priest, whose name Martel still did not know, had enjoyed himself at the celebration until late.

Seeing a mage in the shrine, the novice did not speak or draw any attention to himself. Martel acknowledged the boy's presence with barely a nod before he knelt before the altar. He thought about praying, but he had never been taught any prayers for going into war. What would be acceptable to pray for? That Sol would preserve him in battle or that he would have victory against his enemies? Maybe that he would not meet any enemies at all. Suddenly feeling despondent, questioning his reasons and himself for being here, Martel ended up leaving a few gold coins on the altar before he quickly got up and left.

Making his way to the stables, he noticed three horses saddled up outside. Assuming it to be a coincidence, a post rider making their departure at the same time as him and Eleanor, he realised his mistake as he came closer. Alongside the mageknight stood a man Martel recognised after a second glance. It was the mysterious Asterian who had arrived in Esmouth together with the Tyrians whom Josephine at the brothel had warned him about.

Reaching the other two, Martel looked from one to the other with a question on his face. "Prefect," the man spoke, "I have already identified myself to your companion, but let me introduce myself to you. I am Wulfstan, and I will accompany you to the outpost." With a smile, he swung into the saddle of the nearest horse.

Refraining from replying, Martel packed his belongings and staff into the saddlebags of another horse. Meanwhile, he looked questioningly at Eleanor, who approached him. "He showed me his papers. He is military intelligence," she told him quietly. Or, as Martel would have put it, he was a spy.

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For the duration of the journey, the travellers barely spoke except to handle practical matters such as meals, making camp, setting a watch, and so on. At first, Martel had been hesitant even to trust this man with keeping watch while he and Eleanor slept, but she did not show any objections to that. Martel guessed that she was not apprehensive about what he might do, but rather what he might hear.

Martel was unsure what exactly somebody working in military intelligence might do, and now was obviously not the time to ask Eleanor. He knew what a spy was, of course, but he would have thought such a person would be dispatched to the Khivan side of the front to spy on the enemy; he could not quite understand why this Wulfstan insisted on travelling with them.

While it eventually occurred to him that someone working in military intelligence might also be hunting spies among their own ranks, it was obviously absurd to consider Martel or Eleanor as suspects. Besides being mages, whom the Khivans hated, they were also constantly engaging enemy soldiers and quite frequently killing them.

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The silence only broke properly on the last night, initiated by Wulfstan. "For two people being such good friends, you are certainly quiet."

Neither of the mages answered; Martel wondered what the spy actually knew about them, and whether he was simply trying to make them reveal information about themselves.

"Maybe it is what elevates you both that suppresses your mood. I have heard about your many skirmishes around the outpost."

"Is that why you have come?" Eleanor asked. "To investigate our activities?"

Wulfstan laughed a little. "Stars, no. Is that why you are so reluctant to speak? No, it is coincidence that we travel on this road together. My business is with the Tyrians."

While that made sense, Martel did not feel convinced.

"Though I shall confess my curiosity. When I heard a battlemage had been assigned to this legion, I was baffled, to say the least. I wonder what strings in Morcaster were pulled to make that happen, and why."

Martel saw no reason to enlighten him.

"I will say I find it to be wasteful. Having a fire-touched battlemage running patrols, risking his hide for the sake of killing Khivans. No aspersion is intended on the skill of his protector, of course." Wulfstan looked briefly at Eleanor. "A testament to your abilities that you have both survived the number of skirmishes as detailed in the daily reports."

"If the legate honours you with such access to this information, why not raise your concerns with him and convince him to change our orders?" Eleanor asked.

He laughed again. "The legate has no interest in my opinions. I'm sure he's quite relieved to see me gone. But I have wondered at something perhaps simply because I am uneducated in military matters."

"Yes?" Eleanor finally said.

"You go on patrol with ten legionaries. But I cannot imagine they are anything but deadweight. Compared to your magic, they can scarcely add much strength to the fight, and surely they must make it easy for the Khivans to notice you first and make their ambush."

"A good reason why the legate should rescind his orders to us, as those legionaries often end up not as deadweight, but simply dead," Eleanor replied coldly.

"Forgive my poor choice of words." Wulfstan raised his hands with a contrite demeanour. "I simply meant why not conduct your patrols alone? You will find it much easier to avoid detection."

It was an obvious suggestion, and Martel felt silly he had not considered this himself. "Why don't we?" he asked, looking at Eleanor.

"Regulations state that a patrol must consist of at least ten legionaries," she answered dismissively.

"But there must be exceptions," Wulfstan argued. "If an outpost lacks the numbers, or it is conducting a nightly operation where the fewer, the better, commanders must be able to make that decision."

"Yes, but neither of those conditions apply. I doubt Sir Theodore or any of the other mageknights would simply accept we ignore regulations and leave their legionaries behind, conducting patrols on our own. While the legate has his own reasons for sending us out, the prefects in place rely on their soldiers acting as eyes in the area, maintaining vigilance around the outpost."

"You are prefects," the spy pointed out. "If you decide to leave on your own, what can another prefect do? They do not hold command over you."

"They can complain to the legate or legion prefect," Eleanor said dryly, "and argue that we endanger the outpost by refusing to lend our presence to the daily patrols, as we have been ordered to."

"And what would happen then?" Wulfstan looked from one mage to the other. "It seems to me the worst they can do is ordering you to resume patrolling with the legionaries. I don't see how you lose anything going at it alone."

For a moment, neither of them replied. "We should sleep. I will take first watch," Eleanor finally declared.

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They reached the outpost early the next day. Relinquishing their horses, the three temporary companions separated; Wulfstan gave them a hearty farewell for now, considering they were bound

to run into each other again in the small camp. The mages gave muted replies and left for their own tents with their belongings.

"Is he right?" Martel asked once they were finally alone. "Could we just ignore the legionaries and go at it on our own?"

"I'm not entirely sure. Sir Theodore is bound to complain once he realises this, as will any other mageknight who takes command. And I question the motives of this Wulfstan why would he suggest this to us?"

