

Firebrand 541

Chapter 541: The Choices of a Prefect

The Choices of a Prefect

Once they had returned to camp, Martel and Eleanor went straight to the tent of the legion prefect. "By the looks of you, I suspect you had trouble." Sir Lara gave them an expectant look.

"Three dead, two lightly wounded," Eleanor retorted. "In addition, we found this." She placed the musket ball with its golden lines among the lead on the table in front of the prefect. "I doubt that is standard issue among Khivan soldiery. Especially since our patrol is the only one that involves wizards."

Sir Lara picked up the bullet. "We are not privy to all Khivan strategic decisions. They may very well have begun doing so, at least in this part of the front. Remember, we are not fighting regular Khivan troops, but specialised forces, trying to wear us down through underhanded tactics."

"Be that as it may," Eleanor continued, and Martel knew her well enough to sense frustration, even if she hid it from her voice, "they are clearly targeting Sir Martel. The risk to his life is greatly increased, and nothing is gained by exposing him to this risk. The only thing our presence on patrol accomplishes is to invite an ambush."

"Trust me, Sir Fontaine, the Khivans were apt to ambushing us long before you and your charge arrived in this camp." Sir Lara's mouth turned into a thin line.

"Undoubtedly, but currently, my companion and I are bearing the brunt of these skirmishes. Assigning a Tyrian scout has not alleviated the problem. These forests are Khivan territory, and they make full use of that."

"So far, both of you have emerged unscathed. Proof of Asterian magic being superior to Khivan subterfuge. Regardless, the situation is changing soon. We are making another strike at a Khivan encampment, which should eradicate their presence from this area." The legion prefect gave each of them a stern look. "In fact, you have both been assigned to this mission, and I suggest you take the opportunity now to rest up and be prepared for tomorrow's march. Dismissed."

"Tomorrow?" Eleanor exclaimed.

"Dismissed."

The pair saluted their superior officer a half-hearted gesture in Martel's case and they walked out of the tent. "Tomorrow," Eleanor repeated. "Why would they explicitly change our orders to go on patrol today if we are to take part in a major assault tomorrow? We could have been wounded! We will barely have the chance to replenish our spellpower."

"We did ask if we could be assigned to go on patrol on another day," Martel remarked. Noticing the look that Eleanor gave him, he hurried to continue, "I'm not saying this makes sense. Simply that I'm not sure they think that far ahead. Our legate doesn't even live in camp with us. How much could he actually know about our activities? Which are his decisions, and which are made by Sir Lara?" He gave a shrug as they continued down the dirt road.

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"But this is an Asterian legion!" it burst from Eleanor. "There is supposed to be a plan, order, strategy!"

"I'd settle for just one of those things." As they reached their tents, Martel looked west where Esmouth lay hidden from his site by the wall around the camp. "If we're going to a fight tomorrow, we'll need more salve. I better go pick something up now."

"Alright. I will get started on supper."

After collecting a fresh jar of blood salve, Martel left his workshop in the Tyrian enclave and was immediately approached by a small child. "Mistress Josephine asked you to come by," he said; his message delivered, the boy immediately sprinted away.

Curious. Martel had visited the owner of the brothel a few times; he had given her another lightstone and heard about the few rumours passing through Esmouth, none of which had piqued his interest. Well, best to see what she wanted.

Crossing town, he reached the brothel and walked through the alley to enter through the back; he was not in the mood to deal with neither staff nor clientele in the front room. He only stopped outside Josephine's room to knock, remembering his manners. "It's Martel," he announced.

"Please enter." She sat by her desk with a deck of cards arranged in a pattern in front of her. "The boy found you. I asked him days ago."

"I haven't been in Esmouth since the festival. What is it?"

"Do you know this game? From Aquila. Solitaire, they call it." The woman, whose age was only partly masked by cosmetics, moved a card from one stack to another.

"I don't. I assume you asked me here for a better reason."

"Straight to business. Very well. I had a meeting you should know about. A fellow came some days ago, just before the spring festival."

"What about him?"

"He made the same deal as you did. Asked me to keep an eye out with the celebration going on, tell him about any interesting rumours or strange occurrences."

Martel frowned. "He was a visitor? One of the people who came for the festival, I mean."

Josephine shook her head. "I've seen him before. He arrived around the same time those northern savages did. I guess he didn't find it pertinent to request my help before now."

Thinking back, Martel recalled an Asterian who had sailed with the Tyrians, arriving alongside them. His interest in information combined with him being clearly an outsider, with no apparent reason for being in Esmouth, suggested he was a spy. But if Khivan, it seemed odd he would arrive with the Tyrians. Maybe he spied for the northerners or some faction in Aster. Perhaps worth mentioning to Sir Lara.

"Alright. Thanks for letting me know. Did you accept his deal?"

"Of course. I'm a businesswoman."

"Did you tell him about me?"

"Privilege of being the first customer." Josephine smiled. "Besides, you're a prefect of the legion, whereas I don't know anything about him, not even his name. I know which side I prefer to be on."

"Good. Until next time." Martel inclined his head in a curt gesture and left.

Leaving the place the same way he had entered, through the back and the alley, Martel nonetheless caught the attention of a group of soldiers. One of them, clearly intoxicated, called out, "Even a prefect has needs! What's your preference, sir?"

Not in the mood to humour this, Martel walked past them without a word.

"Nothing, sir? What about the one always following you around, is she your type?"

Martel stopped in his tracks and turned on his heel. The other soldiers, less drunk, realised what was happening and stepped away. The loudmouth remained oblivious until Martel's fist made impact on his jaw, sending him to the ground.

"If you ever disrespect a prefect again, I'll burn your tongue right out of your mouth," Martel declared, staring down at the legionary. His point made, he stalked away.

Chapter 542: Nights in the Forest

Nights in the Forest

At second bell, an entire cohort gathered on the strip of land between the camp and the river. As Martel and Eleanor arrived, they received packs with provisions; this mission would take days. The mageknight Valerius joined them with a hearty greeting. "Ah, our battlemage and his stalwart protector. I shall be glad to have your company." He was among the younger prefects, halfway through his twenties. "What do you think of my cohort?" With a flourishing gesture, he motioned towards the five hundred assembled soldiers. "Best trained in all the legion."

"I have heard that claim made by every prefect," Eleanor replied.

"Ah, but in my case, it is actually true."

"Of course. Have you been informed on our mission?" she asked.

