

Firebrand 561

Chapter 561: The Eye of the Storm

The Eye of the Storm

They marched through the day, balancing their conflicting needs of haste and stealth. Martel used his magical sense regularly, staying vigilant; neither of them spoke, using only touch and gestures to communicate whenever either suspected that others might be near. Martel was keenly aware of how much magic he had spent fighting off the ambush; he might have enough spellpower for another skirmish, but not a third.

As night fell, it lessened the risk of being discovered at the expense of speed. Unlike travelling on the clear road, branches, bushes, and roots all hindered their movement, making their progress on the forest floor treacherous. More than once, Martel found himself stumbling, with Eleanor catching him when she could. He envied her, how her skill in magic naturally lent grace to her movements, and he felt clumsy in comparison.

Weariness only made it worse. They had taken the occasional break during the day, but, as Eleanor explained the only time either of them broke the silence, if they chanced sitting down during night time while weary, they might very well fall asleep. So they soldiered on, never resting more than a few moments while standing up, leaning against a tree for brief relief before resuming their journey.

"Martel?" Eleanor whispered.

The sound of her voice was so unexpected, Martel almost flinched hearing it. "Yes?" He glanced in every direction, surrounded by the darkness of the nearby trees. His magic did not detect any large sources of heat nearby, other than hers.

"We have reached the clearing. The outpost is straight ahead."

Martel welcomed the news, but he wondered at her hesitation. "Are you worried it's full of Khivans?"

"No, the banner flies the eagle, but two people approaching at night under such circumstances might find themselves full of arrows. I thought you might create some light, which should make it clear who we are."

"Oh, sure." Despite him being physically worn out, Martel had no trouble conjuring a flame. Letting it float ahead of them, the two mages approached the gates. Stepping out of the treeline to cross the clearing made Martel feel queasy; he expected every moment to hear a shot fired.

"Who's there?" someone yelled from the small tower beside the gate. "Is that magic?"

Eleanor stepped forward to enter the ring of magical light. "Sir Fontaine and Sir Martel returning from Esmouth. Let us in."

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"Mages!" the guard exclaimed. "Open the gate! Send for the prefect!"

Relieved, Martel staggered inside and immediately fell to sit on the ground, back against the wall. Someone handed him a flask, and he drank greedily. Eleanor likewise slaked her thirst, though she remained standing.

At length, Valerius appeared, hurrying down the path that went through the small camp. "What word do you bring from Esmouth?"

"Fifth and eleventh cohort are marching to relieve you. Presumably, the mounted cohort will arrive first. They may arrive tomorrow, but if not, the day after, I assume," Eleanor related.

"Sooner rather than later, I hope," the mageknight replied. "We expect the Khivans to arrive any day now. I had started to wonder when we might receive word from camp."

"I cannot say if the legate sent couriers ahead of us. If so, the Khivans probably ambushed them, as they did with us. And if their scouts are already west of here, the army itself will be on your doorstep soon."

"Well, I am glad to have you with us," Valerius declared. "A battlemage may make all the difference."

Martel looked up, blinking from weariness, but also confusion. His only experience was in fighting skirmishes. During the battle to take this outpost from the Khivans, his sole contribution had been to destroy the gate. Warily, he got on his feet. He was not certain what anybody expected him to do; stand on the walls and rain fire on attacking Khivans? Not even Eleanor could save him from the barrage of bullets that every Khivan sharpshooter would send his way.

But Martel did not feel sufficiently awake to articulate this, and he doubted he would receive any useful reply as to what difference he was meant to make. "We need to sleep," he simply said. If nothing else, he wanted his spellpower to be fully restored before any fight.

"Of course. Your tent should still be empty, waiting for you. We will speak in the morning and formulate our strategy," Valerius told them. They parted ways, and soon, Martel could finally sink into blissful sleep.

"Prefect? Prefect!"

An increasingly insistent voice coming from outside the tent woke Martel; judging by the stirring sounds on the other side of the divide, Eleanor as well. "What?" he asked, irritated.

"Sir Valerius bids you join him by the north-eastern tower. The enemy has come."

Martel glanced outside, trying to get a notion of the hour. Faint light early morning, it seemed. He grabbed his chain shirt and began putting it on. "We'll be there," he told the legionary outside with a curt voice. As the fog of sleep receded from his mind, the severity of the situation impressed itself upon him. Most likely, they were surrounded by the Khivans now. If they took the outpost, there would be no point in surrendering; they executed mages on the spot. An unpleasant image forced itself into his mind; Eleanor being riddled with bullets, her body falling lifeless to the ground.

Outside, the sounds of soldiers running could be heard; the whole camp was waking up, preparing for battle. But no sounds of Khivan powder exploding, whether in muskets or cannons. Not yet.

Quickly, Martel finished tying up his boots and went outside the tent. Picking up his staff, he stood ready; moments later, Eleanor joined him.

They exchanged glances, but neither spoke. For a moment, they lingered as people moved swiftly around them, handling supplies or hastening towards the gathering spot for their centuria, like the quiet eye of the storm. Unable to delay further, the pair of mages finally turned east and proceeded down the main path of the camp, towards the north-eastern tower.

Chapter 562: Weapons of War

Weapons of War

Given the simplicity of the fortifications, the tower in each corner was little more than a raised platform on the walls, allowing archers and sentinels a better vantage point. Martel and Eleanor hurried up the stairs until they could join Valerius, surrounded by legionaries, all of them staring towards the treeline.

"What is the situation?" Eleanor asked as soon as they reached him.

The mageknight pointed towards the forest. "Plenty of movement going on. They must have marched through the night to arrive at this hour. It is hard to estimate the numbers, but they are too many to be a patrol. If not the army itself, certainly the vanguard has arrived."

"Well, our fortifications more than make up for their advantage in numbers. They would be fools to attempt scaling them directly," Eleanor considered.

"My assessment as well. We will have to see how they intend to assault us, but regardless, there is little to do but wait for reinforcements. A sortie would be costly and accomplish little," Valerius declared.

"What's the distance?" Martel asked. "Between us and them. We all know they've got skilled marksmen." He was not necessarily concerned about being targeted specifically as a mage he probably looked like any legionary to the Khivans standing far away but he figured that this many soldiers bunched together atop the tower provided an obvious target for any sharpshooters.

"At least three hundred feet," Valerius assured him. "We have been busy extending the clearing for a while now. Even their best sharpshooters cannot hit at such a distance."

At least Martel did not have to worry about a bullet striking him randomly while standing on the ramparts. "So, there's nothing we can do for now? We just wait until the cohorts arrive, and we can take the fight to them."

"The Khivans would not have come this far without a plan," Eleanor pointed out. "The question is how they intend to take our outpost."

