

Firebrand 591

Chapter 591: Down the River

Down the River

The two mages stared at each other, surrounded by mutilated corpses and destruction while hearing the distant sound of battle. "There's nothing we can do," Martel finally said. "It would take us ages to reach the battlefield, and we're on the wrong side. We'll just run into the Khivan army." He looked towards the bank, where the small boat and the barge lay. "We should sail upstream. Put as much distance between us and them."

"Or this is our chance," Eleanor said. "This is why we did not encounter any patrols coming here. The Khivans pulled the soldiers back for the battle. If we take the boat and sail with the current, we will reach Esmouth tomorrow. We can re-join our legion and help defend the town."

That felt like willingly inserting their feet straight into a bear trap, but Martel understood her point. If the Thirteenth Legion was defeated and driven away, nothing could prevent the Khivans from besieging Esmouth. Their cannons would sooner or later destroy the walls, as they had done to the outpost. While Martel felt no attachment to his legion, he did have friends in danger; Henry the stonemage, or the berserker Starkad, strange though it might be to consider him a friend. In addition, Esmouth was full of civilians; Martel was not responsible for them, but it was hard to simply leave them to their fate.

He looked at Eleanor. He knew her loyalty to the legion would pull her in that direction, as did his loyalty to his friends. He held out his staff and let a ray of flames ignite the barge, leaving only the boat. "Let's go."

Once away, they made themselves as comfortable as they could and lay down in the bottom of the boat. Since hiding the craft would be impossible on the open river, and there was always the risk of Khivans in the area, they decided to stay out of sight and make it look like an abandoned boat drifting down the river by its own accord. It felt absurd to lie hiding underneath the railing, floating down the water past any possible number of enemies, but hopefully the battle would have drawn them away.

Lying on his back, staring up at the sky, Martel wondered how exactly his life had become this. He imagined writing to his mother, relating all of these events; she would assume he had gone mad. Given his current situation, it was hard to argue otherwise.

Excited words reached them, coming from the shoreline; Martel's heart sank as he knew it to be Khivan. Their little vessel had been spotted. He turned his head to look at Eleanor, next to him. She remained frozen, still trusting in their ruse.

The obvious sound of someone jumping into the water could be heard. Someone made powerful swimming strokes, and soon after, a hand grasped the railing of the boat. Reacting swiftly, Eleanor

drew her dagger and stabbed the hand. The Khivan fell away with a roar of pain. "Protect me!" she shouted as she scrambled towards the seat in the boat while grabbing the oars.

The tale has been taken without authorization; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Sitting up from his own position, Martel looked towards the shore and saw three Khivans unshouldering their muskets. He summoned a wall of fire right in front of them, buying time. He waited until he saw them emerge where the flames ended, unleashing a ray of fire. It struck the first soldier, and he moved it to likewise hit the next. The third Khivan already had his musket down and took aim.

"Watch out!" Martel shouted, activating his shield. In front of him, Eleanor did the same. A moment later, a musket ball struck her, falling harmlessly to the bottom of the boat. Martel reached out with his magic and destroyed the barrel of the musket.

From behind, a dagger struck Martel between the shoulder blades. It met his armour and broke. Looking over his shoulder, Martel saw the Khivan who had swum out to the boat, barely hanging onto the railing with his uninjured hand. Martel pointed at the man's limb, and a stream of flames struck out from his fingertip. With another cry of agony, the Khivan released his grasp, and Martel watched him fall behind in the water.

Ahead, Eleanor rowed with empowered strength, giving their boat speed to rival a horse. On the shoreline, the Khivans had extinguished the flames in their clothes, but they made no further attempts of firing. Instead, they looked towards their comrade in distress in the river, and one of them waded into the water. Martel could have released a final spell to make it troublesome for them, but he decided to be satisfied with their escape, as the boat swiftly continued downstream.

Once clear of enemies, they resumed hiding; it seemed the best tactic, now they knew that more Khivans could be found along the shore. While uncomfortable, it allowed them to rest, regaining their strength and spellpower.

At some point, Martel fell asleep. He did not know how long except that everything was dark when Eleanor woke him up with an elbow. Her finger on his lips silenced him until he realised why she had disturbed him; the sound of voices could be heard.

He turned his head to look at her while trying to use his magical sense to determine the number and location of the sort of people. Being inside the boat and perhaps the distance hindered him, though, and he could not answer the silent question on her face.

However, as the voices continued, they both realised that the language spoken was Asterian. Exhaling in relief, they sat up. In the moonlight, they saw a band of legionaries to the left, on the eastern bank. As before, Eleanor manoeuvred to the seat and took out the oars. "Hail, soldiers!" Martel shouted, as the only useful thing he could do.

The legionaries clearly flinched and glanced around until they spotted the boat sailing towards them. "Hail, soldier," replied the presumed princeps of the patrol. "Where in Nether's name did you come from?"

The boat struck against the shoreline, and the two mages jumped on land, one with more grace than the other. "A long story. We have not been in Esmouth for nearly two months. What is the situation?" Eleanor asked.

Recognising them as prefects, the princeps straightened up. "Not good, sir. The bastards destroyed the bridge, and they shoot at anything that tries to cross the river. So we move soldiers and supplies at night in and out of town. That's all I know, sir, what everyone else knows. But Sir Lara is in camp, so you can speak with her."

"Very well. How far are we from camp?"

"About two to three hours of marching. You best do it on foot, sir. Further down the river somewhere, the Khivans got a cannon nearby. If they see your boat, they'll blow it out of the water," he warned them.

"Good to know. Continue on your patrol," Eleanor commanded. The princeps saluted, and the legionaries continued north, while the two mages moved south.

Chapter 592: Spied

Spied

As the pair of prefects marched into camp, they received a few looks, but nobody questioned them, and they made their way to the tenth of the legion prefect. Morning had just broken, and they found her eating a sparse meal for breakfast.

"Sir Fontaine! Sir Martel! How can this be?"

"We were sent with reinforcement to the Thirteenth, whose legate gave us a mission by the river. Before we could return, we heard signs of battle, suggesting our return was no longer feasible. We decided instead to make our way here," Eleanor recapitulated.

The legion prefect stood up, giving each of them a thorough look. "I am impressed by your loyalty and also your tenacity. Not many would have dared to make such a journey. As for the Thirteenth, I just received word of the battle this night, but given we have no communication with them, we do not know more than you."

"What is the situation in Esmouth?" Eleanor asked.

"Complicated. Their galleys control the delta, which hampers our connection to the town. Nearly all the supplies are in camp, meaning we cannot simply fill the town with soldiers to defend it. We already have to use our opportunities for transport to bring provisions for the existing garrison. If we bring more soldiers across, they will begin to starve. And since we have no knowledge of when the Khivans might attack, we have to consider a lengthy siege is ahead. Though perhaps if the Thirteenth has been driven away, the enemy might think now is the time to strike." Lara spoke all of this with deep concern in her voice, and Martel noticed deep lines in her brow.

"What about the Khivan ships?" he asked. "At some point, our ships must return."

"We assume so, but we are isolated. We have no idea when, or if they are strong enough to win a battle at sea."

"Sir Martel, on our first journey here, you disabled a Khivan galley," Eleanor pointed out, looking at him.

"I heard about that!" Lara exclaimed. "Could you do this now? I am sure we can defend the city if the Khivan fleet is forced to retreat."