"I have. A Khivan encampment considered to be their base in the immediate area, three days' march from here," he explained. "Between two and three hundred soldiers. Once we destroy it, it should give us breathing room."

The Tyrians appeared in same manner as last time, going ahead while leaving one of their number behind to act as guide. Martel hoped this one would not try to kill him as well.

"I cannot say I would trust them in a fight, but they are good scouts, those northerners," Valerius continued. "The Khivans have always been too slippery for us in the past. It feels good to bring the fight to them."

Sir Lara appeared, and the soldiers fell into position. "Attention! Your cohort has been chosen to strike a decisive blow," she spoke in a clear voice that filled the space. "We will push the Khivans back and reclaim this area as ours. Aster Invictus!"

"Aster Invictus!"

"Malac preserve you all." She bowed her head, the soldiers saluted in return, and the march could begin.

Their journey took them east, and the march continued until nightfall without incident, other than the occasional rest. They made camp in the forest that was in full bloom. Using his skills with earth magic, Martel did his best to flatten the ground and provide a more even sleeping experience for himself and Eleanor.

"I heard talk today, earlier when we stopped," she spoke, breaking bread and giving him half. "You punched a soldier, they claim."

"Rumour spreads fast. In this case, it's true," Martel admitted. "He insulted a prefect. I probably shouldn't have let my temper get the better of me, but he's welcome to complain and repeat his words to Sir Lara."

"What did he say?"

"It's not important." Martel took a sip of water. "You don't have to tell me it was a mistake. I shouldn't be making the men hate me."

"I am not concerned what the common soldiery thinks. They are Asterian legionaries, and they will follow orders," Eleanor claimed. "I merely wondered if something was wrong."

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Martel did not feel as confident; Eleanor herself had once remarked that discipline seemed less than stellar in the Tenth. "No, nothing's wrong. What do you think of our task?" he asked, changing subject.

"We have a sizeable advantage. Numbers and magic on our side. Valerius said we could discuss tactics tomorrow night. The advance scouts will be back by then, and we should know exactly what we are dealing with."

"Alright. We better sleep."

Another day of marching passed uneventfully. Martel realised this was the furthest he had been from camp. Moreover, had this been a regular patrol, he would have been ambushed by now. It made him wonder if the Khivans had already spotted them; if not yet, they surely would. However skilled as scouts, the thirty Tyrians could hardly intercept every Khivan between here and their destination to prevent them from bringing a warning back. The Khivans might be fewer in numbers, but they ruled these forests, and Martel assumed they kept as sharp a vigilance as the Asterians did around their own camp.

"Have you noticed something about the soldiers?" Martel asked, as he and Eleanor took their evening meal, another day's march at an end.

"What about them?"

"The half centuria who arrived with us on the Red Emerald, they're here," he told her. "This must be their cohort."

"I suppose it was inevitable that we would fight together with them."

Valerius appeared, sitting down beside them. Unlike Avery, he seemed less firm, less decisive, perhaps less experienced as a commander. "Our task has become a little more complicated. The advance scouts have returned. The Khivans have fortified their position."

"Why was this not known beforehand?" Eleanor asked.

"According to the Tyrians, there was nothing of the sort when they first discovered the encampment some fivedays ago."

"In that case, their defences must be rudimentary. They would not have had time for much else."

Valerius nodded. "Just palisades, but it still complicates our assault. We can cut down some trees and make ladders, but we must assume the place is crawling with sharpshooters. We will take heavy losses scaling their defences." He looked at Martel. "It was my hope that as a battlemage, you might have a better way."

Martel scratched the back of his head, considering the issue. He had never tried to directly blast something away. Air magic seemed more useful for that, or even earth magic, throwing boulders like a catapult. "I can set fire to the palisade, of course, but it will take a long while to burn. It won't get us through faster than ladders."

"The gate tends to be the weak point in the structures," Eleanor contemplated. "Perhaps a combination will work best. If you strike it with your strongest spellcraft, Sir Martel, and we follow it up with a ram? Attacking across a wide front will only let the Khivans pack the palisades with marksmen and shoot our idling soldiers, waiting to ascend the ladders. A concentrated attack through the gate will turn it into a melee, where we hold the advantage."

"Excellent idea," Valerius assented. "For the ram, we just have to cut down a log, and we can make the assault. Much faster than ladders, and we do need speed."

"Why?" Martel asked. "It is time against us?"

"Of sorts. The Khivans are bound to discover our approach tomorrow, one way or the other. The less time they have to prepare for our assault, the better. Or worse they escape altogether, melting into the forest. We may find ourselves harassed at every turn, trying to retreat back to camp," the mageknight explained. "It is settled. When we reach the encampment, we shall attack the gate. Sir Fontaine, you and I should be first through, else we might sustain terrible casualties."

"Of course." Eleanor waited until Valerius had left them before she spoke again. "Martel, under no circumstances are you to follow me into that camp. You understand that, right?"

Martel was not happy about it, but he did. A mageknight's defensive spells would keep them safe from a whole regiment of Khivans, at least for a short while. In comparison, Martel's meagre protective magic would leave him dead if two Khivans fired upon him at the same time. "I understand."

On the third day, they reached their destination. The Khivan encampment lay in a clearing, with an open stretch of land on all sides to the treeline. The ground sloped upwards slightly, though calling it a hill might be a step too far. In the middle, palisades rose to provide simple fortifications, with a ditch surrounding it. A single gate allowed entry; behind, more than two hundred Khivans prepared to defend themselves.

Chapter 543: A Gentle Push

A Gentle Push

The cohort split up with the different centuriae surrounding the encampment, should the Khivans attempt to break through. A tree was felled and cut to shape, leaving some of the branches for the legionaries to hold, creating a simple ram.

The march had taken longer than expected; the sun would set within the hour, and the three mages of the expedition gathered for a final discussion. "I thought we would arrive sooner," Valerius said, pacing back and forth. They stood just inside the treeline. "It will be dark any moment now, and our assault may descend into chaos. Should we delay our attack until morning?"

"Once we're past that gate, it will be chaos regardless. And the darkness may hinder their aim. We should not give them time to make further preparations either," Eleanor argued.

"I agree," Martel added, as he had no thoughts of his own other than the desire to see this done now.

Valerius ceased his pacing. "Very well. Time to take up positions. We attack."

The sound of a horn filled the clearing, signalling to the Asterian legionaries. From one side, two centuriae and every archer sent with the cohort marched forward to draw fire and attention, shooting back as best they could.