"Prefect!" a soldier called out. He stood on the wall below. "To the east, over there!" He pointed in the direction. "Cannons!"

That answered Eleanor's question. Martel looked at the mageknights.

"I had hoped the forest made it too difficult for them to carry such engines of war through," Valerius admitted, and he looked almost crestfallen. "In all my years in the Tenth, we have never faced this before. I must confess, I am not sure what to do."

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"First, we need to take a closer look," Eleanor suggested. "Come along." The three mages descended from the tower and moved along the eastern wall. Legionaries crowding together made it obvious where to go. "Disperse," she commanded as they approached.

All of them peered between the crenelations in the pale morning light. Plenty of activity could be discerned between the trees, though at first, Martel could not make out what exactly was taking place. He strained his eyes until at last he recognised it. One, two, three cannons being positioned. Their open maws were pointed straight at the wall. The Khivans fed their beasts with what looked like great metal bullets and followed up with other manoeuvres that Martel could not make sense of.

With a terrible roar, the cannons fired.

Martel felt it, just as when the Khivans fired bullets at him, three streaks of fire moving through the air, yet the size was many times greater. Made from metal, the projectiles belonged to the earthen element; even if Martel could react in time, his magic would have little power over it, let alone three of them.

One after the other, they struck the wall.

It held. Henry's enchantment proved their worth, and Martel blessed the stonemage for his work. But already, the Khivans could be seen reloading the cannons. A barrage followed.

Retreated some distance, the prefects held their own little council. "How long will the wall last?" Eleanor asked.

"Who can tell?" Valerius looked distraught. "We have no knowledge or experience with this. It might fall in an hour, it might hold days." He looked at Martel. "Your spells have long reach. Can you not silence these weapons?"

"Not from this far away." The irony was not lost on Martel; by extending the clearing and increasing the distance from the treeline to the walls, the Khivans could now remain beyond his range. "I'd have to leave the outpost and move closer."

"Which is suicide under present circumstances," Eleanor swiftly added. "Every Khivan musketeer in that regiment will have his weapon trained on this clearing. There is no cover between us and the treeline."

She was right. The Khivans would know that the Asterians might try a sortie of some kind, hoping to silence the cannons. They would already be watching the outpost intently from all sides, but especially to the east, guarding their siege weapons.

Valerius kept his eyes on Martel. "But if you could get closer, under the cover of dark? Could you disable these cannons? Like you did that first night when the Khivans sniped at us."

Martel had done that many times by now, but muskets and cannons were not the same. He could not be certain his powers worked on something so much bigger and more solid. Furthermore, sneaking outside, trying to cross the clearing to get close enough to the trees it seemed madness, with both failure and death highly likely. Not only his, but also Eleanor's, who would be bound to follow him on such a venture.

Martel glanced around. The entire garrison at the outpost was liable to be massacred if the Khivans broke through. Some might be allowed to surrender, but he and Eleanor would not be. This might afford them the best chance of survival, however slim. He exhaled. "I am willing to try."

Eleanor gave him a look, hard to interpret. Martel assumed she had made the same mental calculations as he had; the danger of heading out against the risk of being attacked before reinforcements could reach them. But if she had come to a different conclusion, she did not let it show. When she spoke, her voice was neutral. "We will have to hope the walls can hold until nightfall."

Chapter 563: Fireflies in the Night

Fireflies in the Night

The walls held until nightfall. Whether they would continue to do so, nobody could say; Martel was the only one with the least bit of knowledge concerning enchantment, and even he dared not guess.

Outside their tent, the battlemage and his protector prepared for their task. They covered all metal to prevent any reflection of moonlight; Martel dearly wished he knew how to conjure clouds. He left behind his staff, and Eleanor her shield; raw magic would have to do, whether in terms of offence or defence.

Despite the dark, the cannons did not become silent. The Khivans knew their munition would hit the target. While this meant the enemy soldiers were active and alert, it also afforded Martel the only chance he had to do something; the heat from the constant firing would leave the cannon barrels hot, allowing him to find them with his magic.

Going through the gate would be too obvious to spot; instead, the mages used a rope to descend the northern wall, down into the ditch below. Crouching, they followed it until north met east and they could see the occasional flash of fire, each time the cannons roared.

Exchanging looks, Eleanor crawled out of the ditch as the first. Martel followed behind her. On their stomachs, they inched their way across the grass. The darkness did not allow them to discern much, not even the treeline somewhere ahead, but the sight and sound of the cannons guided them forward.

Despite the cold, Martel felt sweat on his brow. He could handle combat when it happened instinctively; his magic seemed to react faster than his mind, and any fear was suppressed by the feeling of elation as he unleashed his powers.

This, the slow anticipation of unavoidable battle building up inside of him, it made him feel nauseated. He clamped his mouth shut out of fear that he would suddenly throw up, revealing their position.

They had crawled more half the distance, somewhere beyond a hundred feet, when Eleanor began to stop every other moment to let Martel test his reach; each time he found it lacking and the cannons beyond his range, he would touch the heel of her boot, and she crept forward another ten or fifteen feet.

Eventually, they came close enough that Martel could distinguish more than just flashes of light when the cannons fired. He saw the shapes moving around, loading the weapons, and as he reached

out with his magical sense, he felt the heat of their bodies. This time, when Eleanor stopped, he did not signal her to continue. They had come close enough.

Martel waited until the cannons had fired another volley, giving him as much time as possible. He reached out to connect to the first barrel. Unlike a musket, it was much bigger and made of different metal; the muskets were of iron, but this was bronze. Whether the size or the material made the difference, Martel found himself straining to affect the barrel. He had to pour spellpower into the connection, much like casting a spell, and he still could not crush the barrel like he did with muskets. All he managed was to cause a tear in the metal.

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Almost panting with effort, Martel reached out and connected to the next cannon. It required the same effort, but he felt the metal buckle under his will and crack. Finally, he reached out for the third cannon.

The strangest sensation filled him, like strong brandy being poured down his throat until it made him cough. As he connected to the last cannon, the Khivans fired all three, and he felt the power of the explosion unleashed when the weapon hurled a great metal ball three hundred feet through the air to strike the wall.

But only one did so properly; the other two cannons cracked further under the strain, their barrels ruined. And while the Khivans did not understand magic, they clearly realised what was afoot; bullets began to fly across the clearing, shot wildly in just about every direction. In the nocturnal darkness, Martel saw it as streaks of light with his magical sense. Ahead of him, Eleanor activated her magic to protect herself and be a living shield for him.