Martel felt how both the mageknights stared at him. He was not comfortable with the thought that this suddenly hinged on his abilities, though that had also been the case at sea, and he had decided to take the risk that he could destroy the Khivan galley rather than they should flee. "I am willing to try."

They quickly agreed upon a plan and made the preparations to set it into motion. Once ready, Martel and Eleanor left camp. They walked as far south as they could, reaching the place where the river met the sea, finding themselves a tiny speck of land to stand on. In the distance, Martel saw the Khivan fleet. A score of galleys, at least. They were easily beyond the range of any of his magic; bait was needed to bring them closer.

This content has been misappropriated from Royal Road; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

While Martel and Eleanor made themselves as inconspicuous as possible, a boat was pushed into the water further upstream. It had a few empty crates and two men at the oars. The river was perhaps half a mile wide at this place, and they began rowing to make the journey across.

They had barely made the first stroke of the oar before their movement was mirrored by the nearest galley, except it had twenty oars, and it sailed towards the shore at incredible speed. Swiftly, it manoeuvred to present one broadside towards the river, and its cannons began firing while the two oarsmen in the boat jumped and swam for dear life.

This close to the ship, Martel could make out various details. The cannon ports being open, from which fire and steel emerged with roars. Sailors and soldiers on deck, the former running about while the latter watched the shore.

It was time for Martel to do what he could. He reached out with his magic, across the open air, to connect with the ship. He found himself struggling. As the cannons heated up, his magic drew towards them like moths to a flame. But he could not ignite the metal and thereby destroy the ship. He might try destroying the cannons, but it would be time-consuming and less effective than burning the vessel entirely. Martel continued his efforts.

If he focused, he could perhaps connect to the wood of the hull, but the timber was completely drenched with seawater on the outside, and it refused any attempt to burn. Suddenly, he became aware that the cannons had ceased firing; the boat had been destroyed, and the galley would retreat any moment now.

The canvas of the sail was the best choice, but there was too much confusion, too much noise, so to say; Martel could not connect to it. He thought once again about destroying only the cannons, but

he feared that he would not be able to crush them all in time before the galley retreated. It would also only declaw the ship on one side.

A shot could be heard. Not from a cannon, but a musket. Looking towards the railing, Martel saw a full line of musketeers taking aim. Countless more shots followed, and Eleanor pulled him back behind her. "Retreat!" With her in front of him as a living shield, Martel ran inland until they were beyond the range of the muskets.

They stopped to catch their breaths once they were safe. "I cannot believe they noticed us," Eleanor murmured. "We hardly stood out."

"They have spyglasses," Martel explained, realising what had happened. "A Khivan invention. Master Alastair has one. It lets you see things from afar up close. They were probably checking the shoreline for more targets, or just being vigilant." Out in the distance, the galley had retreated further out to sea once more. "We should get back to camp." He looked towards Eleanor, who despite his words did not move.

"We are not going to win this war, are we?" she finally said in a quiet voice. "I am not sure the legions have made any reforms in centuries. Meanwhile, our enemy constantly makes innovations. How can we defeat them when we do not even know what they are capable of?"

Martel feared she might be right, though he had never expected to hear such a statement from her. "It's not our responsibility to win this war," he finally decided to say. "We just have to survive it."

She looked at him for the longest time, and he wondered if he had made her angry. "You are right. Let us get back to camp."

They walked in silence until they reached camp, where Lara waited for them. "Well?"

Martel shook his head. "It failed. Too difficult, and they spotted us. We had to retreat."

The legion prefect slowly let out her breath. "I should not have gotten my hopes up. Well, our situation remains the same. But tonight, I want the pair of you to make the crossing. If the enemy intends to assault Esmouth, your presence will make a difference."

"Sir." They both saluted in response, though neither with much enthusiasm. Martel looked across the river, knowing he and Eleanor would soon be trapped within its walls. As if to drive this point home, the distant sound of cannons firing began. Everyone turned their heads west, knowing what this meant. The Khivans were battering down the defences of Esmouth; once complete, an assault would follow imminently.

Chapter 593: From the Anvil

From the Anvil

Martel and Eleanor rested as best they could for the remainder of the day, with nothing to do but wait for nightfall. Back in his tent, Martel tried to sleep, but each time he came close, the sound of cannons roaring reminded him of the situation, making his heart do a double beat.

When he finally gave up, he ate some of his rations instead and finally drifted around the camp in a restless state. Some of the soldiers greeted him, mostly those who recognised him from his defence

of the outpost last summer. The mood was as sombre in the camp as could be expected; everyone knew what it meant if Esmouth fell, isolating the legion on the eastern bank. The Khivan galleys could freely enter the delta, sticking to the western shore, and bombard the camp. The Asterians in the camp would have few means to defend themselves, and no option for retreat. Death or imprisonment awaited them.

Though in such a case, Martel figured that some at least stood a chance of disappearing in the confusion, and perhaps vanish into the forests. Not so for those in Esmouth if it fell. The garrison inside stood no hope of escaping across the river, should the Khivan assault be successful, not with the galleys controlling the waters. When it came to the small town on the other shore, they would defend it or die; Martel had no illusions about what happened to mages that fell into Khivan hands.

Once it finally became dark, the legionaries began preparing for the crossing. With Esmouth presumably fully encircled on land, they could not risk moving further upriver; they had to do it near the delta. Fortunately, clouds covered the sky and the moon, which otherwise would have illuminated their activities, but the soldiers hurried all the same; nobody could know if the clouds would break at some point, leaving them visible.

The camp prefect and the quartermaster oversaw the movement of goods into a large boat. It looked to be a small fishing vessel, where the mast had been removed, and instead, two sets of oars had been added. Swiftly, the legionaries filled the boat to the brim with supplies while Martel and Eleanor climbed aboard. She took one of the seats for rowing; a burly soldier with forearms like a smith took the other. A second legionary positioned himself by the small helm, where Martel also sat. A final push from the soldiers on the bank, and they were away.

Martel looked across the river at the distant lights of Esmouth, few as they were. To his left, only the darkness of the sea except for what he guessed to be lanterns aboard the Khivan galleries. As for sound, he heard two pairs of oars being pushed into the water, moving them towards their destination.

Unauthorized usage: this narrative is on Amazon without the author's consent. Report any sightings.

Being unable to do anything but sit still made Martel feel not just useless, but awful. If the boat still had its mast, he could have raised the wind to add a little speed. Instead, he could do nothing but constantly look in the different directions.

Something roused his suspicion, and he squinted his eyes, staring south. Did those lanterns move? There could really only be one explanation for why any of the galleys would approach the shore. Martel turned towards the helmsman. "Any chance we have been discovered?" he whispered.

The soldier looked to his left at the lights in the dark. "Doubtful. But the Khivans know what we're doing every night, even if they can't see us." He spoke in a calm manner; while not being loud, he did not whisper either. "They must have figured it was time."

"Time for what?"

"Well, they know we are here, somewhere on the water. So they'll start firing, just in case they get lucky. Hope you're a gambling man, prefect, because we are about to roll dice for our lives." He grinned, as if the prospect of death did not disturb him in the slightest.

Martel looked over the railing down at the dark river. He could perhaps tread waters, assuming he did not panic if the boat was blown to pieces nor get torn to shreds along with it, but trying to swim ashore felt like a daunting task. He swallowed, praying to all the Stars, especially Perel.