"Forward!" Valerius bellowed. On the other side of the clearing, the remaining Asterians moved out. With heavy shields, they ran forward towards the gate, like an armoured fist holding Martel and the men carrying the ram in its grasp.

The sun had set by now; darkness overtook the clearing. Martel found it hard to judge the distance to the gate, and the responsibility of his task made his stomach turn. If he cast his spell too soon, too far from the gate, the magic would dissipate and be reduced in effect. But every step closer made it easier for the Khivan sharpshooters to find their aim.

Shots could be heard, and somewhere to his side, legionaries fell to the ground with screams of agony. His mouth dry, Martel called out, "Halt!" The entire assault force did so, and the soldiers in front parted slightly to make way. Eleanor stepped forward first, all her defensive spells active as she acted a human shield, crouching slightly down. Behind her, Martel planted his staff in the ground, holding it with both hands.

He called upon every ounce of magic in his body. It coursed through him, leaving his fingertips to travel along the silver veins of his weapon until a bolt of lightning arced from the ruby on his staff to connect with the gate. For an eerie moment, Eleanor's hair rose into the air as the spell passed above her head, and briefly, the night sky became illuminated.

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A crash could be heard, but rather than thunder accompanying lightning, it was the logs and hinges of the gate twisting and tearing. Eleanor placed her helmet back on her head and rose up.

"Forward!" Valerius commanded, and the legionaries did so, led by the two mageknights. His task done, Martel sank to the ground, his hand still clasping his staff.

Martel had spent his spellpower, unleashing it all in a single spell. He was supposed to retreat now, back to the treeline, but he felt too worn to even stand. Instead, he pulled the shield of a fallen legionary in front of him and used that as cover.

Ahead, he saw the soldiers with the ram reach the gate. It took only a handful of blows before it fell apart. Yelling battle cries, the legionaries streamed into the encampment. The sounds of battle raged on, but Martel noticed that fewer shots could be heard; the fight had changed to close combat. The centuriae from the other side ran along the palisades to join the assault.

His hand slightly shaking, Martel uncapped his flask to drink. While the thought of Eleanor fighting inside the ring while he sat outside left him disturbed, he would not be of any use in his current state. Even casting a fire bolt felt beyond him.

A pillar of fire shot up into the air from inside the camp, accompanied by the sound of an explosion. More than that, Martel felt the burst of heat, even at this distance. He knew that any person caught close to the blast would be nothing but ash. Fear overtaking him, he leapt to his feet. With empowered speed, he ran.

Once beyond the fallen gate, he looked in every direction. Dead and dying soldiers surrounded him, whether Khivans or Asterians. Tents, weapons, barrels and crates, everything one would expect to find in a camp. In the other end, the pillar of fire had been replaced by smoke, rising towards the horizon.

"Martel!" His heart leapt hearing her voice. She swiftly reached him, pulling him aside. "You should not be out in the open!"

"I know," he mumbled. "I was afraid"

"I am fine," she told him, leading him outside the gate to hide in the shadow of the palisades. "We have won. One of the Khivans ignited their supply of powder in a last, desperate act."

"Right" Any further words were interrupted as he keeled over and emptied his stomach.

"Martel?"

"I shouldn't have run," he managed to say, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I shouldn't have run."

"No. You should have stayed outside as we agreed." Although her words were firm, she did not use an unkind voice. "Do so next time."

"I really don't want to think about there being a next time." He uncapped his flask to drink, only to find it empty.

"Here." She gave him hers. "Your tactical blunder at the end aside, your spellwork made all the difference. It could have taken us a long time to break through the gate, with every moment costing us lives. I will make sure the soldiers know this."

Placing his back against the palisade, he sank down to sit on the ground. "I thought we did not worry about what the common soldiery thinks."

She gave a shrug, looking in every direction like a sentinel on watch. "No harm in giving their opinions a little push."

The Thunderer and the Valkyrie

Martel slept soundly as soon as the opportunity came, as did nearly the entire cohort, except for a few sentinels. When dawn arrived, they began to clear the area. Most importantly, bodies were hauled away and placed in a pyre, which Martel ignited. The overpowering smell of burnt flesh reminded him of his last months in Morcaster, with fires burning the victims of the pestilence.

"Why are we making such efforts to clean up the place?" he asked, as he came upon Eleanor, who had gone to the other side of the clearing, escaping the smoke and smell.

"I cannot say. I thought we would make our journey back to camp immediately. I will ask Valerius."

"I admire your initiative. I'm too lazy to chase around after him," Martel admitted, and he sat down on the ground, placing his staff next to him. He spoke only partly in jest; the long marches several days in a row had worn him out. Of everyone present in the clearing, he probably possessed the least stamina, even if daily training with Eleanor had helped. In fact, he did not mind the delay in returning; the longer he could relax before they had to march back, the better. As his protector left, Martel leaned back against a tree trunk to do just that.

"Mage of fire!"

Recognising both voice and words, the battlemage opened an eye. "Hullo, Starkad." If the berserker wanted to speak eye to eye, he would have to sit down; Martel saw no need to get up.

"What a battle last night! A joy to witness."

"You were present? You could have helped," Martel chastised him.

"I am paid to scout, not to fight," the berserker argued.

"Speaking of that, I thought all you Tyrians were patrolling the area during the fight."

"The others, yes, yes, but I stayed behind to watch," Starkad explained. "Just in case matters went poorly. And I am glad I did!"

"You must have seen plenty of battles before."

"Not like this! Thunder in your hand, wielding lightning like Thunraz himself!"

"Oh that," Martel remarked, feeling pleased. He had no idea who Starkad referred to, but he assumed it was a compliment. "I suppose it was a neat bit of spellwork."

"And your woman, charging into battle like a valkyrja!"

"She's not – what does that mean?"

Starkad grinned. "I just told you. Alas, mage of fire, I have no more time for idle talk. If we are to stay here, we shall have need of meat! Me and mine are going to hunt." With those words, the Tyrian disappeared before Martel could understand the implication of what he had said.

"We are expected to stay here. This is to be a permanent outpost."

Martel opened his eyes and looked up at Eleanor. "This far from camp? Practically out in the open?" The thought made him uncomfortable. While he doubted the Khivans possessed the numbers to attack a full cohort, at least not currently, the Asterians would be vulnerable to ambushes every time they left the small clearing.

"Yes." She walked back and forth in front of him. "Valerius knew all along, but nobody saw any reason to inform us."