A reasonable question, but Martel did not see what they had to lose. They would be fulfilling their orders; if this would somehow be considered a breach, they would at worst be disciplined and told to resume patrolling with the legionaries. "I'm tired of returning to this camp with bodies in tow," he admitted at length. "I'm willing to try this if you are."

"Very well. We are afforded a day's respite, considering we have been travelling today. Tomorrow, we shall go into the woods alone."

## Chapter 553: Predators and Prey

### Predators and Prey

On the morrow, ten legionaries including their princeps stood in the middle of the outpost, gathered underneath the cohort banner. Seeing two prefects approach, they stood at attention.

"Princeps," Eleanor said, "we shall be conducting patrols on our own. You and your men may go northeast and north, while Martel and I shall go southeast and south."

"Sir," the princeps mumbled, "we were told we have mages with us. Considering enemy activity, we all feel better with magic by our side."

"The Khivans are hunting for battlemages, not legionaries," Martel inserted. "We are doing you a favour, princeps."

"You have your orders," Eleanor added.

"Yes, prefect!" The princeps saluted, and he marched his patrol out of the gates; Eleanor and Martel followed at their own pace, going the other direction once outside the walls.

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Martel reached out and took hold of Eleanor's shoulder, giving her the agreed-upon signal. Both of them immediately crouched low, and he held up three fingers before pointing in the direction ahead of them. Two fingers pointing to the left, moving towards them; three fingers to the right, perched up in the trees.

A silent conversation of gestures followed as they decided upon their course of action and how to go through the different groups of enemies. Once in agreement, Eleanor drew her sword while Martel renewed the grip on his staff. Exchanging a nod, they both got on their feet and charged the Khivans straight ahead. Moments after, the forest resounded with magic being unleashed and death cries.

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Martel and Eleanor had barely arrived back at the outpost before the mageknight in command, Theodore, intercept them on their way to their tent. "My princeps tell me you patrolled alone, leaving them on their own. This is against all regulations!"

"How many of your soldiers made it back?" Eleanor asked.

"All of them, but that is not the issue," the mageknight insisted.

"How often have your patrols been attacked in the last fiveday, while we were gone?" Martel interjected.

"I'm not sure why that matters? I rely on these patrols to maintain vigilance around our camp, and the legate expects daily reports from me."

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"We killed eight Khivans today," Eleanor told him. "No casualties suffered by any of your legionaries. But if you insist on making them follow us, be assured that will change."

"You can put that in your daily report," Martel suggested, feeling too tired to care about bureaucratic intricacies. Both he and Eleanor continued onwards, leaving the mageknight behind.

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The Khivan drew his pistol from his belt, and Martel knew immediately what that meant. Without hesitation, he ducked behind a tree, and a moment later, a musket ball flew past him. The feeling of cold emptiness streaking through the air told him it was touched with gold, as he had feared.

Martel quickly jumped back out, as he did not want to give the Khivan time to reload. Reaching the same conclusion, the soldier rushed forward while drawing his dagger. He took a fire bolt to the chest doing so, yet battle fury or momentum carried him forward, and he swung his weapon at Martel even as his clothes burned.

Using his arm to deflect the blow, Martel felt the blade rip his clothes open until it met the chain shirt underneath. Another fire bolt from his staff struck the Khivan, this time in his face, extinguishing any willpower that had kept him on his feet, and he sank to the ground.

Turning towards the sounds of battle elsewhere, Martel caught the end of the fight. Two Khivans, also using their daggers, attacked Eleanor from either side. Rather than steel, they wore lamellar armour made from leather, useful for stealth and agile movements. Against a mageknight with empowered speed and strength, they might as well have worn nothing. Two quick strikes with her sword and Eleanor felled them both.

"You're wounded," he realised, watching a pained expression flashed across her face.

"My armour is split in the back. One of them got a slash in, but it is not deep. I will be fine." She began her regular routine of stomping on the mechanism of the Khivan muskets with her heel, using such force she sometimes broke the whole weapon in twain.

"Let's get back to camp."

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Inside the tent, Eleanor sat deepest in, with her back turned towards Martel, who was placed behind her. He carefully pushed her shirt up to begin cleaning the wound, thanking those hours spent in the

Lyceum of his infirmary, teaching him what to do. "It's shallow," he said. "No need for stitches, I think."

"Good."

"But you need new armour. I'll get a replacement from the smith."

"Thank you."

He put away the washing cloth and picked up a jar of blood salve instead. "It's been long enough for missives to reach the legate and return, but we haven't heard anything. I guess he is satisfied that we are killing Khivans, whether alone or in company."

"It seems like it." She let out a deep breath. "I still cannot wrap my head around it. That the Khivans continue to try, that is. Without the legionaries getting in our way, we are making a slaughter of it. I do not think a single one of them has escaped since we returned."

"To us, it seems foolish because we know all our advantages, and that the Khivans can't hope to beat two mages." With only Eleanor next to him rather than ten legionaries, Martel had no trouble sensing the heat of every Khivan trying to ambush them; he wondered if they would ever realise the futility of their attempts. "To us, it feels like they've thrown away so many lives," Martel considered. "But to their commander he has lost less than what, two hundred men? Probably still feels like a bargain, as long as he gets a dead battlemage in the end."

"But when do the scales tip?" she asked frustrated. "How many Khivans must be killed before it is no longer worth it?"

"I wish I knew." Martel finished attending to her wound and pulled her shirt down. "I wish I knew."

## Chapter 554: Suppression

### Suppression

Martel practically fell to the ground, bullets flying over his head. Next to him, Eleanor appeared, blood on her blade. "Situation?" was all she asked.

Martel closed his eyes and let his magical sense flow in every direction. The trees interrupted his reading here and there, but he received enough information to understand their predicament. "Bad," he simply replied at first. "Several around us, in every direction except that." He pointed to his right. "They are moving. Complete the circle."

"We break out. Wall. Stay behind me. Ready?"