The sound of cannons firing tore through the night air. This was not from the distant siege camp, assaulting the walls of Esmouth; the galley in the delta had moved into position and fired a broadside. Martel heard wood being crushed, and for a moment, he thought he was about to die until he realised the boat still floated. The Khivans must have hit the remnants of the bridge, parts of which still stood between the shorelines. The helmsman gave him another grin.

The rhythm of the oars increased, moving as swiftly as possible while still remaining in unison. More and more shots were fired, streaks of hot metal barrelling towards them, harbingers of death. Martel felt them with his magic, thanks to the heat being produced; he wondered if he could push them back. It would require a lot of his power, and metal was not a material he could easily control; yet he had to try if the alternative was the boat being ripped apart.

His magic could not reach as far as the galley, and he waited until he heard the sound of yet another cannon being fired. A moment later, he felt the ball of iron thundering towards them. He tried to connect with his magic and push back, to no effect. The projectile continued unimpeded, passing them by some ten feet behind.

Suddenly, the boat struck something, sending tremors through everyone, and Martel had to grasp onto the railing to steady himself. They had made it. Relieved, Martel controlled himself rather than immediately jump overboard. Soldiers waiting for them grabbed the boat and helped pull it closer, and they began emptying it of its cargo. Eleanor helped, using empowered strength to practically throw crates ashore; a little less conspicuous in his efforts, Martel picked one up with one hand, staff in the other, and made his way onto firm ground. He looked back at his protector as she joined him; they had made it, from the anvil into the furnace.

Chapter 594: Into the Furnace

Into the Furnace

Walking through the gate to enter the town felt like a hollow promise of safety, with the constant sound of cannons beating down the walls coming from the other end of Esmouth. Martel clutched his staff, wondering how powerful his magic would be against the forces marshalled against them.

"Mage of fire and his lady the valkyrja!" exclaimed a familiar voice, also recognisable from the choice of words. "From dreams you walk into the waking world!"

"Starkad," Martel uttered, feeling too emotionally worn from the crossing to exhibit any enthusiasm. Still, seeing the berserker hale was a good sight; especially if that meant he lent his strength to the defence of the town.

"What is the situation?" asked Eleanor, always pragmatic.

"A fond greeting to you as well," the northerner spoke with a smirk; evidently, the current circumstances did not dampen his spirits. "Thousands of the fire eaters are outside your walls, waiting frantically to storm through once their metal spitters have done the work."

"You realise that you are inside 'our' walls? Once the Khivans attack, they'll not distinguish between Asterian or Tyrian." Martel looked at the berserker, who stood dressed in armour; perhaps he did understand.

"Oh, sure. But either we die, or we live. Such is every moment in life until it no longer is."

"Martel, we should find the legate." Eleanor's tone of voice suggested she was not in the mood to indulge the berserker's philosophical musings. He nodded and followed her as she began to walk away. Once they were out of earshot, she added, "I am surprised he and his companions are still here. I would have expected them to skip out long ago."

"I didn't see their ship anywhere," Martel replied. "It could be at the bottom of the river."

"I admit, I find that a little amusing." She took a deep breath. "I doubt there will be anything else to laugh at, but we will see what the legate has to say."

Esmouth seemed deserted as they walked through its streets. Even if it was at night, the town had previously always had some semblance of activity. Now, Martel and Eleanor saw and met nobody except a patrol. The princeps saluted them as they marched past, and the legionaries gave them long looks.

They passed by The Salty Mug, looking practically abandoned. Same with the brothel. Approaching the north-western end, Martel glanced towards Henry's home; presumably, the stonemage was fine. He was a civilian after all, with no reason to have taken part in the fighting so far. Of course, that would not save him from the Khivans. Martel wondered if the circumstances became sufficiently dire, would Henry know how to employ his magic to fight? It could easily become relevant soon.

As they reached the legate's house, Martel realised something obvious. It was the middle of the night, and the legate did not know to expect them. "Eleanor, he's probably asleep. Do we wake him up?"

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

"I do not suppose we bring any news that urgent. I just wanted to understand our situation." She looked down the main road, which led to the northern gate. "Someone must be on watch, and given the situation, I assume it is a prefect. Let us go to the gatehouse."

Martel grunted his assent, and they moved past the legate's residence to continue down the road. The sound of cannons firing was clearly louder, only mitigated by the wall between them and the enemy, for however much longer it would stand.

They entered the gatehouse and ascended to its top, finding it full of soldiers. Up here, the noise seemed deafening; Martel wondered how those firing the cannons could stand it. The flashes of fire

in the distance revealed their position to the northeast. After each shot was heard, a few moments passed before they felt the defences tremble, as the shot struck the wall east of them.

"Sir Fontaine! Sir Martel!" The astonished exclamation came from Avery. Martel was not surprised to find her at this post; she seemed among the most capable prefects.

"Sir Avery," Eleanor replied in brief greeting. "What is the current situation?"

"Stars only know where you come from, but I suppose your questions are more pertinent. The bastards have been firing at us all day and now into the night."

Eleanor nodded. "We heard when they began. How sturdy are the walls?"

"The stonemage gave his appraisal. At best, it will last through the night, but not longer. And as long as they are attacking, he cannot repair the damage or renew the enchantments."

"Any possibility for a sortie?" Eleanor glanced out at where the cannons were placed. "Even if we cannot destroy their weapons, silencing them for a while could buy us the necessary time for repairs."

"With the amount of muskets aimed in our direction, such would be suicidal. We might lose the entire garrison and accomplish nothing," Avery argued. "The legate considers our only option to be that we repel their assaults. Let them come to us."

"Let's hope we can," Martel mumbled. He noticed some of the nearby legionaries looked at him, and he realised he should have kept his mouth shut.

"Sir Theodore and the second cohort is in place," Sir Avery added.

"Give us a moment," Eleanor asked of her. She turned away from the parapet, pulling Martel with her to stand on the other side of the gatehouse.

"I know what you're thinking," he said quietly. "You want us to try to destroy those cannons."

"We did so once before."

"Under very different circumstances," he pointed out, struggling to keep his voice down. "Those were small cannons, placed close to our walls. Now, we'll have to creep forward several hundred yards and do the same back when escaping. Not to mention, I could only destroy two of those infernal weapons before we were discovered. They must have at least a dozen here."

"Your skills have only improved since then, and any damage we cause will slow down their bombardment. It could buy us another day or two," she argued.

"I couldn't bring down the galley yesterday," he countered. "Even though I did the same on our first journey here. It's not always about skill, but sometimes more about the circumstances. Magic comes easier to me on instinct than command – when failure means death."

"It could easily mean the same here as well," she almost hissed.

"I know, but it doesn't feel that way yet. Eleanor," he said, staring into her eyes, "if we try this, I don't see how we'll survive. They'll notice us and turn every musket and cannon against us."

"Maybe you are right," she conceded. "I cannot force you to do this, nor is there any point in me going alone. But it feels like it is our duty to at least try if this would save the town."

Martel knew she was right; he only struggled with the question of whether he was willing to die for his duty if given a choice to stay back. And even if he were, would he also be willing to sacrifice Eleanor? For Martel, that tipped the scales.

The sound of a dreadful explosion along with the stonework underneath their feet trembling made it clear that their argument was moot. Henry had been too optimistic in his appraisal; the Khivan cannons had broken through the defences.