He sighed. "I could have brought alchemical supplies. More clothes. Even the Tyrians knew about this, and we didn't."

"They did?"

"Yeah. I spoke with Starkad briefly just now. He and his people are out hunting, so we'll have food."

Eleanor sat down next to him. "This may seem immodest, but I would argue that our presence in the fight reduced casualties significantly."

"I'd say that's fair," Martel assented.

"And yet it seems like we are an afterthought," she complained. "I understand that we were not assigned to this legion as part of some greater stratagem, but we are here now, and our worth is unquestionable. Yet they risk us on meaningless patrols and barely take us into account when planning their assaults."

She sounded surprised, unlike Martel, who had expected little else. He had come to understand the workings of the Empire already back at the Lyceum. Eleanor had only just begun to realise this. Until now, she had been protected from this, growing up in a world without any of these realities intruding.

Martel decided to simply tell it to her. "Eleanor, you remember how your father was dismissed as legate, all for politics?"

She stiffened. "Of course."

"That was not a unique case of injustice. This is how the Empire is. My assignment to the Tenth is just another example. Lists written down on parchment, whether people or supplies, all just numbers. Decisions are made by people who'll never feel the consequences. There is no greater plan, no grand strategy. Just resources being spent and wasted, numbers going up or down."

"That cannot be true. The Asterian legions have conquered the entirety of the old Aquilan empire, and all of Nordmark in addition! Aster is the greatest power this continent has ever known!"

"All of that is true," Martel assented, "but it doesn't contradict anything I said."

"I cannot believe this," Eleanor mumbled to herself. "I am going to find Valerius. I have my doubts he has thought everything through. We will run out of water soon." She got back up and stalked away, crossing the clearing.

Left behind, Martel considered the situation. At some point, the cohort would be relieved, presumably, by another from camp. But as he and Eleanor were not attached to a particular cohort, just the legion in general, would the orders of relief include them? Or would they just be expected

to stay at this outpost, possibly forgotten by their superiors? Martel would not be surprised at this outcome.

He got on his feet, picking up his staff. The soldiers had been at work all morning, removing the bodies and now dismantling the palisades as well. Martel began walking towards the remnants of the camp. If they were to stay here for the foreseeable future, he would try to scavenge one of the tents; perhaps a little bit of comfort and a dry place to sleep could be salvaged.

Chapter 545: A New Residence

A New Residence

The Tyrians prove excellent hunters, as could be expected, and the cohort feasted on fresh meat. Along with their victory, this created a merry mood in the small camp. A small stream had been discovered a short distance to the east, and once water had been brought back, Martel heated up a few barrels to provide a primitive, but hot bath for the legionaries. With the sun shining on the second day after the battle, Martel almost enjoyed the place especially after the charred remains of the dead had been buried, removing the ugly sight. And circumstances improved even further in the afternoon when a train of carts rolled into the clearing.

"Henry!" Martel called out, approaching the stonemage at the head of the column. "Welcome!"

"Thanks. What's that smell?"

"Oh, we burned the dead. They're buried now, so it shouldn't last long." Martel glanced at the wagons, trying to guess what they contained. Probably supplies, seeing sacks, crates, and barrels in most of them, but many also carried a load of hewn stones.

"Right. What do you think of my work?" Henry turned around and motioned towards the forest, from where they had emerged. "Nice little road from here and back to camp. Just dirt, mind you, but at least the carts can come through."

"I'm more interested in what you brought on those carts." While the fresh meat from the hunt had provided a delightful meal, it could not feed five hundred soldiers for long, and the Tyrians were bound to run out of game nearby.

"No appreciation for good earth magic, I see. Well, it's just the regular supplies that you'd expect. Food, tents, that sort. And some of all the stones I've been preparing lately. You lads are getting a real wall!"

"That actually does sound good," Martel admitted. He would rest more easily surrounded by stone.

"I also brought some of this." Henry unslung the wineskin from his shoulder and handed it over.

"Ah, thanks." Martel took a deep sip, enjoying the flavour after drinking nothing but water for days. He gave it back. "How long are you here for?"

"As long as it takes, really. First, we got to get the ground set up properly. Then build the actual wall. There are more loads of stone waiting back in Esmouth. Also a gate. It'll take some fivedays at least. No, over there," Henry added with a shout at the cart drivers. "Just leave the stones to me and unload the rest!"

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Building the outpost required more than just stacking stones on top of each other, as Martel soon discovered. Under Henry's guidance, the soldiers dug a circular ditch, using the removed dirt to create earthen walls, on which the stonework would be placed. While the legionaries provided the rough effort, Henry used magic to shape everything to his liking, strengthening the foundation.

"This is what's called a ring fortress, my friend," the stonemage explained as the earthen ramparts took form around them. "You get the most space inside with the least amount of wall needed to defend."

"What are you doing now?" Martel asked, as Henry created a small tunnel to run along the ground and underneath the wall.

"Drainage. When it rains, this camp will become a bowl, turning all of you inside into soup," he grinned. "You'll want the water to go outside."

Watching Henry work, Martel felt a familiar sense of envy, watching another mage use their skills to create and build. Granted, he was building military fortifications, and thus the overall purpose was basically the same as how Martel was put to use, all in service of war.

But it was easy to imagine how else Henry might use his gifts. In a few years, he would have completed his twenty years of service. He might build houses, or if artistically inclined, create sculptures.

Martel gave himself a mental slap. Such thoughts were old and too familiar. Self-pity about his fate would not help him. He had worked hard both to learn alchemy and enchanting, giving him different skills than those meant for battle. If he wanted to feel useful, he knew what to do.

"I see you are hard at work one of you, at least." Eleanor appeared by their side.

"I don't see you sweating and toiling," Martel retorted.

"I was overseeing work," she said in retaliation. "All the wood from the palisade needed to be sorted. Plenty of things we can use it for, like building a shed for supplies or other storage we might need, and so on."

"Sounds like a daunting task for a frail mageknight, wouldn't you say, Henry?" Martel looked around only to discover that the stonemage had moved along, continuing his work elsewhere.

"Your cry for support goes unanswered."

"Well, something else then. Our little supply train from the main camp brought tents." Martel had been unable to scavenge any the other day, and they had spent another night sleeping in the open. "I picked one for us, but we have to share, given how few there are. And it's just a piece of canvas, really, hanging on some sticks. I put up my cloak to divide the tent in half. You can choose which half you prefer."