He nodded quickly. As Eleanor leapt to her feet, her magic activating to protect her, Martel used his staff to push himself up. He summoned a wall of flames to cover their escape, and the pair broke into a sprint.

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Almost reluctantly, Martel poured water into his cup to dilute his wine. While he felt that he deserved and needed the full effects of the drink, he only had one pitcher, courtesy of Henry. Best to make it last a little longer. So he added water and took small sips, enjoying one of the only good flavours available in the outpost. Most of the immediate game in the area had been already hunted by the Tyrians, so the only meat they received was cured and dried rather than fresh.



As if summoned, Starkad the berserker appeared. "Mage of fire, there you are!"

Martel raised his cup in a gesture of greeting. "What brings you here?"

"From time to time, I must check on my little ravens. And I also brought this, from Egil." He took out a jar of salve, which he handed over.

"Thanks. Though this reminds me, you and I had an agreement. I would teach one of yours how to make these remedies, and you would teach me about runes." Cup in one hand, jar in the other, Martel looked up at the imposing berserker. "You will honour our agreement, I hope."

"A man's word is his law, not to be broken."

"Is that your longwinded way of saying you will do it?"

"Mage of fire, as impatient as your element. Yes, very well. Tell me all the runes you already know, and maybe I will have one or two I can add to your collection," the berserker declared.

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Martel sat, back against the tree. His hands clutched his staff, and the sound of his pulse pounded in his ears. Using his magic, he could see the shape of Eleanor fighting two Khivans, striking at them both. As much as he wanted to focus on that, or get up and join her, he forced his attention in another direction. Two, maybe three shapes moved through the undergrowth towards him. They ran towards the sounds of Eleanor fighting, just as planned.

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Right before they would have gone past him, Martel summoned a wall of flames directly in the path. Carried by momentum, none of them could halt their movements in time, and three Khivans crashed through the fire. They all screamed in agony, which Martel barely registered; he had heard it so often.

A ray of fire from the ruby on his staff shot out to strike the nearest enemy, who fell to the ground. The beam continued to hit the next, who likewise succumbed to Martel's magic moments later. The last pulled his pistol and fired. He aimed for Martel's head, where no armour protected, and the bullet struck close enough to tear his skin, gracing his temple.

The pain and shock made Martel blind for a moment, but battle instincts pulled him back to the fight. Already, the Khivan had drawn his dagger and lunged forward. Using his staff to parry, Martel released a fire bolt straight from his hand into the soldier's stomach, who bent over and fell to his knees. Martel struck him in the head with his staff, just to be certain, and the soldier landed between his comrades.

"Martel!"

The fear in Eleanor's voice made his heart contract, but as he looked at her, she seemed unhurt.

"What's wrong? That should be all of them."

"Your head! You are bleeding!"

The pain of his injury returned, and he felt the trickle of blood down his cheek. "He just grazed me. It isn't deep. Probably looks much worse than it is." Martel dug out a piece of cloth and held it to his temple. "I'll be fine."

"All the same, let us get back to camp. There could be more of them lurking out here."

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Night had fallen, and the outpost was slowly going to sleep. Two mages were the exception, sitting outside the tent; a lightstone provided illumination and also acted as an aid for their activity. On the ground, Martel had drawn the rune as shown to him by Starkad; next to it, Eleanor slowly replicated the symbol, and when she was done, she whispered the activating the words to make it glow slightly.

Grabbing the lightstone, Martel brought it closer. As it approached the rune, its light softened and grew frail, becoming almost extinguished as he placed it on top of the symbol. Removing it again restored its light. "That looks to be a functioning rune of suppression," he said, looking up at her with a smile. "Well done."

"Thanks. This is very interesting. I wonder how powerful the rune is. If there are some kinds of magic it cannot suppress."

"Starkad explained it depended on the skill of the rune maker compared to the strength of the spell or enchantment," Martel elaborated. "This is a weak lightstone that wouldn't last longer than until morning anyway." He picked it up and threw it to a legionary, who stood nearby, waiting. "All yours." Catching the lightstone, the soldier bowed his head and disappeared. "Oh, I told him I'd make him some light," Martel explained, seeing Eleanor's questioning look. "Supply train arrived late, so he'll be working through the night to catalogue the inventory."

"That is kind of you. How is your head?"

"It's fine. It hurts a little when I think about it."

"I reported you as wounded," she explained. "Tomorrow, we should stay in camp. Let the soldiers do all the patrolling for once."

Martel shook his head. "A wound like this would not excuse a legionary from duty. We didn't take a break either when you got injured. I'll be fine, trust me."

Her expression revealed her scepticism, but she seemed to relent. "Alright. But if we meet any Khivans tomorrow, we should retreat rather than risk a confrontation. Head injuries are not to be taken lightly."

"As you command, prefect."

Chapter 555: Blue Skin

Blue Skin

Martel and Eleanor were on their way out of the small camp when a voice called out. "Prefects, one moment!" They both turned around to find Florence, the mageknight in charge, striding towards them. "This came for you yesterday." She handed over a brief missive.

Reading it, Eleanor looked up. "Why are we only receiving it now?"

Florence shrugged. "You weren't in camp when it arrived, and I forgot. Safe journey." She walked away.

Grumbling, Eleanor handed over the missive to Martel.

Sir Fontaine, Sir Martel, returned to the camp at Esmouth immediately. Sir Lara

"Why?" Martel immediately asked. It had been about a month since summer solstice; he could not think of any occasion that warranted their presence in camp.

"I suppose we will find out. Come on, we should pack some provisions. I will get us horses."

Martel groaned.

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It was pleasant to journey through the forest in high summer, assuming no Khivans lurked about. The trees provided pleasant shade, and the nights were warm enough to make sleeping outside tolerable. As the legion constantly patrolled this particular trail between the camp and the outpost, Martel almost felt he could even relax. The only issue was the uncertainty about the reasons for him and Eleanor being recalled.

"Why do you think we've been summoned?" he asked at length as they made camp for the night.