Chapter 595: The Forces of Nature

The Forces of Nature

Everyone looked east, though the darkness hid the destruction from their eyes. Eleanor crossed the parapet to grab Avery by the shoulder. "They will destroy the gate next to have another place of attack," she explained loudly, and Martel recalled how the Khivans had used this tactic when assaulting the outpost. "You must be ready!"

"The gate is mine to hold," Avery replied, "and my soldiers stand ready. You should help Sir Theodore – he has the harder task."

"Agreed," Eleanor assented.

She looked at Martel, who knew they could not delay further; battle was upon them. "Let's go."

They rushed down the stairs, almost colliding with legionaries moving about frantically for their own reasons; everyone knew what was about to happen. Reaching the street, they had more space, and the two mages could run alongside the wall towards the east.

The breach looked similar to when the same had happened at the outpost, except on a larger scale. A long section of the wall had been shattered, debris thrown about to smash against buildings. It looked like a storm had passed through, tearing everything apart. Already, legionaries were trying to restore some kind of defence, creating a barricade from the rubble.

Another volley of cannon shots tore through the air. They passed through the now broken wall to smash up what the soldiers had built, killing several of them in the process.

"Fall back!" yelled Sir Theodore to his men. "Behind the buildings! Nobody in the breach until we know they are coming!"

Martel dove behind a house wall, Eleanor next to him. The ruined section of the fortifications far exceeded what he could cover with his flaming wall; at best, he might use it to disrupt the Khivan attack, but it would not hold them back. And given their numbers outside, it seemed certain they would overwhelm the defenders.

He looked at his protector, knowing she would be in the thick of the fighting once it began. Martel wished, as he had done more than once before, he was a mageknight as well, able to fight by her side. No matter how well he might support her with his own array of spells, she needed someone physically by her, protecting her vulnerabilities, not cowering twenty feet behind.

The barrage of cannon fire ended. The Khivans were coming.

Scores of soldiers equipped for close combat poured through the breach, wielding small shields and swords. Behind them came a row of musketmen. As the latter took position where they could and opened fire, the assault troops engaged the Asterians in melee. The legionaries were strongest when fighting in disciplined ranks, but the shattered pieces of the destroyed wall and buildings made that difficult; furthermore, every time several of the defenders linked together, they invariably presented an easy target for the musketmen. Sir Theodore engaged many of them, using his defensive spells to survive what no ordinary man ever could, but his strength, magical and physical, would eventually be spent.

"Stay behind cover!" Eleanor shouted at Martel over the noise of battle before she leapt into combat, driving back a whole band of Khivans. Looking around to figure out what he could do that would help the most, Martel finally decided to raise a wall of flames in front of the nearest group of musketmen. This alleviated the pressure on the flank, and Martel looked for his next opportunity.

He knew if he began flinging spells from his staff, the fire would attract attention, making himself the most obvious target. He wished that he could reach out and destroy the barrels of the Khivan muskets within his sight, but the amount of people on the battlefield confused his magical sense. He could use his elemental bolts that did not draw the same attention as fire, but drawing on any other element would drain his spellpower, and he would not be able to fight for long. He had to make a choice.

Seeing Eleanor surrounded by enemies, yet fighting on without hesitation, he made his decision. One fire bolt after another began flying from the ruby on his staff, striking every Khivan within reach. It did not kill them, but it caused enough hurt to make them withdraw or at least interrupt them, leaving them vulnerable. Eleanor followed up whenever she could, striking them down. Along with Martel's wall making it hard for the musketmen to support the assault, and more legionaries arriving to reinforce them, they began pushing the Khivans back on their flank.

All throughout the fight, the sound of muskets firing could be heard. Martel only realised they had begun aiming at him when a bullet struck his arm. It tore open his flesh, and he wondered if it had struck bone; if so, it would probably be shattered. The pain almost made him fall to his feet, but he gritted his teeth and took a step into the shadow of the building serving as his cover, re-composing himself.

Unauthorized tale usage: if you spot this story on Amazon, report the violation.

The injury was on his left arm; he leaned his staff against the wall and clutched the wound with his right hand, feeling the slippery liquid of his own blood. Not a wound to kill, as long as he staunched the bleeding. If need be, he had the healing elixir in his belt. He could fight on a little longer.

Risking a look at the battlefield, Martel saw an encouraging sight. The Khivans were being pushed out of the breach, at least on their flank. He dismissed his wall of flames, raising it further east down the line to prevent the enemy from reinforcing their beleaguered brethren fighting Eleanor.

A moment later, Martel realised this was perhaps a mistake; where his wall had stood before, several musketeers appeared, either arriving new to the fight or returning with renewed courage. They all lined up their weapons and shot in Eleanor's direction. Some of the bullets took out the Asterians fighting by her, while the rest struck against her magical shield.

Watching them reload, Martel knew he could recreate his wall in front of them, but that would simply allow Khivans from the other side to attack Eleanor, repeating his mistake. Nor could he hope to hit them all with his spells at this distance; too much and too many in between. But if they kept up their barrage, they would kill every Asterian fighting near Eleanor, and finally her as well, once her spellpower ran out.

Steeling himself, Martel summoned his shield; it would take the first blow aimed at him, hopefully getting him close enough. He grabbed his staff and ran forward, into the fray. In the confusion, and as he did not engage any of the Khivans fighting in close combat, Martel managed to get past the front line, growing thin on both sides as the battle dragged on. One of the musketeers noticed him and turned to quickly fire. The bullet struck Martel's shield and fell to the ground.

Also having a clear line of sight, it was now Martel's turn. He planted his staff in the ground and poured spellpower into the ruby. From the gem, tendrils of lightning arced towards the nearest musketeer. Martel continued to feed power into the spell, and the lightning jumped from one enemy to the next, clustered together. They trembled and shook in agony, their faces twisted from pain; one by one, they fell to the ground, dead.

Seeing this display of magic, the nearby Khivans broke. They did not even have the wits to attack Martel, already wounded and vulnerable; they fled out of the gap. Eleanor pursued them, striking down those closest as she positioned herself in front of her battlemage until no enemy remained within reach.

"You are wounded!" she exclaimed, as she turned around to look at him.

"I'll live," he mumbled, feeling about ready to collapse. Between his wound and all the spellpower he had poured into a single spell, he had little fight in him left. Perhaps this had been another mistake; if the assault continued for another wave, he would not be able to contribute much longer. He looked east, where his wall still stood, hiding any vision of the battlefield beyond, but sounds suggested that the fight still raged on.

"Get back into safety," Eleanor commanded him. "All the way out of here. Find someone to tend to your wound. I will join you when I can." She moved up to stand in the breach itself, gazing out into the darkness beyond. "They will send another wave sooner or later. Go, now!"

The sound of a cannon firing reached them, and Martel knew where it was aimed: right where the assault had just failed. He dropped his staff, leapt forward, and grabbed Eleanor by the collar with

his right hand, using empowered strength to pull her back behind him. Without noticing any pain from his injury, he raised his left hand towards the orb of metal and death that sped towards him.

A memory resurfaced. The arena of the Lyceum, Maximilian trying to teach him empowerment magic. Eleanor by his side, a dagger thrown straight at her face. Martel's arm reaching up on reflex to catch the weapon, protecting her.