"I cannot imagine there is much difference. All right, that will have to do. Thank you for making the arrangement."

"You may want to check the rigging. Some of the soldiers helped me put it up, and I wouldn't put it past them to make a shoddy work of it, just for a laugh."

"I shall be sure to examine the sturdiness of the structure," Eleanor promised with a serious face.

"Great. Meanwhile, I suppose I'll find myself some pebbles to enchant." He could ask Henry to make him some suitable rocks that would hold the enchantment well, but he figured the stonemage had plenty to do at present. "The lightstones will make it easier to work after nightfall." And the sooner the fortifications were complete, the better. Martel knew little of war and strategy, but he assumed the Khivans would not let this go unanswered.

Chapter 546: Heat and Metal

Heat and Metal

The shot woke Martel. He stared in the dark, confused as he summoned a flame for light, until he recognised the small tent he shared with Eleanor. On the other side of the cloak dividing the space, he heard her stir as well. "Wait here," she told him, "and let me go first."

She left the tent, and he could see her wearing only a tunic but armed with sword and shield, looking in every direction. He grabbed his robe putting on armour in the dark while crouched inside the tent was a fool's errand and got himself dressed, grabbing his staff afterwards. More shots could be heard.

"No sign of fighting inside the ring. They must be outside camp still."

For now, Martel thought as he crawled out of the tent with little grace. If this was a full-scale attack, the ditch and earthen ramparts would do little to hold the enemy back. "Where's the fighting?" As he asked, he looked everywhere to gain an understanding of the situation. All around them, legionnaires ran back and forth, many of them half-dressed.

"No sounds of close combat. They are outside camp, taking shots at anybody in their sight. Stay inside the ring," she cautioned him. "We should find Valerius. He has command."

"Wait. If they're hiding in the dark, I'm the only one who can find them. Come with me," Martel said, and he moved towards the closest section of the earthen ring that surrounded their outpost. Reaching it, he saw a legionary on the ground, dead. A torch next to him explained how he had met his fate. Using his magic, Martel extinguished the torch, returning their surroundings to darkness.

"Let me stick my head up first," Eleanor said. "I can handle bullets better than you." Her magic activated to protect her, and she moved up the small slope. At the top, a handful of large stones lay, ready to be placed together and form a wall; for now, they lay scattered on the ridge. "Nothing," she whispered back at him. "Thankfully, the Khivans cannot see in the dark."

Martel joined her, using the stones to hide behind. Unfortunately, they also blocked his magic, and he had to put his head out to extend his magical sense, washing over the clearing outside the camp.

By the edge of the clearing, he found them. Two sources of heat, standing up. Probably hiding behind a tree while reloading their weapons. Striking them with spells would be difficult; he was more likely to hit a tree. Using any kind of fire would also make him an obvious target for them to hit.

Focusing on their shapes as he felt them with his magic, Martel made a discovery. Besides the blurry outline of their bodies, he could feel the heat of something else. It looked almost like an extension of their limbs, except it was far too long. He finally understood it had to be the barrel of their muskets, heated up by the shots.

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His magic could not directly entangle with another person, nor easily affect anything they touched. He could not simply ignite the clothes of a man like he had done the sail on the Khivan galley; at least not until his powers grew. But he could connect with the tip of the barrel and squeeze it together, just a little. Enough to prevent it from firing a bullet. He did the same with the other sharpshooter's weapon and ducked down behind the stone.

"Well?" Eleanor asked. "How many?"

"Two, but I doubt they'll trouble us further." As Martel spoke, the Khivans fired their weapons, but he felt no streak of fire bursting through the air. "I've destroyed their weapons."

Eleanor stared at him. "You can do that?"

"I'll accept your compliments later. There are shots coming from the other directions as well. Let's deal with them," Martel suggested, sliding down the ridge.

They discovered seven Khivans in all, including the two already dealt with. They had spread out to attack the camp from all directions, taking shots where they could find targets. Once Martel had made a full round, destroying each of their weapons, he and Eleanor went to the banner of the cohort in the middle, where they found Valerius, Starkad, and Henry.

"There you are! I expected you here immediately," the mageknight reproached them. "I have chosen one centuria to lead an attack out of the gate, under my command. Sir Fontaine, you will be by my side."

"We took care of it," Martel simply said. In terms of magical stamina, destroying the weapons had been simple, causing little exertion, but interrupted sleep along with the tension of the situation leaving his body made him feel worn. He sat down on a nearby pack.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Valerius asked.

"Didn't you notice the firing stopped?"

"What Sir Martel means," Eleanor interjected, "is that we investigated all angles of attack, and he used his powers to dismantle the Khivans' weapons from afar. Hence they have ceased to fire."

The other magic-wielders all looked at him with varying degrees of scepticism or incredulity. "You can simply do that?" Henry asked after a moment.

"When they're heated up from shooting, yeah. It lights up like a torch in the dark," Martel said, not sure how else to explain it. It felt like describing sight to the blind. "So I damage the barrels of their weapons, and they can't shoot again."

"In that case, they must be in retreat and without weapons. We must search for them before they escape!" Valerius declared.

"Finding these Khivan woodsmen in the dark, in the forest?" Starkad asked, and his smile almost made his words seem benign rather than an indictment of the mageknight. "When we cannot be sure if others await? That this was a trap to lure us out of camp?"

Nobody else spoke, as they all allowed Valerius to draw the conclusion on his own. "Fine. But I want sentinels posted everywhere."

"I'll make the rounds until daylight," Martel suggested. "I'll know if they return or try to sneak up on us in the dark." Seeing the others look at him, he wondered if they understood what a battlemage could do. "I can see the heat of their bodies. I'll know."

"Mage of fire, you are useful!"

"Glad you noticed." Weary, Martel got on his feet and looked at Eleanor. "You can go back and sleep if you want."

"Not a chance."

Chapter 547: Ostracised

Ostracised

They saw no further sign of Khivans, neither that night nor the following days. It seemed to have been a lone patrol, returning to find the Asterians occupying the camp and taking what revenge they could. With their muskets gone the Asterians found most of them discarded in the forest, their barrels shattered the Khivans had vanished into the woods; the Tyrian scouts found no trace of them.

Without further interruptions, work on the outpost continued. Under Henry's supervision, the stones were carefully placed in position to create the wall. The timber from the palisades was reused to build shelters, and little by little, the small camp took shape into something permanent. As for Martel, he enchanted a handful of light stones to be placed in a ring around the clearing, ensuring that none could sneak up close at night.