"Maybe they have realised our presence at the outpost only attracts unwanted attention," Eleanor speculated.

"What is the purpose of the outpost in the first place? The camp by the river is much more defensible."

"I assume they want stronger control with the area. The ability to have eyes further east and a better understanding of Khivan movements." She shrugged.

"What about that spy? Wulfstan. You think he has something to do with us being called back?" Martel considered, switching back to the prior topic.

"I think he left long ago, did he not? A fiveday after we arrived or something. But I never understood his purpose. Whether spying or catching spies, the outpost is hardly fertile hunting grounds."

"Alright. I suppose we'll find out when we arrived. I'll take first watch." It would be a while before he could fall asleep anyway, with his head full of thoughts.

"Very well. Good night."

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As they reached the camp, Martel half expected to be immediately confronted by the legion prefect, but nobody seemed to take note of their arrival. They left the horses at the stables, walked from town into the camp and placed their belongings in their tents, and finally sought out Sir Lara.

"Sir Martel, you have knowledge of alchemy?" she asked as the first thing, ignoring Eleanor.

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"Yes," he all but stammered, perplexed. Of all the things he had imagined this conversation to be about, alchemy had not been included.

"Make your way to the infirmary. The physician will have need of you. Dismissed!"

Outside, the mageknight and battlemage exchanged looks as they made their way through the camp.

"I did not expect that," Eleanor admitted.

"Me neither. Let's go by my tent. I might need my notes," Martel mumbled.

After a brief detour, they made their way to the corner of the camp with the large tent housing the infirmary. Still outside, Martel noticed the change. While such a place would always have bad odour, the stench was now overpowering. Furthermore, it looked like more tents had been raised nearby to supplement the larger one.

Stepping inside, Martel found the place packed with cots and sick people using them. There was barely room for a handful of helpers, constantly making their way around offering water to the sick. "Wait outside," he told Eleanor. No need for her to expose herself to all of this. She did not object, but hurried away.

"Don't tell me you found more," spoke the physician, practically climbing around the cots to reach Martel. "We are all full, so you'll have to get us more tents."

"I'm here to help. Sir Lara sent me," he explained.

The physician gave him an incredulous look. "You're the alchemist she sent for? You're a battlemage!"

"As it turns out, I have more than one skill. What's the disease? Have you determined this?" While Martel trusted his alchemy, he had never had to diagnose an illness like this, and he hoped the physician knew better.

"Yes, it's blue plague. The spread is limited, perhaps caused by eating diseased rations, and I believe we have found all those afflicted. We are doing our best to keep them hydrated, and I'm making compresses with strangleroot for those with greatest need. A remedy that all my learned colleagues would agree with," he said pointedly.

Martel ignored anything the man said after identifying the illness; he had his own remedy, born of another tradition. Flicking through his notes from his time in Mistress Rana's laboratory, he found the page detailing the cure for blue plague as well as symptoms.

Walking among the cots, he examined the patients. Fever and sweating were to be expected and could point to any number of diseases. Extreme dehydration, water leaving the patients faster than they might drink it, and some of them directly expelling it by throwing up this narrowed it down. Finally, Martel noticed a blue hue tainting the skin of those patients in the worst grips of the disease, and he accepted the physician's diagnosis. "Do as you see fit," he finally told the man, knowing this would make little difference one way or the other. For many of these patients, alchemy would be the only hope.

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Eleanor waited a small distance from the tent, and she immediately approached as she saw him leave. "What is the situation?"

"It could be worse. I know of an elixir to cure this, assuming I can get everything in sufficient quantities." He looked up at the sky, slowly darkening. "What phase is the moon in?"

"I am not sure," she replied, sounding caught off-guard. "I think it was new moon ten days ago?"

"Full moon would be best," he mumbled, mostly to himself, "but it'll have to do."

"Martel," she said with added weight to her voice, "is this like Morcaster? How bad will this get?"

"Blue plague does not spread as easily," he reassured her. "As long as we notice new patients and isolate them here, contagion should be limited. Let's walk." He set into motion, and she followed.

"So what do we do now?"

"They've got that part handled. I'll get the camp prefect to find me resources, but you and I will have to make our own trip. Some of this can only be collected by an alchemist," Martel explained. "Give me a moment." He headed inside his own tent and began scribbling down every ingredient that could be gathered by normal means. "Let's go," he said as he returned outside, and they continued.

"Where to?"

"Camp prefect." They moved through the camp until they reached the tent belonging to the man keeping the wheels of the legion turning.

"Prefects," Robert said with a frown, seeing them enter. "What's this?"

Martel placed his list on the desk. "Gather every legionary who can recognise herbs and have them search the area for these. I need as many as you can get."

Robert picked up the list. "I should like some explanation what is this for?"

"Alchemy."

"You're the alchemist Sir Lara sent for?"

"Yes. I know, most surprising, not what you expected from a battlemage. Irrelevant. Soldiers are dying. Get everything you can from that list, and bring it to the Tyrian enclave in town. Understood?"

The camp prefect looked at a loss for words, but he managed to finally say, "Very well."

The pair left his tent. Once outside, Eleanor looked at Martel. "What now?"

He took a deep breath. "Time to set up a potion mill."

## Chapter 556: Nocturnal Gathering

### Nocturnal Gathering

Swift activities followed Martel's return, though with complications. The Tyrians set up another abandoned building to act as storage where harvested ingredients would be brought and processed; a few of their number along with some legionaries received the task of doing the latter, preparing them to be used. However, a lack of tools meant only a few could be at work at the same time.

As for his workshop, Martel wanted to emulate the warehouse back in Morcaster, where he and the other alchemists had laboured long, but efficient hours during the pestilence. But lacking both space and equipment, this was not possible. At best, he could have two potions brewing at the same time, once he created a second fireplace; it would make for hectic hours to keep both cauldrons going, but with his Tyrian helper, Egil, aiding him by stirring and watching the progress, it could be done.