As the cannonball hurled towards him with enough force to shatter his body, Martel reached out with his magic and commanded it to stop. The force of nature met the strength of magic, and the latter won. Three feet in front of him, the cannonball lost the remainder of its speed and fell to the ground. Collapsing, Martel would have struck the broken rocks of the shattered wall if Eleanor had not caught him.

Khivan battle shouts could be heard. Martel knew his wall would have been dispelled now; he lacked the focus to maintain the spell. Eleanor began dragging him back, but even from his limited vantage point, it felt certain that the enemy would be upon them in moments.

Something whistled through the air. Martel could not see what it was, but he heard screams. A shadow moved past him, and as he turned his head towards it, he finally recognised it. Moving like a scythe through rye, Starkad the berserker felled enemies left and right. Behind, the Tyrians supported their leader with arrows.

A reprieve, but short-lived. The cannon fire had ceased, meaning another wave of Khivans would be moving across the open field to attack the breach. However valiant and powerful, one berserker and a score of archers would not be enough. More legionaries had long since ceased to arrive; the entire garrison was in the fight, either here or at the gate.

"Run," Martel mumbled. He looked up at Eleanor, still dragging him away. "Swim. Get across the river," he told her. She did not react; she could not hear him through the noise. He tried to yell, even as he knew it was pointless; Eleanor Fontaine would never flee if it meant leaving others behind.

A warrior ran past Martel, and he saw the shimmer of magic around them. Strange – he thought every mageknight was already in the fight. Turning his head with difficulty, he recognised her to be Lara, throwing herself into the fray. Legionaries followed her, rank upon rank.

How – the legion prefect in Esmouth? She was in the camp, on the other side of the river. Eleanor finally reached somewhere she deemed safe, in between two small hovels, one of them little more than a ruin.

"Eleanor," Martel croaked, "what's happening? Is that Sir Lara?"

"It is," she confirmed, gently lowering him down on the ground.

"How?"

"She must have crossed the river. And she brought the rest of the legion, by the looks of it." Eleanor grabbed some rags from a pouch in her belt, pressing it against his wound. "Which suggests the galleys no longer control the delta. Which suggests the Imperial fleet has arrived." She exhaled.

"We may be saved yet, Sir Martel."

Chapter 596: The Embrace of Sleep

The Embrace of Sleep

Eleanor wanted to find anyone that might resemble a physician in Esmouth; failing that, cross the river and get to the infirmary in camp. Trusting in her ability to dress his wound, Martel negotiated with her until she allowed one errand beforehand. Together, they crossed the town to reach the southern walls and gaze out onto the sea and the river delta.

Dawn was still hours away, but the clouds had broken, allowing moonlight to illuminate the waters. In the distance, they saw the Khivan galleys; they had sailed further out to sea, presumably to give them more room for their manoeuvres, in turn removing their ability to suppress transport across the river.

And to the west, the slender warships of the Imperial fleet approached. They had no oars like the galleys, being moved only by sail and wind, the latter provided by magical means if needed.

Already, the galleys turned to present their broadsides. While he could not see this, Martel knew the cannon ports would be opened, framing the deadly weapons held in the maw of the ships.

The rumble of thunder reached them; real, not the artificial sound made by cannons firing. Martel looked up and saw that clouds had reformed, at a speed too swift for nature. They were dark, foreboding and filled with the promise of destruction.

Even at a distance, Martel felt the burst of magic being released. Lightning struck the galley nearest the Imperial ships, setting its mast and sail ablaze. While he could not see this, Martel knew a stormmage stood on the prow of the Imperial vessel, summoning the weather for which they were named.

Bolt after bolt of lightning struck in an orgy of nature's violence. When three galleys had been sunk without ever firing a shot, the remaining turned and fled. Their oars allowed them to outpace even sails filled with magical wind, or maybe the summoned storm caused a hindrance to the Imperial fleet after delivering them victory. Regardless, the battle at sea, brief as it had been, was won.

Despite the infirmary overflowing with wounded, the physician took the time to inspect Martel's wound. The bone in his arm remained intact, meaning he would live, and after cleaning the wound and giving it a new bandage, the physician sent Martel away.

"You should rest," Eleanor told him, as they walked away to give space for the constant flow of injured soldiers arriving to the infirmary as well. "You need it badly. I will talk with the legate or the other prefects and gain a better understanding of our situation. See if I can find out what the next days have in store for us."

Unauthorized use: this story is on Amazon without permission from the author. Report any sightings.

Martel was too worn to argue, and she was right, anyway. He simply nodded in agreement and walked towards his tent, while she turned back towards the river.

Rarely had a cot seemed so inviting; Martel slept moments after lying down. After a month at sea, restless nights in Morcaster, and a long march on the road and through marshes, sleep embraced Martel as it never had done before.

When he woke up, he had no idea of the time; it was still light outside, so presumably the same day as when he had gone to bed this morning. He got up, feeling his body stiff from resting in his armour, not to mention his wound. It was a good thing he did not require both hands for casting spells, as it would be a few fivedays at least before it healed.

Checking the tent next to him, Martel found it empty. Eleanor was still in Esmouth, he figured. He could seek her out, but the crossing was probably still busy, assuming they only had a few boats to ferry people and materials across. Instead, with some of his spellpower restored to him, he enchanted a rock until it was hot enough to serve as a fireplace. Digging out a pot, some water, and some supplies he had squirrelled away in his tent, he began to make himself a hot meal.

Eleanor returned just as he had started to eat. "You timed that well," he told her. "Get yourself a plate."

She did as suggested and took a seat opposite him, with the soup pot between them. "I spoke with the legate and the prefects. After some lengthy explanations as to our doings, I was informed of the current situation. The Khivans have pulled back entirely. Perhaps they knew the Imperial fleet was approaching and chose to make one last attempt before was too late. In any case, they have pulled back north."

"I don't suppose our legate is of a mind to let them leave."

She shook her head. "Messages have been sent to find what remains of the Thirteenth legion. The aim is to have them link up with us, but regardless, our legion is moving out tomorrow in pursuit of the enemy."

"I guess they'll be trying to cross the river upstream, make their escape back to safe territory?"

"So it appears. Which means we may have to chase them into the marshes, which is not a good battleground." Eleanor drummed her fingertips against her own cheek. "They have no horses, as they could not bring them across. But in that terrain, our cavalry will not be useful either."

"Any idea what our role will be?" Martel had never fought a pitched battle like what seemed to lay ahead; he knew that once, the Asterian battlemages had been famed for their ability to wreak destruction on the battlefield, but he had not been trained specifically for that.

"We will have to wait and find out." Eleanor set her plate aside. "I saw Henry. He is well and sends his regards."

"That's good. Also, was I delirious last night, or did I see Starkad join the fight?"

"You did. Like we talked about, their ship has been sunk. So all the Tyrians are stuck here with us." Eleanor seemed to find some sort of delight in this. "Also, while the legate did not say anything, the

other mageknights did seem impressed by you. That you came all the way back to the legion, that is, and the fighting you did last night."

"I hope they were impressed by you as well," Martel said in a dry voice. "You did all the same."

She shrugged. "True, but they expect nothing less of a mageknight." She gave him a wry smile. "We should see the quartermaster. We need to be equipped for tomorrow's march."

"Aye, sir."

Chapter 597: Visible Cracks

Visible Cracks

The legion borrowed every longboat that the Imperial fleet in the delta could spare, allowing them to transport soldiers and supplies across the river more expediently. Thanks to this, the Tenth Legion was ready early next day to march out, leaving Esmouth behind for now.