One afternoon, with nothing left for him to enchant, Martel lay on the earthen ramparts and enjoyed the sun. Spring was in full force; the forest was green and teemed with life, and warmth accompanied the sunlight. With closed eyes, he thought of little until voices from inside the camp reached him through the gaps of the unfinished wall.

"How was patrol?" The voice sounded familiar; after a moment, Martel recognised it as belonging to the optio who had been on the Red Emerald, back when he first journeyed to Exmouth.

"Quiet," replied the other man. "No sign of the fire eaters. Even those northerners say so, if you can trust a band of barbarians. Half the time, I don't know whether they are talking or chewing."

"Enjoy it while it lasts. As long as the battlemage is here, don't expect things to remain peaceful." The optio's voice sounded bitter.

"He brought down the gate, didn't he? Night of the assault. He earns his keep, at least."

"Don't let yourself be fooled by prefect talk. They have to say that, so we'll be impressed by all these mages and accept them leading us. It was ordinary legionaries with a ram that brought down the gate, not some fancy spell."

"Wait, you once told me you were on the ship with him when he arrived. Didn't he take down a galley?"

"Sure," the optio replied, "endangering all our lives. Rather than allow the captain to make a run for it, we practically sailed into that cannon fire. Risked the lives of fifty men and the crew. On the pride of a wizard who had never been to war or had any clue what Khivan cannons can do."

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"To be fair, he was right, wasn't he? Galley went down, your ship made it through."

"Alright, but his very presence is a danger to us all. You know what happens to any patrol he goes on? They get ambushed, every time. The Khivans know he is here. This posting was bad enough before, when you never knew when a fire eater might jump out from behind a tree. Now, it's guaranteed they'll do so."

"I didn't know that. Nobody in my centuria has patrolled with him. I would have thought you'd be particularly safe, with both a battlemage and the mageknight in your group."

"On the contrary. And I wouldn't be surprised if this whole push is because of him. Legate thinks now he's got a battlemage in the legion, it's time to make moves. So here we are, stuck in the woods. Now, he might be alright in the end he's got a protector. But it's optios like you and me who gets to see the men under our command die."

Their voices faded away. Martel blew out his breath; he could chase them down and give them a tongue lashing for speaking this way about a prefect, but he did not imagine it would make a difference. And he plainly just felt too tired to care. It was like back at the Lyceum when his secret had been revealed, and people shunned him for being fire-touched. No matter what he did how many fires he extinguished, how many battles he fought he would always be met by distrust. Making himself comfortable again, he closed his eyes to enjoy the sun.

More days passed, as the sixth cohort continued building the outpost. Lacking orders, Martel and Eleanor found themselves unoccupied and with little to do. They could not return to Esmouth, and given the danger that their presence on patrols might constitute, they elected to stay in the clearing. Henry's company and friendship provided some distraction, but the stonemage had his hours full leading the construction work, lending his own spellcraft to the task.

Finally, after two fivedays, another cohort reached the outpost along with a train of supplies.

"Alright, young lads, you can rest easy," Lucius declared as the old prefect led his troops into the clearing. "We'll take it from here, and you boys can get back to camp."

"Lucius, what about us?" Martel asked, approaching him.

"Get those carts inside," he commanded as his soldiers began to fill up the clearing, waiting for the other cohort to pack up and make room. "Ah, yeah, got a missive for you." He rummaged around his pockets until he drew out a note. "You're stuck here with me."

Martel unfurled the parchment and let his eyes run over the text.

Sir Fontaine, Sir Martel, you are to remain at the newly constructed outpost until further orders. You are to conduct patrols daily. Sir Lara

Martel almost laughed in disbelief. Staying at the outpost indefinitely felt like a punishment of some sort. Even if there was some military purpose to their presence, daily patrols almost felt like an attempt to get them killed. The Khivans were bound to return, and they would discover that their favourite target left the walls each day.

He wondered at the consequences of disobeying. If he stayed in the outpost but refused to patrol, would he suffer some minor punishment, perhaps imprisonment, or would he be hauled before a military tribunal and face execution? The latter seemed an overreaction, but he could not be certain

of it. And anything he did had a risk of spilling onto Eleanor. Accepting his fate, he went looking for her; she needed to know they had new orders.

Chapter 548: In the Forests of the Night

In the Forests of the Night

Martel reached out with magic and crumpled the tip of the Khivan's musket. That still left six enemies ahead of them and two behind. They had changed tactics, using only sharpshooters; none of them engaged in close combat. "I'll draw their fire," Eleanor told him. She ran with empowered speed through the forest.

Focusing on the enemies behind, Martel could destroy one of their muskets the same way as the others. The second, however, had yet to fire his weapon, and Martel had no way of affecting it. He had to deal with them directly.

Using his ability to sense their location again, Martel snuck closer to them while staying out of their sights. He could see them, moving cautiously forward, both he and the Khivans hunting each other. Yet no matter how skilled in woodcraft, they could not contend with Martel's supernatural abilities. The moment he knew he would have a clear line of sight, he jumped out of cover and unleashed his spell.

He struck the Khivan who still had a working musket first with a ray of fire. The other raised his weapon and fired, only to find the barrel cracking apart. Desperately, he fumbled for the pistol in his belt. By the time he got it out, Martel's ray had moved from one target to the other, killing them both.

Without a second glance at the two bodies, smoke rising from their burning corpses, Martel turned and ran towards the sounds of Eleanor fighting.

Fifth day on patrol; second ambush. Three legionaries lay dead from the initial burst of musket fire. Martel had a bullet in his shoulder, made of gold, judging from how his entire shoulder felt cold and dead yet also burning with agony. Eleanor had dragged him into the bushes, and the rest of their patrol, those alive, had scattered.

"Four to the right, keeping their distance. Must be the sharpshooters. Three to the left, closing in. You take those, I keep the others back."

She glanced in either direction before looking at him. "Are you certain?"

He nodded, gritting his teeth from the pain of the injury. "Go."

She ran off, making the Khivans regret they picked a fight with a mageknight. Meanwhile, perhaps realising their quarry was wounded, the four marksmen approached Martel's position. Reaching out, he destroyed their muskets one by one, thanking Sol that their caution made the Khivans approach slowly, which gave him time to do so.