The major bottleneck was bloodwort. It had to be harvested while its magical potential was being activated, and thus, it could only be done by someone trained in Sindhian alchemy. With no other recourse, Martel and Eleanor left Esmouth for the wetlands.

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While only Martel could harvest the plant, Eleanor helped to scour the marsh and point him towards clusters. She watched as he placed his hand around the stem and drew out its magic, colouring the white petals red before he cut the plant with his knife.

"How do you do that?" she asked, sounding a little fascinated.

"It is a Sindhian practice. Magic exists in a dormant state in just about everything, and it can be awakened to be used in alchemy," he explained. "I suppose I could teach you, but it took me quite a while to learn, and awakening ingredients is just a small part of it. There's all the actual alchemy to learn as well."

"I think I will be satisfied with my foray into Tyrian runes and otherwise stick to Asterian magic," she considered, resuming her search with eyes peeled to the ground.

"Probably wise. It's a lot of hours bent over cauldron, stirring and trying not to fall asleep."

"But we all benefit now of your time spent learning this. I cannot imagine any other legion would have such luck. By the time another alchemist could be summoned, the outbreak would probably be over."

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"I suppose that's true. I wish I could have studied the craft longer, though. I'm not feeling fully confident my potions will be good enough. Not to mention, I only ever learned a handful of recipes. There's so much more I should like to know." Absentmindedly, his hand went down to touch a pocket on his belt wherein rested the healing elixir given to him by Mistress Rana; it remained his most valuable possession, though he hoped he would never have need of it.

"Maybe one day you can travel to Sindhu, and they can teach you all the things you have yet to learn."

The way his first year in the legion was shaping out, Martel had his doubts he would ever be afforded the opportunity. "Yeah, maybe."

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Sunrise could be glimpsed on the horizon as the pair made their way back to Esmouth. The orange glow reached the river on their left, granting the same colour to the waters. Both yawned more than once, as their journey to the marsh and back had taken all night. Martel dearly wanted to sleep, but it would have to wait. First, he wanted to inspect his workshop and deal with any issues that might have come to light setting up the new work processes.

He parted ways with Eleanor; she could not help him with this, and he saw no reason to deny her sleep. As they trudged to the Tyrian enclave, she continued towards camp while he went into the building newly prepared for storage of reagents.

He found it empty of people, though a few heaps of plant had been dumped inside. The early fruits of what could be harvested near the camp. No further preparation work had been done, due to Martel's absence; the legionaries lacked the oversight or initiative to do anything more. Martel would have to direct them once the camp woke up and he had workers at his disposal.

For now, he began the most time sensitive part of the process. His drying rack had been moved from his workshop to this storage location, and he began hanging up those herbs that required it. Once complete, he used his magic to draw water as best he could.

He was never entirely comfortable with this method, even if he had used it back in the apothecary at the Lyceum; water being his weakest element, he could not trust his own sense on whether he had done the task adequately. He could try and use heat to basically dry the herbs at speed, but he feared it might alter the properties of the reagents or render them inert. Letting them simply dry by normal means had always seemed the safest route to go, but time was of the essence, so he allowed himself a small head start in this manner.

He glanced at the other reagents, in need of cutting or grinding and so on; he would leave that for later, once he had help as he could instruct and who could take over for him. For now, he would grant himself a little rest. He left the building and Esmouth itself, walking to his tent in camp. Once inside, he saw the hands of his Khivan clock somewhere between four and five. Still dressed, he lay down on his cot and fell asleep.

The ringing of the first bell woke him. A glance at his watch confirmed it was the sixth hour; noises from outside told him that the camp was slowly waking up. Fighting back the urge to continue sleeping, he got out of bed. After a splash of water into his face and eating the last of his travel rations, he staggered back to his workshop.

## Chapter 557: Spiders

### Spiders

Martel waited until evening before he dared to begin actually brewing, giving the plants further time to dry. Until then, he did his best to handle all the other steps by instructing the helpers at his disposal that they could churn out prepared reagents for him to use, much like the apothecaries had done so in the warehouse in Morcaster during the pestilence.

A crucial difference was that the men at his disposal had no experience with this work, and Martel found himself in the same situation as when he first began working for Mistress Rana in her workshop, except he played the role of master, and they were the novices. He inspected their cutting, remarked on how they held and used the knife, and reprimanded any who was too quick at the mortar and pestle, leaving chunks of seeds uncrushed.

Martel took one break and went to The Salty Mug to buy a hot meal, eating it voraciously; he did not wish to spare the time to cook himself or run around town or camp looking for food. Once returned to his workshop, he made his final preparations. Cauldron and fireplace stood ready, he had all the necessary ingredients on his table, a handful of bottles for the final product, his notes should he need to consult them, and his Khivan clock to help him keep track of time between each step. It was time to brew.

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"How is it going?"

Martel glanced over his shoulder, seeing Eleanor in the doorway. "It's progressing. What brings you buy?"

"I brought you supper. Just some bread, butter, and fruit." She unpacked a small bundle in her hands, finding space for it among his equipment and ingredients. "You are alone in here?"

"My Tyrian hands left for that very purpose, to eat," Martel explained. If not for the Khivan clock, he would not otherwise have paid attention to time; the lack of windows kept the place in the same darkness, night or day, only dispelled by the constant glow of a lightstone. "I'm nearly done with this potion, though. Can you hand me that jar? Careful not to open it."

"Why, is the content dangerous?" With measured movements, she picked it up and gave it to him.

"No, but the spider may escape."

"Spider?" she asked with a contorted expression.

"The Tyrians are out catching as many as they can. Lots of them in these old, ruined buildings." Martel opened the jar and shook it. A small, eight-legged creature crawled out, and he swept it down into the cauldron.

"Not sure what is worse," Eleanor remarked, looking a little nauseated, "the sickness or the cure."

"We'll find out soon enough." Martel stirred the ladle around, watching the strange glow of magical effects.

"How odd. It looks like a sunrise caught in a cauldron, only to become distorted and almost sickly in appearance."