The sudden burst of heat and power, along with the flurry of activity, disrupted Martel's concentration and his connection to the last cannon. Desperate, he reached out to re-establish it. Bullets, muskets, soldiers, of whom more and more appeared in the treeline, all of it confused him. It was like a tapestry of fireflies. Belatedly, he realised what had happened; understanding the cannons could be destroyed, the Khivans had pulled the third one back. It was beyond his reach now.

He reached out to grab Eleanor by the heel, giving her the signal to retreat. As bullets continued to fill the air, Martel laid with his head flat against the ground, pushing himself backwards. Every moment, he expected to feel the pain, musket ball piercing his flesh, or a soft cry from Eleanor, revealing her to be shot. Rather than stripes of heat, the bullets now felt like cold lines piercing the air, and Martel knew them to be mixed with gold. The Khivan sharpshooters had arrived with their mage-killing munition.

Resisting the urge to jump up and run towards safety, Martel continued his slow crawl backwards. Suddenly, his feet floundered, finding no ground beneath them. With a deep sense of relief, Martel pushed himself back to fall into the ditch. Moments later, Eleanor joined him. This close, even in the dark, Martel could see the clear relief on her face, reaching this place of relative safety; Martel felt the same emotion, but tinged with dread, as he knew the exact outcome of the mission.

Staying low, they followed the ditch back to their starting point, until they could finally climb back into the temporary safety of the walls.

Valerius awaited them upon their return along with all five of his centurions. They laughed and applauded, shouting the praises of the battlemage and his protector.

"Most impressive, Sir Martel!" The mageknight's face practically glowed with relief. "Now that you have silenced their cannons, they have no hope to reach our defences. And if they attempt some half-hearted assault, we shall gladly throw them back."

"I failed," Martel murmured. Realising his words had not penetrated the noise, he repeated more loudly, "I failed."

Valerius stared at him, confused. "But the cannons have stopped."

"I was only able to destroy two. They pulled the third to safety. Once morning comes, and they can be certain the clearing is empty, they will resume battering down the wall. We are still in danger."

His words had the expected effect on the boisterous mood, as the officers fell silent. "One cannon works much slower than three," Eleanor finally said. "If nothing else, this has bought us time."

"Yes, that is true." Valerius patted Martel on the shoulder. "You have bought us time."

"We have until morning, at the very least." Eleanor looked at Martel. "We should rest. Be as prepared as we can be."

He could not argue against that.

Chapter 564: Walls of Spark and Stone

Walls of Spark and Stone

Martel woke to the sound of a cannon's roar. Besides being a rude awakening, it also served as an unpleasant reminder of their situation. In some ways, the uncertainty was the worst part. Would the next shot bring the wall down? Would it take ten or twenty? Would it hold until reinforcements arrived, or would the other cohorts only find ruins and bodies when they finally reached the outpost?

Martel did his best to push such questions from his mind, knowing it to be useless speculation. The wall would hold until it no longer did; they had to prepare for that moment. Swiftly, he and Eleanor both put on their armour and ate bread and dried meat for breakfast. Afterwards, they sought out Valerius.

The mageknight was overseeing work being done in anticipation of the breach. A primitive barricade was under construction to act as a secondary line of defence, hopefully keeping the Khivans at bay once they stormed the camp.

"Prefect," Eleanor called out.

"Prefects," Valerius replied. "We are preparing our defences, but my concern is that once the wall is breached, that damnable cannon will continue to fire, smashing anything behind it. It makes erecting this barricade a rather precarious proposition."

Eleanor nodded, surveying the carts and crates being placed. "They will have to cease firing once their own soldiers are in the breach. I think the greatest danger will be if they establish a line of defence inside our walls, allowing their musketeers to stand behind and fire upon our soldiers at will. Especially if they have sharpshooters outside, picking off our defenders upon the walls. They might seek to scale them as well, gaining a foothold."

"I have every archer positioned on the north-eastern and south-eastern towers," Valerius explained. "The first task will be to repay these sharpshooters in kind."

"We have an advantage the Khivans may not know," Eleanor continued. She looked at Martel.

"I can summon a wall of fire," he explained. Last night, he and Eleanor had briefly discussed this. "I can't keep it burning all day, but it will disrupt their attack."

"You are a fountain of wonders, Sir Martel!" Valerius gave a relieved smile. "Such a spell will undoubtedly be of great help."

The deafening roar of stone shattering interrupted their conversation, along with debris flying in every direction. Soldiers, busy with the barricade and unlucky to be caught near the breach, fell to the ground. The wall turned to rubble, creating a gap at least thirty feet wide.

A ringing overtook Martel's ears, and he coughed as dust filled the air. They had not been near the wall, but he felt afraid all the same, looking through the haze until he saw Eleanor. She was standing upright, and he felt relieved, until he noticed that she stood unmoving, as if catatonic.

"Eleanor? Eleanor!" As he called her name, she did not react. He reached out to grab her shoulders. "Eleanor!"

She finally seemed to stir. "Yes," she breathed. "What happened?"

"The wall, it fell! The Khivans are coming!"

Her eyes, hitherto hazy, became focused on him. "Yes, of course." She looked around. "We must know the situation. Follow me, but keep your head down!" Eleanor turned and ran towards the wall, in between soldiers dusting themselves off or helping others back on their feet.

Valerius had done the same, and they joined him. Looking out across the clearing, the Khivans began a slow approach. They had great wicker shields to protect them from arrows, and soon, they would be within range to shoot at the walls.

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"Where is the cannon?" Eleanor asked.

She was right; it had not made any shot since bringing down the wall. "Strange," Valerius remarked. "I would have thought they would bombard us until the last moment."

Martel strained his eyes, but he saw no sign of it, and the distance was too great for his magic to sense anything.

"Of course!" Eleanor exclaimed, and the other two mages looked at her. "They have breached the eastern wall, but we expect this. They know we are ready to defend it. They are creating another breach to divide our forces. To the west."

"The gate," Valerius muttered. "It will not last long against the cannon."

"We have to split up," Martel considered. "Eleanor and I defend one spot, you take the other."

"Yes," Valerius agreed. "Your wall can do much to slow them down."

"We will take the gate," Eleanor declared. "The causeway will make it easier for them to attack, and they will have the cannon on that side for further attacks. Give us one centuria," she told Valerius.

"Of course! First centurion, you are under the command of Sir Fontaine! Defend the gate with her!"

"Sir!" The officer saluted.

As the pair of mages ran down the walls, they were soon followed by a hundred soldiers, all rushing towards the gate.

The cannon only had to fire twice. First time, the wood of the gate cracked and groaned. Second time, it splintered, flying everywhere. Immediately, the Khivans followed up with an assault. Musketmen ran out into the clearing and began firing upon the walls. Soldiers armed with blades and small shields went straight for the opening. Yelling war cries in their own tongue, they stormed over the causeway and passed beyond the walls.