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As they came close enough that he spotted the first of them, he saw the soldier had drawn his pistol instead. His prayer of gratitude becoming a curse, Martel raised a wall of flames as far as he could, creating a fortress of fire to hide within. Undeterred, the Khivans shot at him, their bullets passing

through the flames. In response, Martel moved the wall towards his enemies, burning the undergrowth as it rolled forward, finally catching one Khivan unaware. Whether convinced by the sight of the moving fire or the screams of agony from their dying comrade, the others pulled back. Given a moment of respite, Martel reached out and extinguished the flames on the trees he had accidentally set ablaze.

The two legionaries in front both fell at the same time. Martel raised his shield, suppressing a groan; his shoulder had not fully healed yet from its injury. At least leaving his staff behind meant he was not the first target for a Khivan bullet anymore, though that proved to be little comfort for the legionaries on the patrol, who became targets instead.

The angle of the shots alone told Eleanor what she needed to know, and she already ran through the forest. Sensing the location of every enemy, Martel turned towards those trying to outflank them. As soon as they came into sight, lightning tore the breath from their lungs.

The Tyrian scout appeared out of nowhere, returning to them on the trail. Silently, he gestured with his hands. Fifteen enemies, and probably more hiding elsewhere. Martel briefly looked at the legionaries in their patrol, knowing that even if they retreated, most of them were probably about to die. He took a deep breath. "Everyone, take cover!" With a gesture, he raised a wall of flames ahead of them, as far as he could extended in either direction. Bullets flew through the air to pass through his fire, shot blindly, though only a few; the Khivans were still trying to get into position.

"Retreat, now!" Eleanor shouted. The legionaries scrambled to obey; one of them only made it two steps before a musket ball tore into his leg, making him stumble.

Martel could not spare the time to help him. His own wall made him blind towards any heat on the other side, but he could feel Khivans moving around on either side. Exchanging looks with Eleanor, they both nodded at each other in shared understanding. Taking a deep breath, he ran in one direction while she moved towards the opposite, both of them unleashing their magic.

"Prefect, missive for you." A legionary approached the tent Martel shared with Eleanor. They sat outside on the ground, and they both looked up at the soldier. Martel had his fingers in a jar of blood salve; a Khivan blade had cut Eleanor's arm when a fight had left her magic exhausted.

"Which of us?" she asked.

"Both your names are on it." The soldier extended the note.

Martel waved his hands around, one holding the jar, the other full of paste. Taking the hint, Eleanor accepted the note and unfolded it. The soldier saluted and left. "We have been recalled." She held it up for Martel to read. "I wonder at the reason why. At least this will give us an opportunity to discuss events here at the outpost."

Sir Fontaine, Sir Martel, make your way back to the camp at Esmouth at earliest opportunity. Sir Lara

"Let me have your arm," Martel told her, and she placed it across his lap that he could tend to it. It had been forty-one days since they had begun their daily patrols, fighting more skirmishes than Martel cared to count.

Chapter 549: Between the Trees

Between the Trees

Martel did not know whether to stare at Eleanor or the two horses. "I don't know how to ride," he told her, dropping his pack on the ground that he might cross his arms.

"You are a prefect, and it is time you learn. This is the perfect opportunity." She opened his pack and stuffed the contents into a saddlebag.

"But the post riders need these horses. You know, to ride with the post." Martel looked around as if he might spot one of them to bolster his argument.

"They can spare two. Come on, into the saddle."

With some difficulty, Martel got one foot into the stirrup and swung himself up. He nearly overshot, but managed to stop himself and get into the saddle.

Eleanor handed over his staff. "See? That was no trouble at all."

"Everything hurts." They had decided to make camp for the night, having travelled for a full day. Martel felt sore to the point where just the thought of sitting down sent tingles of pain through him.

"Surely not everything." Eleanor gave him an overbearing look. "You will be fine. It just takes a little getting used to."

Having determined a small spot for their campsite, they handled the different necessary preparations. The horses were unsaddled, given feed, and allowed to graze on what little the forest might offer. Both mages created runes of warning in a circle around their home for the night; each of them could keep two symbols active at a time, and they dispersed the four runes to cover their surroundings as best they could. Lastly, Martel did a brief and simple enchantment on a rock, providing them with heat during the night.

With all this done, Martel carefully placed himself on the ground, lying on his side, and they ate from their provisions. "How's your arm?"

She ran her fingers over the gash, already closed. "Healing, thank you. It will be fine soon enough."

Martel looked at her, thinking about the strange events that in the end had led them to this point. In camp or on patrol, they were always surrounded by noise and people, and especially the last many days had left Martel feeling worn out with little time or inclination for deeper contemplation. But now, in the quietude of the forest, he remembered what Eleanor had given up for his sake. Being with him, she would never become a legate or any other such position of influence. And he could not imagine there was another posting in the legions where a mageknight constantly faced the enemy like she did.

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Martel wanted to ask her if she regretted her decision, following him to the Tenth, but he knew it was selfish to bring that up. Even if she had regrets, she was far too kind to ever admit them. Whether truth or lie, her answer would be the same, and so Martel's reason for asking would not be to know her answer, but to make himself feel better. To have her absolve him of his guilt.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked.

"I was just wondering have you heard from your family lately? It's been awhile since you mentioned any letters."

"I have not received anything since we went to the outpost, but maybe some will be waiting for me back in Esmouth. I'm not sure if personal correspondence is delivered to the outpost or only missives from our superiors." She yawned as she spoke.

"Why don't I take first watch?" he suggested. "I'm too sore to be comfortable any time soon."

She laughed a little. "You poor thing. Wake me up when the moon is over that tree." She pointed to indicate her choice and lay down on the ground, pulling her cloak around her.

The forest continued to be quiet. At least in comparison to an army camp. The occasional rustle of leaves or flapping of wings did not seem like noise, but more like the music that might be heard in the background of an emotional scene in a theatre play, like the reunion of the hero and the heroine.

Martel looked at Eleanor's sleeping form. He should be keeping watch in every other direction, from where danger might actually appear, but he used his magical sense now and then instead, being a more reliable method of vigilance than his eyes. It told him of nothing but birds in branches and woodland creatures scurrying about.

Other than their brief trip into the wetlands collecting herbs, this was the first time they had been truly alone. A full day's journey between them and any other people. He imagined if, rather than an exception, this was every day. The two of them, travelling where they saw fit. No orders or commanders, no patrols or skirmishes, no cares or concerns other than which destination they might choose for their travels. With his skills in enchanting and alchemy, and all their magical powers between them, he did not imagine they would ever want for much.