"Alchemy isn't pretty," he admitted, "but as long as it's effective. Can you help me pour?" He held out a piece of cloth. "Handles are hot," he warned her.

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"Sure." She took the cloth and wrapped it around the handles to protect her hands. "Pour into what?"

Martel grabbed a bottle, removing the stopper. "Into here. As slowly as you can."

"Martel, it will not fit even closely. I am going to spill it all over your hands."

"Hot water won't exactly hurt me," he told her. "And you only need to pour until the bottle is full. Don't worry about spilling, my hands won't feel it."

"If you are sure"

"Yes. Just remember, slowly. A constant, but gentle waterfall."

Eleanor began to pour, doing her best to control the speed of the liquid. Meanwhile, Martel focused on connecting to the magic, pulling all of it into the flask. "Enough." As she stopped, Martel placed the stopper onto the bottle. It held a concoction that glowed a soft, red colour, while the remaining water in the cauldron had turned a dull brown.

"How strange," Eleanor remarked, gazing at the elixir. "Is that how it is supposed to look?"

Martel had no idea. It had been a long time since he learned this recipe. "Let's hope so. Nothing to do but test it and find out."

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Entering the infirmary, Martel tried not to focus on the overpowering stench of human offal. "You don't have to be here," he told Eleanor. Certainly he would not be if he could avoid it.

"I would like to be present."

"There won't be much to see. It will take time for the potion to do its work." Unless Martel had made it wrong, and it immediately killed the patient.

"All the same, I should like to be by your side."

The physician spotted them and stepped between cots to approach. "You have returned. I was wondering when that might happen."

Not sure whether that was intended as a slight, Martel overlooked it; more important matters were hand. He held up the flask in his hand. "We need to find a suitable patient. Someone looking so poorly, they probably won't survive on their own. Yet not so close to death's door that even alchemy can't help them."

"So it has its limits," the physician muttered.

Ignoring him, Martel moved deeper into the tent as the narrow passageways allowed. He looked at one patient after the other, wishing he had gone with Mistress Rana on her trips into the copper lanes, working directly with the sick. Finally, he made his choice. A young soldier, probably younger even than Martel, who had feverish eyes and cracked lips. His skin looked like parchment stretched over his skull, and he had clearly lost weight; his frame did not at all look capable of wearing a uniform while carrying weapons and equipment.

In truth, many others in the tenth looked as far gone as he, but something about his face reminded Martel of his little brother, John. Wanting to save him, hoping to restore life to him, Martel opened the bottle in his hand.

A memory surfaced from the Lyceum, specifically the infirmary, when Mistress Rana had tried an experimental elixir on a comatose patient. The boy had immediately puked it all up, and only Master Kelsos's intervention had saved his life. This place had no Master of Healing, only a physician with mundane skills and an apprentice alchemist. Taking a deep breath, Martel pulled the sick soldier to a more upright position and carefully dripped the potion into his mouth.

The patient did not vomit or cough; he did not react at all. Martel let him gently sink back into his bed and stepped away. He looked at the physician. "Send word to me when his condition changes, for better or worse." Nothing further he could do in the infirmary, Martel left for his workshop to resume making elixirs.

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Martel slept on animal skins in the corner of his workshop, provided by the Tyrians. First bell woke him as always, and he resumed his work. He had finished two more potions yesterday, bottled and ready on his table; he could make maybe ten a day, if he dared to keep two cauldrons brewing at the same time.

It would not be enough, he knew that; there had to be hundreds of patients in the infirmary, and more might get sick. But saving some was better than none.

He had only just gotten started when the animal hide serving as a door was pulled away, allowing Eleanor entry. "He is improving. The soldier you gave the potion." Her smile was more radiant than the lightstone in the room. "The physician is confident that he will live."

Martel exhaled, allowing himself a moment of relief before he resumed his work.

## Chapter 558: Disruption

### Disruption

Day by day passed without Martel taking much note of them. He laboured his available hours in the workshop, creating potion after potion. At times, when he felt tired, he might momentarily believe himself to be back in the warehouse in Morcaster; he thought he heard the voices of Mistress Rana or Nora, or if someone entered the workshop, he imagined it might be either of them.

In the infirmary, the cots slowly became empty. Some recovered on their own, others were healed by Martel's elixirs, and now and then, a patient died regardless of effort or alchemy. On occasion, new patients arrived, usually a group of soldiers sleeping in the same tent, eating the same food, but due to the vigilance throughout the camp, contagion was limited.

At some point Martel had lost count of the days, but more than two fivedays after his return to camp he ran out of a particular herb, giving him a rare break until the legionaries brought him more. Collecting his recently finished potions, Martel crossed the bridge to reach the camp, intending to deliver them himself.

The physician, whose name Martel had at length learned to be Oswin, greeted him with a raised hand. "How many you brought?"

"I got five ready." Martel carefully opened the bundle in his arms and distributed the bottles to the helpers, who by now had learned which patients would benefit the most from alchemical aid.

"There's a bit of delay though, so might only be able to make one or two more this evening."

"Each one helps," Oswin declared, making his way over to stand next to Martel as they watched the helpers administer the elixirs. "I'm sorry if I doubted you at first. I've seen the difference your alchemy has done."

"I'm lucky to be able to learn it in the first place," Martel replied, and it was an earnest emotion. As gruelling as it was to work endless hours in the workshop, it felt good to see his magic blossom and bear such fruit. Even if learning alchemy and making a potion involved so much more labour than setting things on fire. Besides weather magic, it was what he had hoped to do as a mage, helping people with no other options. "I don't envy you your task. All these soldiers going to battle, and you're expected to stitch them up afterwards." This was also meant earnestly; Oswin and his helpers did not possess magic, but Martel was impressed by how they did everything in their power to aid and comfort the sick.

"The worst part is how often nothing can be done. The wounds caused by these Khivan weapons much worse than stab wounds or removing arrows. Often, it's just impossible to staunch the bleeding," the physician admitted.

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"How did you end up becoming the surgeon for a legion? It must be a much harder position than being one in civilian life."