Once the first two scores had come this far, Martel raised his wall to fill the space left by the broken gate. Inside the camp, a hundred legionaries led by a mageknight charged the Khivans suddenly caught between steel and fire, unable to retreat; nor could their comrades outside the walls come to their aid.

Swiftly, the Khivans in close combat were butchered to a man, and the legionaries went up the walls instead, protecting against any attempt to scale the defences while hiding behind the crenellations, as bullets flew at any sign of movement.

"How long can you maintain the wall?" Eleanor asked, appearing by Martel's side. He had watched the fight from a distance, unable to join as his spells were more likely to hit their own soldiers than the enemy.

"I don't know," Martel admitted. "A while longer." It was difficult to tell how much it drained him to keep the spell going. Unlike the initial casting of a complicated spell, where Martel could feel the burst of spellpower spent, this was more of a trickle, making it hard to judge.

"I should help at the other side. A mageknight may make a big difference in such a fight," Eleanor considered. "But I need to know you will stay safe, away from the walls and the gate, and do nothing but keep your spell burning. Agreed?"

Martel swallowed. "Agreed."

While the Khivans assaulted the outpost both east and west, Martel sat on a crate. He could hear the sounds of it all. Muskets fired, bullets whistling through the air, the screams of the wounded and dying.

To his left, the legionaries defended the walls against Khivans with grappling hooks, preventing them from gaining a foothold while taking fire from the musketmen on the ground.

To his right, at the other end, Eleanor and the others fought to hold the Khivans back and keep them from overrunning the camp.

Still, Martel remained seated. As much as he wanted to run towards the east and find Eleanor, support her, the distance would break his connection to his spell, keeping the Khivans out. Nor

could he join the legionaries on the walls, even though his magic would be useful against the musketeers sniping at them; if Martel got shot, his concentration might break, and the spell would be lost. Despite all his instincts screaming at him to join the fight, Martel remained seated.

A cannonball came flying through the wall of flames. It smashed into a tent. While unable to see inside the camp, the Khivans apparently thought it worthwhile to shoot at random.

Martel felt himself slowly growing tired, magically speaking. The wall of flames drained his spellpower bit by bit. If the battle continued much longer, he would be exhausted, making his consternation irrelevant; he would not be much use in a fight, and the spell would end on its own accord.

Was it better to let it end early and spend his remaining strength fighting the enemy? Martel felt like a coward. Another cannon shot interrupted his thoughts briefly. Its flight ended, and it landed on the ground, accomplishing nothing; Martel shared the sentiment, even if he knew the importance of his spell.

Another sound pushed through the din of war. It took Martel a moment to recognise it, new and unexpected. Trumpets, giving the signal to attack. Reinforcements had arrived for the Asterians.

Chapter 565: Blood upon the Leaves

Blood upon the Leaves

If the sounds of battle had been loud and dissonant before, it all turned into a cacophony as the mounted cohort of the Tenth Legion arrived. Horses thundered into the clearing, legionaries on the walls cheered, and the Khivans discharged their weapons. Finally daring to leave his spot, Martel went up on the wall.

Gazing out, he saw the reinforcements sweep into the clearing while the Khivans hastily retreated. Relieved, Martel dismissed his spell. Only one concern remained. Swiftly, he went down the walls and ran east.

Martel found Eleanor surrounded by carnage. Her weapons and armour carried blood, but she did not appear wounded. Legionaries and Khivans lay dead on both sides of the breach by the scores. The defending centuriae had taken losses, but inflicted just as many upon the enemy, by the look of it.

"Martel! Are you hurt?"

He shook his head. "You?"

"No. The Khivans retreated only moments ago. Did reinforcements arrive?"

"Yes. They must be sweeping around both sides of the outpost." He looked towards the gap in the wall. "I am sure you can see them soon."

"Prefects," Valerius spoke, appearing next to them. Like Eleanor, his appearance showed he had taken part of the heaviest fighting. "Come. Let us greet our comrades."

Together, they returned to the gate. Already, a handful of riders had streamed into the small yard. "Sir Dominic!" Valerius called out, and the decurion dismounted to approach them with a smirk.

"I see we arrived in time! I have ordered my men to dismount and prepare to pursue on foot. How many of yours are able to join, Sir Valerius?"

"Pursue? Into the forest?" Martel asked, sounding doubtful. Until the other cohort arrived, they did not necessarily outnumber the Khivans, and fighting among the trees would be chaotic; they might take as many casualties as they caused.

"Of course!" An irritated expression flashed across the decurion's face. "The enemy is on the run! Now we cut them down to size. Sir Valerius, gather your available troops and give chase. Battlemage, you and your protector do the same!"

Martel looked at Eleanor. This seemed reckless, but in the absence of the legate or legion prefect, the decurion nominally held command. "Yes, sir," she spoke and turned to Valerius. "We will take the centuria that fought with us by the gate."

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"Excellent," the mageknight replied. "I will gather the others." The decurion gave only a grunt and disappeared, leaving through the broken gate.

Under a canopy of leaves, the battle continued. The Khivans were as spread-out as the Asterians, small bands fighting each other across a mile long front, snaking through the forest and constantly expanding as the Khivans retreated further.

Rather than a headless rout, the Khivans were pulling back in good order. Their musketeers fired at the advancing Asterians, pulled back behind a line of their own and reloaded, while their comrades in front fired their volley, only to make the same retreat and reload. This meant that for every legionary who closed the distance to engage, another died before getting as far.

Sticking close to Eleanor, Martel found his abilities less useful. The cluster of soldiers around him prevented him from sensing the heat of the enemy, which he relied upon to ensure his spells landed. Along with the trees providing cover and breaking his line of sight, he could not rely on his fire bolts to take out enemies.

His spellpower was nearly drained from maintaining the wall during the assault, and he dared not use his stronger spells for fear of exhausting himself. The last thing Eleanor needed was an unconscious battlemage she would have to drag back to the outpost with the risk of encountering any Khivans straying behind.

Sounds of battle, especially muskets being fired, reached them from elsewhere in the forest, but Martel ignored it, focusing on the enemies straight ahead; the scattered skirmishes meant every band fought for themselves. Some twenty to thirty Khivans had grouped together and fired on the centuria fighting under his and Eleanor's command, and they had already lost a dozen soldiers. Martel knew if not for his presence, Eleanor would long since have led the charge, but she must have sensed Martel feeling vulnerable, staying near him.

"Eleanor," he called out, even as he crouched low behind their own men. "I will disrupt their ranks," he spoke as she turned to look at him. "If you have any magic left, now is the time to attack!"