He released his breath, letting his thoughts leave him as well. He had twenty years of service ahead of him while she had only five. Martel did not know what would happen, but he doubted her father would accept that she continued as protector, wasting her talents in the Tenth. A life awaited her in Morcaster, along with her family and a betrothal; all things that Martel had no part of. Days like today were rare, and they would not last, he knew that. All he could do was appreciate them when they happened.

As the moon reached its position above a certain tree, Martel reached out and gently shook Eleanor awake. "Hm? Oh, is it my turn?" she asked with a sleepy voice.

"It is. No sign of visitors other than an owl hunting for supper. Try not to look like a tasty mouse."

"I shall do my best, though you ask much of me."

Grunting in response, Martel carefully arranged himself on his side; despite any discomfort, he fell asleep soon after.

Chapter 550: Keeping Count

Keeping Count

After three days of travel, they reached the camp. Seeing the walls at the end of the road, Martel felt a sense of homecoming, stronger than he would have expected, only marred by the discomfort of his body being stiff and sore over.

They reached the river, crossed the bridge, and rode through Esmouth until they arrived at the stables, and he could mercifully dismount. They remove their belongings from the saddle bags and left the animals in the care of stable hands.

"Are you coming?" Eleanor asked, taking a step in the direction of the camp.

"I was thinking I'd stop by Henry's, since we are here anyway. And I need to go by my workshop. Want to come?"

"I have a few things to sort out myself," she replied. "Come find me when you are ready. We can talk to Sir Lara together."

"Alright. See you later."

"Martel! Back in time with one day to spare, I see." Henry stepped back from the door, allowing Martel entry to his home.

"How do you mean, one day to spare?" Martel asked as he walked inside.

The stonemage rummaged through a cupboard, pulling out cups and a pitcher. "Tomorrow is solstice. The legate's celebration. Why do you think you were recalled?"

"I had no idea. They didn't tell us. I guess the celebration is the most benign reason. It's really tomorrow?"

Henry nodded. "It is. The legate hosts the celebration every year, inviting all the prefects. And yours truly. Just like the saint's feast." He sat down, taking one of the cups. "Go ahead, take a seat."

"I'm fine standing, thank you." He took the other top, pouring himself some wine. "Never imagined I'd actually miss this town."

"I've been a few times to an outpost like that before. It's pretty much the worst posting you can have, or certainly, the most boring."

"I would have settled for boring, honestly."

"That bad?" The stonemage looked up at him.

"You don't know the half of it. Just about every other patrol, the Khivans tried their luck. At first, they were few in number, going for stealth, and we could always fight them off, even if we took one or two losses ourselves. But these last five days, they threw themselves into it. Twenty or more of them, throwing themselves against our magic in some crazed attempt to break through." Martel nearly shivered, and he took a sip from his cup.

"I didn't want to say this, in case things had changed. It's been several years since the last battlemage was assigned to the Tenth, after all. But this is what the Khivans do. They'll keep at it. You have to convince the legate to keep you from patrol." Henry gave him an earnest look.

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"I know. Eleanor and I will speak to Sir Lara this afternoon."

"Alright. You sure you don't want to sit down?"

After a pleasant hour, Martel took his leave and went to his little workshop. He found it in good order, and his Tyrian helper at work preparing materials. "I gather more," Egil said, gesturing at the drying rack, which was full of herbs. "Starkad said you gone long. So I gather more."

"Thanks, I'm glad you did. I'm going to need a new jar, but I'll stay and work a while. Make it myself." Martel pulled out an empty clay pot from his belt and placed it on the table. He noticed several others. The fruits of Egil's labours. Enough to cover the needs of the Tyrian band, Martel assumed.

No doubt the whole legion could benefit from this, but it would require a lot of time and resources just for Martel to teach enough legionaries how to make these simple remedies, and he doubted that his commanding officers would invest that. Still, he could bring it up with Sir Lara tonight.

"Of course. Your workshop. You do what you need. I go now." Egil inclined his head and left Martel, who began the familiar steps of creating blood salve.

"Eleanor? I'm back." Standing outside her tent, Martel looked west at the sun sinking behind the walls.

"One moment." He heard the sounds of somebody rummaging around until she emerged, draping a cloak around herself. "I am ready."

They began walking towards the legion prefect's tent. "Did you hear about solstice? That's why we've been recalled. The legate is hosting a celebration tomorrow."

She nodded. "Someone told me, yes. I suppose that is not the worst reason for being summoned, though I had hoped it was due to a change in strategy."

"Well, maybe we can make that happen now."

Reaching their destination, they waited briefly until receiving admittance. "Sir Fontaine, Sir Martel, do you have something to report?" Sir Lara looked at them expectantly.

"We have been carrying out daily patrols around the outpost as ordered," Eleanor began to say; Martel was content with her taking the lead. She had a better understanding of this military business. "Out of about forty patrols, we fought seventeen skirmishes. We sustained thirty-one losses among our legionaries, and another fifteen heavily wounded."

"What about casualties incurred on the enemy?"

Eleanor blinked, looking caught off-guard. "We made no such count."

"Your best guess?"

She glanced at Martel. "Seventy to eighty?"

"Something like that. They got better at the end, keeping distance and retreating whenever we went on the offensive," he said.

"My point is, Sir Lara, these losses do not seem sustainable for a cohort. Especially as nothing seems gained. The Khivans only maintain such a heavy presence because I and my charge are present. If Sir Martel and I were withdrawn, the outpost would not come under such attack."

"Or perhaps your absence would embolden them to show up in force," the legion prefect retorted with a stern voice. "Besides, your concerns are unfounded. The cohort manning the outposts will be regularly rotated, and once summer ends, Khivan activity will be reduced in the area anyway. Your orders remain the same, Sir Fontaine. You will have tomorrow to celebrate the solstice. The day after, you are to return to the outpost and resume your patrols exactly as before. I understood?"

"Yes, prefect."

"Yes, prefect."

"Dismissed."

They made it fifteen paces before Eleanor could no longer contain herself. "They must realise this is bound to go wrong! Why would they risk us in this manner? Do they not understand our worth?"

"It doesn't look that way." In contrast with Eleanor's indignation, Martel felt resigned.

"Well, tomorrow we are seeing the legate. Perhaps I can talk sense into him."

"We can try."

As they returned to their tents, they each found an invitation to the solstice celebration waiting for them.