"My master retired, and only one of his apprentices could take his place in the guild. The choice did not fall upon me." Oswin gave a mirthless smile. "I had two choices. I could remain as an apprentice, perhaps indefinitely, or I could take twenty years of service with the legions and the guarantee of guild membership afterwards." He shrugged. "Here I am."

It made Martel wonder at all the other reasons why people joined the legion. He was one of the few who did not have a choice; every soldier in the camp had volunteered, after all. Perhaps desperate for money, no other trade or craft available to them, or maybe they dreamt of glory and spoils. Martel glanced around the tent. Whatever their reasons, he doubted any of them had expected this.

"Excuse me, I should return to my work." Oswin bowed his head and resumed tending to his patients; Martel turned and left, back to his workshop.

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The Khivan clock said four in the afternoon as Martel laboured on another potion, using the last available ingredients until more could be harvested. It worried him that this interruption in his process had occurred, but he was unsure whether it was a flaw in his planning or just a lack of materials; while the camp prefect had placed a lot of soldiers at his disposal, they were inexperienced with this work, including herb gathering, and quantity could only substitute for quality to a certain degree.

Eleanor entered, but she remained standing in the doorway. "Martel."

There was a weight to her voice, and he turned towards her. "What is it?"

"You will have to cease your work for now. The legate summons all the prefects to a council."

"What has happened?"

"Reports of Khivans on the march. A strategy has to be decided."

"Wait, towards here?"

She shook her head. "Not towards Esmouth. The outpost."

Martel looked back at his cauldron, which was in the early stages of brewing. If he left it for too long, it would be ruined, and a patient would die who could otherwise have been saved. "I know nothing of strategy. Can't you get me excused? I really should be here." He also needed to solve his lack of materials. He worried that poor handling meant too much of it went to waste; perhaps he should have spent more time instructing the soldiers, watching them at work, but he had been eager to begin brewing, afraid that delays would cause deaths.

"Martel, you are first and foremost a prefect, and we have all been summoned. You must attend," she impressed upon him.

Frustrated, Martel tried to think of a solution so at least this potion would not be wasted. He looked at his Khivan clock, noting the time, and reached out to lessen the flames in the fireplace, decreasing the heat. "Keep stirring," he told Egil, and the dour Tyrian accepted the ladle with a nod. When he got back, he would have to see if it could be saved. "Don't let it settle." He looked back at Eleanor. "Fine. Let's go."

## Brief Respite

Martel and Eleanor went straight to the legate's house. The other prefects had gathered in the atrium, discussing the same news that Eleanor had brought him. Though one of them was able to tear himself away from the topic; with a disdainful smile, the decurion looked towards Martel. "This is a council of war; who sent for the alchemist?"

Demonstratively, Martel turned his back towards Dominic. He lacked the mood and the energy for any witty retort. "What do we know?" he asked of Lucius, engaging the old prefect in conversation instead.

Lucius shrugged. "Reports of Khivans marching against the outpost. Only the legate or maybe Sir Lara knows more. She's tight-lipped, though. No point asking her."

Martel looked towards the legion prefect, whose expression exhibited exactly what Lucius had said. Nothing to do but wait, which Martel did while studiously ignoring Dominic. Martel was already galled that he had been pulled away from his workshop, and this was not the place to lose his temper because of needling remarks made by the decurion.

Finally, Legate Varus appeared, and everybody snapped to attention, Martel a moment later than the rest. "I shall be direct," the legate spoke. "Reports of large troop movements towards the outpost has reached me. We estimate this to be a Khivan regiment at near or full strength."

From what Martel remembered, a full Khivan regiment numbered a thousand. The cohort at the outpost would be half that; probably less, given most cohorts in the legion were not at full strength.

"Does this include cannons?" Sir Lara asked, and everyone's eyes moved from her to the legate.

"Uncertain. None has been sighted by our scouts, and given the terrain, it may not be worthwhile for them to drag such heavy equipment to the fight. Regardless, our men are outnumbered." The legate looked around the room and the prefects gathered before him. "I'm sending our mounted cohort to provide immediate assistance, and the fifth cohort to follow in a forced march. Both of you will depart tomorrow morning."

The decurion bowed his head in recognition, as did Sir Avery moments later.

"I expect with your forces, you will drive the Khivans back and make them regret their assault. Should we have underestimated the numbers, further reinforcements will be dispatched, but we cannot rule out that this is a diversion, and so we must maintain our defence of this town. To that end, every other cohort is to maintain highest readiness either for battle or to be dispatched. Any soldier found derelict in duty or unready to march at moment's notice will receive double punishment."

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The remaining mageknights, other than Eleanor, mumbled and nodded in acknowledgement.

"Finally, our battlemage is to make his way to the outpost immediately without delay. The Khivans will no doubt attempt to encircle our forces, and I expect the pair of you to make it before that happens. Place yourselves under the command of Sir Valerius." He glanced at Eleanor and Martel.

"Of course, legate." Eleanor inclined her head.

As for the battlemage, he disagreed. "With respect, sir, the blue plague is still upon the camp. If I am to be torn away, patients will die, and it will take longer to deal with the outbreak," Martel tried to argue. Given the number of sick, and assuming half of them would die without aid, that meant up towards a hundred soldiers or even more.

"You are a prefect of the Tenth Legion, not some snivelling apothecary!" the legate roared. "Do not dare to ever mention such trivialities when we are at war! Dismissed!"

"Yes, sir!" the prefects replied in unison, save for Martel. He tried to ignore the obvious gloating expression on Dominic's face as they all filed out of the small mansion.

Outside, all the prefects except Eleanor hurried away towards camp, while she turned towards Martel. "I will get us horses. We have several hours of daylight left, so if we make good haste, we might arrive the day after tomorrow. We need to pack quickly and be on our way."

Martel wanted to argue if the legate was sending close to a thousand men in addition to the near five hundred at the outpost, he could not imagine his presence would make much difference. Perhaps in open battle, but not if they were to fight among the trees, the forces clashing in a hundred skirmishes. He much preferred to stay and continue working with alchemy, tedious as it were, as he knew that would make a difference for certain.