She nodded, trusting his decision, and sprinted forward. He saw the shimmer of magic as she activated her defensive spells while ten or more Khivans fired at her. Spurred on by their officer, the remaining legionaries charged as well. For his last spell, Martel conjured another wall of flames, this time as far back as he could. When the Khivans pulled back after firing their musket to reload, they found the way barred.

Some of them gripped the barrels of their muskets with gloved hands to wield them as clubs, while others drew daggers from their belt. Five pikemen, retreating alongside the musketeers, lowered their weapons to form a wall of steel against the charging mageknight. With a burst of magic, Eleanor jumped high into the air, clearing the lowered pikes with ease to land among their wielders. In close combat, they stood no chance against her sword as she slaughtered them. The musketeers joined the fray, but the legionaries had caught up, and none of the Khivans survived.

Exhausted, Martel ended his spell. He could taste blood in his mouth, though he was not wounded. He would be no further use until he could replenish his spellpower, but the battle still raged on, if not in close vicinity. As the legionaries caught their breaths, Eleanor returned to him. "There is more fighting to be done," she said softly. "Stay in the back. Do not let any musket get a clear shot at you."

"What about you?" He looked at her physical shield, cracked and torn. Her armour underneath the surcoat was probably in similar condition. Without her powerful magical shield, a bullet would end her life as swiftly as his.

She gave a weary smile. "I have enough in me for another fight." She turned towards what remained of their centuria. "Soldiers! To me!" The legionaries got on their feet, shields raised, and followed the mageknight towards the nearest sounds of battle.

Chapter 566: A Matter of Courage

A Matter of Courage

Martel did not have the numbers, but he suspected that the Asterians had lost as many soldiers as the Khivans by pursuing them into the forest. Once pursuit was no longer feasible, they began a slow march back towards the outpost, through woods littered by bodies. While Martel had fought dozens of skirmishes in the woodland hills surrounding the outpost, they had always been brief, involving only a handful of enemies and Asterians alike. Walking mile after mile back towards camp, seeing corpses stretched out throughout the entire journey, left him shaken.

He took his sole consolation from knowing it was over, and that neither he nor Eleanor had been wounded. The Khivans had been driven back, and besides all the legionaries present, another cohort marched towards them to provide further reinforcements. They could sleep soundly tonight, which the battlemage and his protector did.

"Prefects, the fifth cohort has arrived, and the decurion summons you, outside the gate."

Martel looked out of his tent, seeing the boots of the legionary. It was clear daylight; he had slept through the night and taken most of the morning with it. "Understood," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. Only after the legionary had gone did he take notice of the word choice in the message.

He and Eleanor got on their feet and trudged through the camp. The aftermath of battle could be seen and felt. Many of the tents were occupied by wounded soldiers. The dead by the gate, which still lay shattered on the ground, had been unceremoniously piled together, and legionaries had begun to strip them of anything worth preserving. Martel did not wish to imagine how it looked in the other end of the small camp, given how hard the fighting had been around the breach in the walls.

"Prefects!" Valerius caught up to them. "What a day yesterday!"

"The Stars favoured us," Eleanor remarked. Martel found any sense of exuberance out of place, and he chose to remain quiet as they crossed the causeway leading out of the outpost.

The clearing was packed as far as Martel could see. The arrival of two cohorts, one of them with horses, took up all available space. He hoped that with the Khivans dispatched, he could be allowed to return to Esmouth; there might still be patients in need of his alchemy.

The three mages made their way through the crowd of men and horses to reach the other wizards present, Avery and Dominic. The former bowed her head in recognition. "A battle well-fought, I am told. You did well holding this outpost against a superior enemy, Sir Valerius."

The mageknight beamed. "Thank you. I should mention the timely arrival of our decurion, and of course, both Sir Fontaine and Sir Martel proved invaluable during the assault."

"Curious." Dominic looked at Martel with an overbearing smile. "I was told that as the battle raged, our good battlemage stayed out of the fray, even as the mageknights fought in the breach."

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"He was maintaining the spell that kept the Khivans out," Eleanor pointed out with an icy voice. "And the night before, he risked his life to destroy two of the cannons bombarding our walls."

"Certainly, my report will mention how invaluable both Sir Martel and Sir Fontaine proved to be for our defences," Valerius added.

"Regardless," Avery interjected, "you and your cohort are relieved, Sir Valerius. Fifth cohort will defend the outpost for the next month." She looked at Martel and Eleanor. "As for you, the legate's orders are to resume your daily patrol of the area. Clearly, the Khivans remain a greater threat in this region than we assumed."

Martel kept his expression blank, as he knew any sign of frustration would only delight the decurion, who placed his helmet on his head with a smirk. "My men and I will make our departure. Always a pleasure to come to the aid of the infantry." He left the small gathering and mounted his horse while barking orders; soon after, the eleventh cohort of the Tenth Legion left.

The battlemage and his protector spent the remaining day providing aid to the legionaries or tending to their own affairs. Martel ignited the pyres of dead Khivans and raised the wind to push the smoke and stench away from the outpost. Eleanor exchanged her damaged armour for a new chain

shirt and repaired the various cuts and tears of her uniform. Around them, the legionaries continued the task of removing the signs of battle, salvaging what they could, and making simple repairs. As for the gate or broken wall, such would have to wait for materials and skilled hands from Esmouth.

At the end of the day, as they went to sleep in their shared tent as usual, Martel happily closed his eyes. But before he could drift off, the sound of Eleanor's voice arrested him. "Yesterday, when the wall was brought down How long did it take before I reacted? When you grabbed me and shook me."

Not a question Martel had expected; he had already forgotten about that brief moment amidst everything else that had happened. "Not long at all. More or less immediately."

"I see."

With the cloak dividing the space, Martel could not see her, but her tone of voice and the strange question made him a little concerned. "Is something wrong?"

"I am just embarrassed. I should not have required you to snap me out of it. If we had been surrounded by enemies, such hesitation could have cost either of us dearly."

"You're being very hard on yourself," Martel told her. He knew that Eleanor had a tendency to strive for perfection, but this felt out of proportion. "A wall burst apart around our ears. We were all shocked."

"It was more than that for me."

"How so?" he asked when she did not continue.

"It brought me back to a memory. Something I have not thought about for years."

"Which memory?"

He heard her take a deep breath. "The night that Esmouth fell. When the war began. I was six. Foolishly, I had left home even though my father had told me in strict terms to stay indoors. I did not know about war or the Khivans, not really. For some reason I forget, I found myself in the eastern part of town. Soldiers were running in every direction, yelling words I did not understand. It was frightening, but I was also strangely fascinated by all the activity around me, not realising what it meant."