Martel and Eleanor rode near the front, one row behind the legate and the legion prefect. As they passed through the remains of the gate, Martel thought about the battle fought just the night prior. He wished there had been time for him to see Henry, but it would have to wait until their return.

The legion marched swiftly for a full day, though they did not catch up to the Khivans. They were joined by the Thirteenth, however, and together, they made camp while setting a strong watch.

"Sir Fontaine! Sir Martel!"

The battlemage looked around bewildered at hearing such an enthusiastic voice call his name, until he spotted Godwin, the legion prefect of the Thirteenth, who waved at them even as he approached.

"I am heartened to see you both well! When you never returned from your mission, I feared the worst."

"We could say the same, Sir Godwin," Eleanor remarked politely. "While we heard the sounds of battle, we could not intervene, and we feared for your losses."

"The Khivans took us by surprise," he admitted with a grim expression. "We underestimated them, and Legate Aurelius paid for it with her life. Thankfully, our loss of soldiers was less severe, and most of the legion remains battle-ready."

"A pity about the legate," Eleanor said with sympathy in her voice, and Martel hurried to mumble the same sentiment. "That would leave you in charge," she added.

"It does, though I defer to your legate for this battle. We may have the Khivans on the run, but they are cunning beyond measure, and unified command is required in response." The legion prefect looked at them both. "I was on my way to the legate's counsel – I assume you were about to go as well?"

Eleanor glanced at Martel; neither of them have been informed of this, though it stood to reason that the legate would gather all the prefects with battle to be expected. He wondered if they were simply expected to attend, or if their summons had been deliberately overlooked.

"Of course," she said. "Let us accompany you."

The legate's tent did not have room for every prefect, so they meet outside, crowded around a table. It held a piece of parchment with a few crude pen strokes, detailing the immediate area. A few rocks kept it weighed down, and a few more lay in the middle, showing their legion, that of the Thirteenth, and the Khivans.

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

If the presence of the battlemage and his protector seemed curious, nobody mentioned it; Legate Varus did not even acknowledge them, but simply began talking. "The enemy is scattered. We will deploy each cohort as a separate unit, spreading out to enter the marshes and engage the Khivan forces. The ninth and tenth cohort will be in reserve, as will naturally our mounted unit, able to swiftly reinforce where needed." He looked at Godwin. "The same goes for your legion, moving in from the west. I trust you can dispatch your cohorts as needed?"

"Certainly, sir," the legion prefect replied.

Martel frowned, confused as to whether this was the extent of the plan. It seemed wholly inadequate, but the fact that nobody else protested made him wonder if he was simply misunderstanding the whole situation. Maybe speaking up would make him look a fool; well, he cared little for their opinions of him.

"This seems a mistake," he said, and all eyes turned towards him, some of them hostile. "During the assault of the outpost, we chased the Khivans into the woods, and the terrain made it difficult for us to catch up. Half their soldiers had muskets, giving them the advantage, and the terrain here is even worse." He looked around, wondering why this was not obvious. "I have been to these marshes, and finding a path is treacherous. Our soldiers will be hemmed in on narrow trails, making them easy targets."

"As always, your experience picking flowers is invaluable for our tactical discussions," said the decurion with an overbearing smile. "The wetlands are frozen. If the Khivans can drag cannons over the ice, it can easily hold our weight as well."

"The Khivans have had months finding the paths, using them for their supply lines. We are going in blind," Martel countered. "Once your horses come thundering in, they'll break right through."

"Sir Martel is right," Eleanor chimed in, and Martel felt better, knowing the most sensible person present was on his side. "We should spread out our cohorts to approach from the north as well, taking advantage of every possible ingress towards the enemy."

"That would take days to get into position," Legate Varus growled. "I will not allow the enemy to escape!" His outburst caused an uncomfortable silence to descend on the gathering, as the commander looked from one prefect to the next for any to challenge him.

"He is right, though," interjected Valerius, the young prefect of the sixth cohort. "About what happened in the forest, I mean. I lost a whole centuria's worth of soldiers chasing after them."

The legate stared at him. "Sir Fontaine, you and your charge are attached to the sixth cohort for tomorrow's battle. Sir Valerius, you will lead your cohort on the extreme right flank, right against the river, as the first wave of attack."

"Yes, sir."

The council at an end, the prefects dispersed. The battlemage and his protector walked back to their tent in silence until they were alone, as much as one could be in an army camp.

"Looks like we got Valerius in trouble," Martel mumbled.

"Someone has to fight in that position," Eleanor pointed out. "If not him, another would. And there is sense placing us there as well. Close to the river, finding a trail will be hardest. Those legionaries can use a good battlemage and an extra mageknight."

"You say that as if the legate displayed sound tactical reasoning rather than trying to punish us."

"I prefer thinking of it that way. The Thirteenth had a fool for a legate, allowing the Khivans to catch up with them and attack them. I should hope ours is a little more – strategically gifted," she ended up saying.

"Hope all you want. I'm going to sleep. At least I know that'll have an effect," Martel remarked, trying to sound relaxed; with his head full of thoughts about tomorrow's battle, however, it took a long while before rest came to him.

Chapter 598: Blood and Ice

Blood and Ice

The wind chilled them to the bone as they marched out of camp, but Martel knew they should be grateful for the cold weather; the stronger the ice covering the wetlands, the better their chances of winning this battle. There was no sight of the Khivans yet, but given they had to drag their cannons with them, their progress would be slow; it was expected the Asterians would catch up to them during the day, depending on their own speed.

Valerius walked in front, followed by an optio and fifty legionaries; Martel and Eleanor came behind, with the rest of the cohort following. As they entered the marshes, the ice could be heard groaning underneath their boots, though it held this deep in winter. To their right, the river flowed, acting as a natural barrier; at times, it forced them to swing leftwards in the places where its flow exerted sufficient pressure to crack the ice and sweep it away.

Besides causing this challenge, Martel also knew this meant they were the cohort most likely to encounter the enemy, whose goal was to cross the river where possible. That thought alone was uncomfortable, and the terrain made it worse; the reeds and sporadic growth might provide places to hide, but they would not protect against bullets or worse, cannonballs. Once the fight began, they were in the open, and only magic would keep Martel safe; for as long as his powers lasted, at least. Nor would retreat be much of an option, for the same reason; whether advancing or retreating, they would be easy targets. Gripping the haft of his staff tightly, Martel did his best to keep his concern from showing on his face.

Three hours after leaving camp, they caught up to the enemy. The sound of muskets firing came before anything else; the Khivans hid in the reeds, setting up an ambush. A handful of legionaries fell; spurred on by their prefect leading the charge, they ran forward. Several more fell; unlike him, they did not have magic to protect them. Hemmed in by the river extending into their path, it took the Asterians valuable time to reach the enemy, while the Khivans constantly pulled back behind the next line of musketeers ready to fire.

With his fellow soldiers in front, Martel was limited in what he could do; most of his spells would hit his own rather than the enemy. Unlike the legionaries rushing forward, he advanced more slowly, keeping behind Eleanor as usual. Once they were finally close, he summoned his wall of flames to disrupt the Khivan retreat. Besides serving as an obstacle, the flames also melted the ice, causing further disruption. Close combat erupted, and with superior numbers, the Asterians were able to cut down some of the Khivans; the rest turned and fled rapidly, forgoing their orderly retreat.