At the same time, he understood arguing was pointless. Eleanor could not change their orders, and while the battle hardly hinged on Martel's participation, every mage could make a difference speeding victory along. His magic might save more soldiers by fighting the Khivans than his alchemy could save patients from the blue plague.

Deep down, Martel wanted to stay because he preferred how his magical talent had been used in the workshop rather than at the outpost. Making elixirs had been a respite, but he should have known it would be short-lived. "Give me a moment to close down work at the workshop. I will go pack provisions for us both afterwards."

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By now, the pair had experience making this journey, and they swiftly made their preparations. Martel lingered a moment in his workshop, giving Egil various instructions that mostly amounted to resuming his duties from before, none of which required alchemy. Likewise, the helpers preparing ingredients were released from their duty; they would all have to return to their cohorts anyway, preparing to defend the town and camp should it be necessary. As the last thing, Martel poured the remains of his ruined potion into a hole in the ground, covering it with dirt afterwards.

Horses, supplies, water, armour, and weapons he and Eleanor quickly gathered what they needed and began their travel. Seventh bell had yet to ring when they left camp, bringing spare mounts to speed up their journey in the hope they would reach the outpost before the Khivans did.

## Chapter 560: The Straight Path

### The Straight Path

To travel on horseback between Esmouth and the outpost, it was necessary to stick to the dirt road made by Henry months prior. Martel and Eleanor rode at a trot until darkness fell, and they decided

to halt. Both paid extra attention to their runes of warning, trying to cover their small camp from every approach.

"Do you think the Khivans will beat us to it?" Martel asked, as the silence of the forest settled around them, broken by the occasional insect or the horses snorting.

"Impossible to say. We do not know how close they are to the outpost, nor how fast they might march through the forest. The fact we travel by road gives us an advantage, at least," Eleanor considered.

"I guess we'll have to turn back if they've already encircled the place," Martel mumbled. "Not much we can do on our own."

"Let us leave such speculations until they become relevant and make all haste until then," she suggested. "That in mind, you should sleep. I will take first watch."

Martel lay down, but it took a while before he could find rest. He had fought a number of skirmishes and participated in two assaults upon Khivan encampments, and he would have thought that he might be accustomed to it by now. But this felt like marching to a real battle, involving a thousand people or more on either side; mage or not, he would be just one out of many.

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As dawn came, they both rose, despite only a few hours of sleep for either of them. Breaking camp was swiftly done, and Eleanor saddled two of the horses, letting them continue. Like yesterday, they rode at a trot, trying to make speed without exhausting their mounts beyond restitution. Aware that they travelled towards danger, Martel did his best to use his magical sense and discover any signs of heat around them.

Unfortunately, riding down a straight road allowed a clear line of sight across a long distance, and the Khivans noticed the Asterians first. Martel heard the muskets fire only moments before his horse stumbled with a terrible sound, throwing him from the saddle. He managed to react in time, activating his shield to protect himself as he struck the ground. Immediately, he rolled to the side, getting off the road and into cover.

"Hurt?" Eleanor's voice reached him.

No sense of pain anywhere, just the initial shock. Martel saw no sign of his armour or uniform being torn either. "No! You?"

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"No! We are on opposite sides!" she yelled. He could not see her; the dead horses on the road lay between them. "Provide cover?"

Martel summoned a wall of flames to stretch across the road, preventing visibility. He did not know how many marksmen lay in wait down the path, but he imagined at least three or four. Letting his sense of magic sweep out, he did not notice any signs of heat other than his wall and Eleanor, scrambling to cross the road and join him.

"How many?" she immediately asked, falling down beside him.

"Three or four down the road is my guess. I haven't sensed anybody on either side yet." They both knew that most likely, at least two Khivans would be outflanking them from both right and left until they got a clear line of sight and could shoot.

"I counted four shots in the initial ambush," Eleanor added. "With your spell, they will know we are mages. But with luck, they may not be equipped with gold."

"That's a risky assumption," Martel hissed. He knew that she would want to move ahead of him, assuming the danger.

"We will have to brave it. Ready?"

Nothing to do but nod; any moment now, the Khivans would find them and line up their shots. Eleanor got on her feet and began moving away from the road, deeper into the forest. Martel followed straight behind. Every moment, he feared the sound of a shot and seeing Eleanor fall to the ground right before his eyes. He could not shake feeling like a coward, which only served to distract him.

Eleanor discovered their enemy before him, even with his ability to sense heat. She rushed through the undergrowth, sword ready. The Khivans, taken by surprise, raised their muskets and shot with poor aim, both missing. Eleanor struck twice, felling them both. Looking over her shoulder, she found his gaze, and with silent looks and gestures exchanged, they continued towards their other enemies.

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The other Khivans had fled, as it turned out, perhaps feeling ill-equipped to deal with mages. Or to fetch reinforcements, Martel considered with gloom, collecting his staff from the saddlebags. Two dead horses lay on the road; the others had bolted when the fight began.

"You think this means they have reached the outpost?" Martel asked. He rummaged around to pull out provisions and his water flask.

"If so, they would have been here in force to block the road. I think these were scouts sent in advance to watch for reinforcements. They probably figured we were couriers and took their shot at us," Eleanor considered. "Let us get away from the road. No point staying on it without horses." They stepped back into the forest. "But we must make haste to reach the outpost the Khivan regiment cannot be far behind their scouts."

"I wasn't thinking we should hang around and wait for those scouts to come back with friends," Martel remarked. There was a decent chance the Khivan marksmen would return with golden bullets in their muskets, now that they knew the location of two mages on their own. Soon, these forests could be swarming with enemies.

"More than that, we cannot allow ourselves rest. We will have to march through the night," Eleanor warned him. "Every moment counts if the Khivans have made it this far."

Martel made no protest, knowing she was right. A long day and an even longer night awaited them as they began, walking on the forest floor towards the outpost.