"You were under attack?"

"Yes. The cannons began to roar. The sound was so loud, it made me cry. Next, the gate exploded, and rubble flew everywhere. Dust and smoke filled my eyes, and my ears rang from all the noise."

"How did you get away?"

"A legionary recognised me and grabbed me. He brought me back to my home." She paused and took another deep breath. "I dreamt about this for many nights after, though it has been years since the last time. And yet, yesterday, I was brought back to that moment, like I was still a small child."

Martel wished he could see her, reach out and touch her, comfort her. "I'm sorry. It sounds awful."

"It was."

"If it means anything, I think you're the most courageous person I've ever met."

"Thank you. We should sleep." And so they did.

Chapter 567: Intelligent Conversation

Intelligent Conversation

While a lot of repairs and other work still needed to be done in and around the outpost, clearing up after the battle, Martel and Eleanor would not lend further aid to these efforts; as a new day dawned, they had their orders of resuming daily patrols. First to be ready for departure, Martel idled about in the middle of the outpost, waiting for Eleanor. It was late in the morning; both mages had required a lot of sleep these last few nights after the battle, recuperating their strength.

"Mage of fire!"

Recognising the words as much of the voice, Martel turned in the direction of the gate. Down the small thoroughfare came Starkad, along with a handful of his Tyrian companions. "You always seem to arrive after all the excitement is over," Martel replied, approaching the berserker.

"I know," Starkad grinned. "My timing is impeccable."

"Why are you back here?"

"Same as ever, really. You boys need some help watching your forests. Full of unfriendly eyes, they are. My little ravens pulled back in anticipation of the assault, but since you have handled that, we are happy to be back."

Martel wondered if he would ever see the berserker in action; perhaps it was not something he should wish for. They had a reputation for trouble with distinguishing between friend and foe. Before he could make a reply, his eyes caught sight of something unexpected. Wulfstan, the fellow working for military intelligence, had also returned to the outpost.

"Master Starkad," Eleanor spoke in brief greeting before she looked at Martel. "I am ready."

"Lady Valkyrja," the berserker replied with his typical grinning expression. "Let us speak more when you are back, mage of fire!"

"Sure thing." Martel glanced around, but the spy had vanished from his sight. "Let's go," he told Eleanor, and off they went.

The pair went east and afterwards north for several hours. Plenty of bodies remained in the forest, almost like concentric rings with the outpost at the centre. Carrion birds had arrived to feed, and while Martel knew it would only be a brief respite, he shot off a few flames to drive them away. All the remaining dead were Khivans; the legionaries had collected their own fallen already.

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Eventually they reached beyond how far the battle had reached, and they walked in what could be any ordinary forest. The trees were in full bloom with birds singing and woodland creatures scurrying about. At times, they even sighted deer briefly before the skittish animals took off. It would have been a pleasant stroll if not for the reason behind it; they could not afford to relax or enjoy the surroundings.

Their vigilance proved unnecessary; as could be expected, the Khivans did not linger this close to the outpost. If they remained in the region, they were further out than a day's march at least. With no sign of enemies other than those already slain, the two mages headed back to camp.

Returning to the outpost, Martel found his mood a little better. Strangely enough, this was caused by seeing Starkad this morning. However odd it might seem, Martel liked the man's company, maybe because he reminded him of Maximilian. More importantly, the Tyrian scouts might resume their hunting and bring back some of the deer he and Eleanor had spotted. In a remote place like the outpost, fresh meat was one of the few luxuries they could get.

Once they had dumped their weapons and pack at their tent, Martel went in search of the berserker. Similar to Esmouth, the Tyrians had their own little corner of the camp. Rather than smaller tents meant for a few people, five at most, they had erected a single one, big enough for at least ten people.

"Mage of fire, you bless us with your presence!" The berserker sat outside his dwelling, using a piece of the destroyed gate as a bench.

If spoken by anybody else wearing such a grin, Martel might have thought the greeting to be sarcastic. But that did not seem to be the way of these Tyrians. "Starkad. We saw a number of deer maybe two or three hours north-east of here. I thought your so-called ravens might like to know."

"Certainly! They shall become wolves when such prey is to be found. Sit down, my friend, you are too tall to be standing makes my neck hurt to look you in the eye."

With half a smile, Martel did so, taking a seat next to Starkad on the improvised bench. "I was wondering about something. You arrived this morning in the company of an Asterian, Wulfstan. If I recall, he was also on your ship when you first came to Esmouth."

"A sly fellow, that one. He doesn't always say much but he observes. What's your interest in him?"

"He's not part of the legion, yet he seems involved nonetheless." Martel knew this was explained by Wulfstan being a spy of sorts, of course, but he figured he should keep that to himself. "I thought maybe you knew more about him, given that you arrived together."

"Not really. It was somewhat coincidental. My band was hired up north, and when we sailed towards Esmouth, we made berth in Morcaster, where he joined us as a passenger. I know nothing of his plans or purpose."

Martel should probably have expected as much; someone working in military intelligence would not divulge anything to Tyrians if avoidable. He had hoped that Wulfstan had asked questions or given tasks to Starkad and his band, but that did not appear to be the case.

"Does he concern you?" As the berserker glanced at the battlemage, his typically jovial expression had become serious.

Martel considered the question for a moment. "No, not really. Whatever he's up to, so far, it hasn't involved me."

"Very well. Now, you must tell me of the battle!"

Smiling, Martel began. "Well, the excitement began even before we arrived here. Eleanor and me, we were not even halfway to the camp when we fell into an ambush"

Chapter 568: One Shall Follow the Other

One Shall Follow the Other

The next day's patrol proved as eventless yesterdays. It seemed the Khivans had retreated to lick their wounds, pulling further back and abandoning the immediate area to the Asterians. Neither Martel and Eleanor nor any of the patrols made by the regular legionaries saw any sign of the enemy. While Martel knew this would not last, it heartened him to know that something good had come from the assault upon the outpost.

The Khivan cannons were truly fearsome, and being trapped behind walls under assault from such monstrous weapons inspired dread in him, but at least their subsequent victory had bought them some days of peace. With luck, it would last until the end of summer. Once the trees lost their leaves and the days grew cold, fighting in the woods would slow down on its own accord.

Returning to the outpost, Martel and Eleanor trudged past those very cannons to reach their tent. After the battle, the three conquered weapons had been hauled into the camp to serve as a monument of their victory. Sitting atop one of them was Wulfstan. Seeing the returning mages, the spy jumped down with a smile. "Sir Martel, good to see you have returned in one piece. I hear you took my advice to conduct your patrols without any legionaries to slow you down."