Hurrying off in pursuit, some of the legionaries burst through the ice, forcing their comrades to stop and help them up. "Stick to the islands!" Valerius roared; here and there, small strips of land stood out as beacons of refuge, but it further complicated their advance. In the distance, the sounds of fighting told them that the other cohorts had also engaged the Khivans.

They had not progressed much further before meeting resistance again, this time of a far more substantial nature. Several rows of musketeers met them, and once again, dozens of legionaries fell. Martel knew what Eleanor was thinking, and he placed his hand on her shoulder. "Go – I will be fine!" he spoke into her ear, over the sound of battle.

She glanced at him briefly before her magic activated to surround her, and she ran forward, overtaking the legionaries. Trying to help as he could, Martel grabbed a fire pot from his belt. He lobbed it over the heads of his fellow soldiers to land near the Khivan ranks. While it did not cause much harm to any of them, it melted the ice, disrupting their formation.

If you come across this story on Amazon, it's taken without permission from the author. Report it.

The lines clashed; Khivan swordsmen appeared, allowing their musket-armed soldiers to pull back. Trying to stay low while still advancing, Martel understood why the enemy resisted so fiercely. Up ahead, he saw a barge in the water, making the crossing. A cannon and several soldiers stood upon it.

Martel knew he was meant to destroy the vessel if he got the chance. It would trap the Khivans, and the legionaries could kill them all. Yet the thought of being responsible for so much death troubled him; at the same time, if they escaped, they would return to fight the Asterians another time.

It proved irrelevant for now; the barge was beyond his reach. He watched as the legionaries pushed forward continuously, aided by the two mageknights leading the charge; the Khivans knew their situation, and they fought a desperate defence, especially as another cohort of legionaries could be seen to the west, approaching their location.

Martel stayed back, releasing a spell when he had a clear shot, but otherwise contributing little. If he exposed himself, he would simply compel Eleanor to pull back and focus on protecting him instead, so little would be won by that. Instead, he stayed within a mass of legionaries, striking at Khivans at the extreme ends of the fighting.

A loud roar reached them, and even before he looked, Martel knew what it was. The barge had made the crossing, and the Khivans had put the cannon to use. Its first projectile flew across the narrow river and ripped two legionaries to pieces in its path.

"Move inland!" Martel yelled. "Away from the river!" If they manoeuvred so that the remaining Khivans were between them and the river, the cannon could do no further work. He looked to either side as the legionaries near him obeyed, doing their best to move swiftly in the difficult terrain. Several of them slipped on the ice, and the occasional musket fire did not make it easier.

The cannon roared again. Martel saw the metal ball a moment before he felt it through his magic. He was calm; he knew he could do this. Reaching out with both his arm and his spellpower, he pushed back, commanding the projectile to stop. It obeyed, falling into the waters.

A few of the soldiers cheered, seeing their own perfect triumph against the weapons of the enemy; the rest were too busy trying to get away to pay attention. As for Martel, he knew that it was more likely he would run out of spellpower long before the cannon expended its munition; he began to withdraw as well.

The arrival of another cohort decided the fight. The Khivans began to jump into the water, swimming across for safety. Javelins followed them, though the legionaries did not pursue all the way to the edge of the river; the cannon on the other side remained a potent threat. As it grew dark, the prefects shouted for a retreat, further inland. They had gained as much victory as they could; the remaining Khivans would be allowed to escape, assuming they knew how to swim.

Regrouping on a small spit of land, Martel looked at his fellow prefects. Eleanor was unharmed, more or less. Valerius on the other hand had taken deep cuts, and he looked pale. They would have to make a stretcher for him. The last in their company was Lucius, whose cohort had come to their aid. "A good day's work," the old prefect declared. "Valerius, you're not looking your best. Sit down before you fall down, and let's get the medicus to look at you."

Around them, the soldiers were catching their breaths as best they could; it was not feasible to spend the night in the current location, and it would take several hours of marching to reach camp.

"Medicus, maleficus," Valerius grunted, reciting an old wordplay, though he did sit down. "More likely to kill me than help me."

"I'll do it," Martel declared. The mageknight was only in this position because he had spoken up at the council, agreeing with the battlemage. And Martel had plenty of experience treating wounds, between his time in the infirmary at the Lyceum and looking after Eleanor.

"A battlemage and a physician," Lucius laughed. "I'd say that sounds ludicrous, but nothing stranger than a battlemage doing nocturnal work as an alchemist."

"Save your laughter and help me get his armour off," Martel mumbled.

"I shall get a stretcher prepared," Eleanor told them. "The sooner we can leave, the better." They all set to their tasks, as the sun descended in the horizon.

Chapter 599: The Promise of Spring

The Promise of Spring

The sixth cohort along with three prefects made their return to camp during the night, seeking rest for the remaining nocturnal hours. As a new day began, so did the work cleaning up the battlefield. The bodies of the slain had to be collected, and equipment was salvaged where possible. The terrain complicated this work, and while Martel and Eleanor were not involved with this task, they had to remain with the legion rather than return to Esmouth, giving them a few idle days.

Although it made him uncomfortable, Martel helped out at the infirmary, as his skills were particularly useful. With a battle like this, many soldiers needed wounds cauterised, usually because one of their limbs had to be amputated. It took Martel only moments to heat up the surgical tools for the physician, saving time and ensuring the cauterisation was successful.

While the smell of blood and burnt flesh along with the ear-piercing screams of agony made him nauseated, Martel suppressed his unease and lent aid where he could. He tried not to think about the future that awaited these men; crippled, they could no longer serve in the legion nor hope to find much employment once sent home. Those fortunate had families that could look after them; the rest would beg on the streets until cold or hunger claimed their lives.

"Sir Martel?" The physician held out a blade expectantly.

Taking a deep breath while trying not to look at the soldier lying on the table, Martel held out his hand and heated up the metal until it turned red.

In the evening, Martel and Eleanor joined Valerius for their meal. While the fare was much the same as their own, the young mageknight had seemed eager to share their company, perhaps in appreciation of their aid during the battle. He seemed quickly on the mend; while Martel had never heard this discussed, he suspected that those with magical talent healed from their wounds swifter than those without, though still nothing in comparison to those with the actual gift of healing, such as Maximilian.

They made idle conversation around the cooking fire; mostly Eleanor and Valerius, as Martel's day spent in the infirmary had left him with little appetite for conversation. He only noticed when they both fell silent and followed their gazes to see yet another mageknight approached their small gathering.

"The illustrious Firebrand and his valiant protector!" Godwin exclaimed. "And Sir Valerius, if I caught your name correctly." He inclined his head towards the latter.

"You did," Valerius assented as he looked at Martel, "though I'm unfamiliar with the other name you just spoke."

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

"What? Sir Martel, is your own legion not aware of your exploits in the capital?" The legion prefect seemed thoroughly amused by this, judging by his expression.

"It's nothing," Martel mumbled. "He simply jests," he told Valerius. While he did like the legion prefect, Martel would prefer if Godwin did not spread that ridiculous moniker any further.

"Sir Godwin," Eleanor interceded, "how did the Thirteenth fare in the battle?"