Martel had forgotten about that conversation, though it did ring true. "Yeah. Thanks," he said as they walked past.

"Might you have a moment to spare? I should like to ask you some questions about the battle and specifically your heroic endeavour in destroying these weapons." He patted the barrel of the nearest cannon.

Martel gave Eleanor a look and a nod, indicating he would catch up to her. "What is it?" he asked of Wulfstan.

"Obviously, I have little understanding of magic. I was hoping you could explain to a layman how exactly you were able to destroy the cannons. I have been told you did this without casting any visible spell, and such knowledge could prove very useful."

Martel had not considered this; he had assumed any battlemage would be able to reach out and destroy metal heated by fire. It only occurred to him now that perhaps he was an exception, being fire-touched. "I suppose I can try. Magic can be used in two ways, roughly speaking." That excluded other traditions, such as Sindhian or Tyrian, but Martel figured that would be unnecessarily complicated to explain, nor did he see a reason to say more than needed. "Either a spell drawn directly from my body as its point of origin." He summoned flames to surround his hand briefly and let them disappear again. "Or a connection between myself and some other point that I wish to affect." He conjured a flame in the air between him and Wulfstan, who blinked in surprise.

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"An interesting explanation, and you put it in terms that are easy to understand. What confuses me is that these cannons are made from solid metal. I might expect a metalmage to be able to influence them, but how could you do this as someone attuned to fire?"

"I probably can't under normal circumstances. Not now." Martel reached out to let a finger run along the cool bronze of the barrel. "But once that cannon has fired a hundred times, the barrel becomes blazing hot. I can't do much with metal, but fire I can shape."

"Fascinating. I appreciate your time and explanation, Sir Martel."

The battlemage gave a curt nod and continued. He wondered why the spy wanted to know; obviously, lacking any magical talent, he could not make use of this knowledge personally. Reaching his tent, he found Eleanor seated outside. Seeing him approach, she extended her hand holding a letter. "This arrived for you today."

Eagerly, Martel grabbed it and opened the envelope.

My dear boy,

Your niece bears the name of Tora. At first, I felt reluctant about it. It seemed an ill omen to saddle a newborn child with. But your brother thought it only right, and Father Julius has assured me that no evil fate is tied to the name. And with Master Ogion present, there is little danger that we shall ever suffer famine again. And she is a sweet child, growing fast. I have already told her about her uncle, the powerful wizard who protects our home and keeps us safe. I dearly hope you will be able to meet her soon.

Father Julius is very pleased with John, so much that he might recommend him for the clergy. I never really imagined any of my children would join the priesthood, but I never imagined any of them would become a mage either. I just hope that if John really ends up going to the seminar, he will be able to find a posting close to home.

As for William, I will not even get into it. Juliet is doing so well as a brewster, I could not be prouder. Everybody in Engby praises her ale, except the hatmaker, but only because he is offended that she spurned his son, and I told him as much. Father Julius is giving me a disapproving look as I say this, but he better write it exactly as I tell him.

Mira has been moping about since the wedding. Not because she is upset about that, but a boy from a neighbouring village apparently has yet to visit, even though he claimed he would. I told her that I did not wish to know, but I certainly hope another wedding would not already be on the horizon. I have yet to recover from the last one, and until Tora begins sleeping through the night, I probably will not.

Write soon and tell me more. I received your letter about your posting. Such a shame it could not be up north. Are you well? What do they feed you in a camp like that, down south? Be sure to treat this Eleanor girl politely with all the trouble she has looking after you.

Love,

Your mother

"Good news?" Eleanor asked from outside the tent.

"My niece will be called Tora," Martel replied. "And my mother tells me to treat you nicely."

"She sounds like a wise woman."

Smiling, Martel folded the letter together and placed it under his pillow.

Chapter 569: A Heart of Bronze

A Heart of Bronze

As Martel and Eleanor were on their way for their daily outing, they could not help but notice the activity in the middle of the outpost. Using rope, mules, and legionaries, efforts were undertaken to roll the captured cannons out of camp. All of this was overseen by Wulfstan, which made Martel curious, given their conversation yesterday. Evidently, the spy had a vested interest in these weapons, which was understandable; they gave the Khivans an advantage that so far had held the Asterian legions back. The question was what Wulfstan intended or hoped to gain.

"I see you're taking our trophies," Martel said, sidling up to Wulfstan. He spoke in a jesting manner, hoping that a display of camaraderie would make the spy more likely to say anything. "I don't suppose you intend to return them?"

"Doubtful. They're going all the way to Morcaster, where they'll be examined by both mages and craftsmen alike. So far, we know very little about these weapons. We can't even answer why they make them from bronze rather than steel," Wulfstan remarked.

That was a curious question, Martel admitted. But he could not see how it made a difference, or how knowing this would help the Asterians fight against these weapons. "What do you hope to learn about them?"

"No idea, which is what makes this exciting." The spy wore a sly smile on his lips. "If you'll forgive me, Sir Martel, I better make sure my little caravan is ready to depart." He hurried onwards, out of the camp towards an assembled group of carts and draught animals, carrying wounded legionaries, empty supply crates and barrels, and now also cannons back to Esmouth.

Patrol proved the same as yesterday. The Khivans stayed elusive. Even if they still remained in the region, they did not seem willing to attempt further ambushes of a battlemage and his protector. Martel wondered if they knew that he was the reason they had lost two cannons on the first night of the assault; they must have figured that it could not be coincidence two of the barrels cracked at the same time, and there could be no other explanation than magic.

But whether they knew specifically to blame him was another question. Perhaps they had suspected he could provide such hindrances and thus been so keen to kill him in the days preceding the assault. Then again, as the Khivans did not practice magic at all, perhaps they were wholly ignorant about his specific powers, and for all they knew, all sorts of wizards might be holed up in the outpost. Unless they had spies, of course, just as the Asterians did

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As Martel speculated on all this, they reached the end of their patrol and returned to the familiar sight of the outpost with its still missing gate. Once they were back inside the camp, they parted ways, as Martel had a personal matter to attend to.

He continued towards deeper into camp until he arrived at the tent belonging to current commander on post in this case, Sir Avery of the fifth cohort. Unlike the other tents in camp, this was tall enough that a man could stand inside, and it also contained a few pieces of furniture. One of them being a cot, on which the mageknight rested. "Sir Martel, what can I do for you?" she asked as she opened one eye to look at the visitor.

"I should like to borrow your writing set. I received a letter from home I should like to give a reply to," Martel explained.

She closed her eye again and gestured vaguely towards the small writing desk. "Go ahead."

"Much obliged." Martel took the seat and grabbed the quill.

Dear mum,

Thank you for the news from home. I think Tora is a wonderful name, and I can't wait to meet her. I am sure she is a sweet and lovely child. Tell Keith and Clara congratulations on my behalf, both on their wedding and their child. I'm sorry to have missed it.

Matters are quiet here. The enemy did attempt an assault, but they were easily driven away. We outnumber them greatly in this area, so they are quick to disperse and flee as soon as we discover them and fight back. Otherwise, with the weather being so lovely, and us being camped inside a forest, I almost forget we are at war at times. Often, our days are pleasant, and my only concern is how to pass the time. I receive more salary than I know what to do with, especially as there is little it can be used on here. Don't forget if you ever need coin, you can withdraw from the Imperial Treasury in my name.

I hope you had a pleasant solstice. I was invited with the other prefects to celebrate it at the home of my legate. He is the man commanding the legion if you don't know the title. It was nice enough, though not as merry as the celebrations back in Engby.

I have met some people that remind me a little of home. There is a band of Tyrians here, serving as scouts. While they keep to themselves, their leader is a jovial fellow. I taught his people a little of apothecary work, and he showed me some magic in return. I know, some would be wary of northerners, especially one who knows magic, but they fight on our side, at least. They are also good hunters, bringing meat back to camp, so we eat like emperors. Don't worry about that.

Love,

Martel

The letter finished, Martel grabbed an envelope and wrote the name of his mother along with the town and region. "Thank you, Sir Avery," he said, looking towards the mageknight.

"Not a problem. You can leave it with the other correspondence. It shall be sent tomorrow with my report." Still with her eyes closed, she waved her hand in the direction of a small pile of letters stacked a small table. Martel closed up the envelope and placed it there with the others before he left, returning to Eleanor for supper.

Chapter 570: Hardened Defences

Hardened Defences

The easy days of pleasant weather and peaceful patrolling did not last, Martel realised, as a bullet whistled past him. Whether the Khivans lay in wait for him and Eleanor, or whether they had surprised the Khivans, he could not tell; the result was the same regardless. Seven enemies, by his count as sensed by his magic, could be found dispersed around them. Nobody approaching from the back though.

Reaching out with his magic, Martel found the musket that had just fired at him and crumpled the barrel together. Eleanor sprinted forward, having already taken numerous bullets, and struck down the nearest enemy. Judging by their frantic shouting, they had not expected to meet two mages, answering Martel's initial question about who had surprised whom.

Another Khivan shot at Martel and hit him, only for the bullet to strike his magical shield. Martel destroyed his musket as well and released a fire bolt at another soldier furthest away. Meanwhile, Eleanor cut through those standing her.

The remaining Khivans turned and fled, throwing their weapons aside. Martel struck one with a fire bolt; Eleanor threw her dagger with empowered strength at another, hitting him in the back. Both their targets died while the others kept running for their lives.

Martel considered giving chase; they were beyond the range of his spells. Looking at Eleanor, he noticed she remained in place, and he took his cue from her.

"Any others?" she asked while glancing in every direction.

Martel released a burst of magic to sense his surroundings. "Nobody near us."

She nodded and went to retrieve her dagger. Once she came back, she did her usual destruction of the Khivans' weapons.

"Did you think about pursuing them? I wasn't sure whether we should," he asked.

"I thought it unwise. We might get separated, and others could have been nearby." She glanced at him. "Does it trouble you they escaped?"

He shook his head. "They probably already figured we were out here, or they would find out sooner or later. Today or tomorrow I doubt it matters in the long run." He wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. "But I suppose we should expect a lot more resistance, now that we know they are back. This won't be their last patrol."

"No." Eleanor looked up at the surrounding trees. Their green leaves had barely begun their slow transition to the colours of harvest. "It will be a while before summer ends."

Stolen story; please report.

An expected change awaited the pair as they returned home; they noticed it as they reached the clearing. A new gate guarded the causeway; it must have arrived during the day with the latest train of supplies. After leaving their equipment by their tent, the two wizards crossed the camp towards the gap in the wall. They found several carts holding large slabs of stone and a wizard in green robes busy at work, using magic to clear away debris. Likewise, it was clear to see that the rugged edges along the gap in the wall had been smoothed over.

"Henry!" Martel had wondered when the stonemage might be sent to make the repairs; if anything, the assault had proven that only enchanted walls would be sufficient to protect against cannon fire. Martel did not doubt that without the stonemage's enchantments, the fortifications would have crumbled much faster under the barrage. Any simple repairs that the legionaries could do on their own would leave a glaring vulnerability in the defences.

"My favourite battlemage and protector in the entire legion," Henry replied, turning towards them with a smile. "They've still got you busy chasing Khivans, I take it."

"It never stops," Martel replied.

"How are repairs coming?" Eleanor nodded at the wall.

"I didn't have enough stone prepared," Henry admitted. "I'll have to send for more material from Esmouth and shape it here. So it will take a while before it's all done. You'll have to keep the Khivans at bay for at least two fivedays."

"At least you are assured good company," she added.

"I suppose." A wry smile accompanied Henry's words. "I don't mind being out of Esmouth for the time being either. Our legate is having his own little strife with the Thirteenth. Well, the same old argument they keep resurrecting. He's been in a mood lately, and even a civilian stonemage isn't safe from his outbursts."

"What argument is that?" Martel asked.

"Who's responsible for patrolling the wetlands," Henry explained. Seeing the uncertainty on their faces, he continued, "The Thirteenth Legion is camped north of ours. They're responsible for guarding the river against any attempted crossing. In between us and them lie the marshes."

"We are familiar with those," Eleanor said. "They ruined a perfectly good pair of boots for me."

"Well, our legate claims that his imperium only extends to the river delta, leaving the marshes the responsibility of the Thirteenth to patrol. They argue since it's between our camps, half of it is our responsibility," Henry elaborated.

"Is that really so contentious?" Martel frowned, unsure why it mattered so much.

"Nobody likes going into the marshes. The soldiers hate it, and I guess the good legate considers it a waste of his resources. He'd rather spend it on something like this." Henry glanced around the outpost. "You can't move horses or carts across those wetlands, let alone cannons, so it would be suicidal for them to try a crossing in that place."

"I wish they'd try," Martel declared. "Maybe they'd leave us alone here."

"Well, I hope I'm done and can get back before they try again. Say, speaking of good company. Do you have something decent to eat? I'm already tired of travel rations," Henry admitted.

Eleanor and Martel looked at each other. "If you like deer and don't mind a lot of company during your meals " he began to say.

"Along with singing in a language you don't understand," Eleanor interjected.

The stonemage glanced at them both. "I'll suffer a lot for venison."

"Good," Martel told him. "They sing terribly."