"I won't lie, it was a grim affair." The same sentiment could be seen on the legion prefect's face. "We took our losses getting up close, putting the knife against their throats. But we fought our way to one of their crossings in the end, make them regret stepping foot on Asterian soil. Few of them escaped, and our battlemage sunk their barge, committing their dreadful cannons to the depths of the river!"

"Well done," Valerius commended him. "We came close, but we had to retreat before achieving the same."

"You had the most difficult position of all," Godwin replied with a sympathetic voice. "If you could not do this with the Firebrand at your side, no cohort in the legions could."

Martel struggled to keep his expression blank.

"I suppose it is only a matter of time before confirmation arrives from Morcaster that you should be made legate," Eleanor speculated, looking at Godwin.

"Possibly. I believe your own legate has certain plans that involve the Thirteenth. I doubt we'll return to our previous assignment." The legion prefect let his gaze move from one to the other. "You may see much more of us in the coming months. Oh, I forgot. When I discovered you had survived, Sirs Martel and Fontaine, I made enquiries about your belongings. Sadly, they seem to have been lost or destroyed when the Khivans attacked our camp. My apologies."

"Such is war," Eleanor remarked prosaically.

Martel felt a little more annoyed; his Khivan watch was irreplaceable. Likewise, the loss of all his letters from home bothered him; re-reading them had brought him comfort during long and lonely days. At least he had an excuse for never attending any further solstice celebrations; all his nice clothes were lost or being stretched out by some Khivan soldier. "Yeah, it's fine."

Returning to their own tent, Martel wondered at Godwin's words. He had been distracted by the loss of his luggage, but now his mind returned to what exactly the legion prefect had meant. "Hey, what do you think Godwin meant? Talking about us seeing more of him."

She gave a shrug as they walked alongside each other. "The only reason the Thirteenth does not require a new legate immediately is if it will be placed under the command of an existing one. This is speculation, but I imagine Legate Varus will use our victory in driving the Khivans out to demand that he is named captain prefect with imperium over both the Tenth and the Thirteenth Legions."

"What does he want that for? The camp at Esmouth can't hold another legion."

"No." She let out her breath. "But it will double his forces for a campaign in spring into Khiva itself. With their recent defeat, now seems an opportune moment to press the advantage."

Martel almost froze in his tracks before he recollected himself. The Khivans had just failed, launching an invasion onto enemy soil; if Eleanor was right, which tended to be the case, it would be the Asterians' turn to do the same.

Usually, spring heralded renewal and the promise of easier days after winter; with a heavy heart, Martel understood that he should expect the opposite. The sun might burn brighter each morning, but darker days lay ahead.

Chapter 600: The Path Ahead

The Path Ahead

The Khivan incursion had disrupted the usual reprieve that winter brought from campaigning, but a month of frost and cold remained after they had been driven back across the river, giving Martel time to himself. He and Eleanor had not been sent back to the outpost, given the absence of enemy soldiers in the region; their defeat had bloodied the Khivans sufficiently to warrant a larger retreat, it appeared. Still, Martel knew it would not last; at best, once spring arrived, he would probably find himself once more given the task to seek out enemy patrols. At worst, the Asterians would conduct their own, rumoured offensive, with plenty of fighting to follow.

So, Martel did not spend his days idly, but prepared as he could. He procured materials to replenish the alchemy and enchantments he carried in his belt. Accompanied by Eleanor, he returned to the marshes to pick what plants could be found in winter, though they mostly found broken weapons and other such pieces of destroyed equipment, along with the occasional body parts, rotting only slowly in the cold. Turning to the Tyrians, Martel got their help with acquiring supplies for his alchemy, reciprocating the favour by providing them with some of the resulting work.

Besides offering company and the occasional cup of wine, Henry provided him with a few small orbs perfect for enchantment. Martel made a lightstone for Eleanor, his best work yet, that would last much longer than any previous examples he had made for her. He kept the remaining few stones, leaving them untouched for now, holding onto them as valuable items he could one day enchant and barter for favours or such, should he need it.

When time permitted it, and often because Henry was busy repairing all the damage done to the walls of Esmouth, Martel spent available hours with Starkad. Although they differed greatly in many ways, including origin and temperament, Martel found himself growing accustomed to the berserker's company. Unfortunately, he had not been able to learn any more runes from the northerner; while Starkad knew plenty more than those he had already shown, Martel found himself unable to reproduce their effects. It was a great pity, as they promised to have a number of useful effects, but nothing availed, no matter how much Martel tried; just as he would never be able to conjure down storms or build great walls, there was much of Tyrian magic he could not master.

Eleanor spent most of her time with the other mageknights, though Martel joined them on occasion. While he would not necessarily regard them as friends, he was at least on friendly footing with them, and he no longer felt uneasy in their company. Perhaps the events of the Khivan invasion had improved how they viewed the battlemage; he had fought alongside them in both the marshes and

the defence of the town, not to mention braved dangers and evaded Khivans to return to the legion in its time of need.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

In these various ways, the days passed for the Tenth Legion, camped in the Savena Delta by the town of Esmouth. The nights were cold, luxuries and comforts ran dry as no ships arrived, and boredom was widespread, but for a legion at war, it was the preferred state of affairs. Until one morning, Martel noticed that the thaw had begun.

That same day, a dozen of the Tyrians marched out of Esmouth, going northeast. Hearing this, Martel figured he might glean a little of what the future held. He crossed the bridge, rebuilt by the engineers of the Tenth, and entered town. He found Starkad sitting outside, enjoying the sunlight; perhaps to the Tyrian, this was considered a hot day.

"Mage of fire! Or do you prefer Firebrand?" The berserker grinned, waving one hand; the other held a comb for his long hair.

"I prefer Martel," the wizard mumbled in reply. He sat down on the log that served as a bench. "I noticed a bunch of your comrades leaving earlier. What's happening?"

"I suppose I can tell a prefect." Starkad resumed combing his hair; Martel had noticed that the Tyrians were rather vain about such things. "There's a city of the fire eaters some hundred miles east of here. Your legate showed it to me on a map, though I couldn't read the name, nor do I remember. Some ugly sounds." He shrugged.

"And?"

"Your leader wanted my brethren to scout in that direction, as far as they could."

"Scout for what? Khivan patrols?"

"That as well, but first and foremost, finding good paths. Places with water, places to make camp, trails that don't invite an ambush."

"A route for an army to take. Towards this city."

"That seems to be it, my fiery friend."

"I guess it'll take a while for them to return. They'll be going further than any Asterians have been before," Martel considered.

"And it's slow work, especially if they have to avoid the enemy with their fire spitters, take longer routes," Starkad added. "You got a few more days to grow fat."

Eating winter rations, Martel did not imagine there was much risk of that. But besides waiting for the Tyrian scouts to return, the legion would also require a lot more supplies; most of their stores

had been depleted in the last few months. Until ships began to arrive regularly at the pier in Esmouth, nothing would happen.

Starkad finished disentangling his hair and held out the comb at Martel. "Want to borrow? Your locks are getting long."

"I'll stick to the barber in town, thanks."

They continued in idle conversation a while longer before Martel returned to camp. He practised his enchantment, making more heating stones for the infirmary. Winter's cold made recovery harder for the injured and the sick in the big tents, and the physician was grateful for Martel's gifts. He had only just finished one such stone when commotion and excitement pulled him out of his tent, wondering at all the noise. A passing soldier quickly informed him. The first ship of spring had just sailed into Esmouth.