

Interlude

Paper Dragons

Late Autumn

Count Siveril Norric ran a hand through his grey hair, letting out another weary exhale as he stared down at the map in front of him. Word of Lymtoria moving into Meris had made its way to him in Galehaven quickly.

At that point there was no other option than to mobilize everything they could.

So he and Ser Theran had gathered the two thousand strong force of infantry and five hundred cavalry and marched toward Larton. He'd left some five hundred behind to man the fortress at the seat of his county along the main road that connected with the Meris capital.

There were a few villages south near the border with Meris, but there was no way the forces under his control could save them. Not without the ducal or even royal army. Which, according to the duke's missive, one of them—the Thirteenth Royal Army—was moving to cut off the Lymtorians that were moving north from the Meris fortress at a town named Barbeck.

Siveril had already taken steps to fortify their position, strategically demolishing bridges to bottleneck the enemy's advance, all except for one crucial crossing near Baron Iemes's castle at Larton.

He'd expected the Third Royal Army or even Edimiss to send forces from one of the castles along the border with both the republic and Meris, but apparently they were holding off an enemy force of their own.

Which left no one to stop the army about to move into Tilorat except a royal army that was likely exhausted from a forced march for days on end.

So, combined with the five hundred levies that Iemes had managed to raise, Siveril had to figure out how to hold out until the duke could arrive with his troops.

He had a week.

That's all he had to hold. *Luckily*, after seeing and hearing about the effectiveness of his royal liege—Princess Gwyneth, not the fools on the throne—he'd found every able body capable of casting magic and trained them to fight.

Though lacking in magical expertise himself, he had managed to form a small but potent magic corps under Ser Theran's leadership—even if the knight didn't have magic himself.

Manabound - Resilience

The weight of responsibility hung heavily on Siveril's shoulders as he gazed across the room. Each piece on the map represented lives, futures, and the fate of Tiloral itself.

Now, Siveril had a decently sized force which consisted largely of troops the duke had originally redeployed to Galehaven only to be 'released' from ducal service and quickly entered the service of his county. They were quality troops; all well trained and equipped. Everything he could ask for in order to hold off whatever made it to Larton.

But it was Iemes's troops, though, that were a complete surprise. The baron always maintained a strong force due to their strategic location, but Siveril hadn't realized just how formidable they had become. These men-at-arms had been honing their skills in the Larn Forest, battling the beasts there to gain valuable experience and 'steps'.

They were aware of said progress because the Archpriestess had set up the Ceremony of Paths in the temples of both Galehaven and Larton. And that progress was nothing less than outstanding—at least according to Theran—with an average of thirty-seven amongst the entire group. The average was not bad considering the ducal-turned-county forces under his command had an average of twenty-two.

Siveril had no idea how *good* that was. The only thing he knew of those outside his responsibility was that Gwyneth was likely the person with the highest known steps according to the Archpriestess.

The door to the office swung open, drawing Siveril's attention. Commander Helvek of the House Reinhart troops entered with a grim expression plastered on his face. Accompanying him were Baron Iemes, Ser Theran, and the baron's knight-captain. Each man wore a different expression and they each hinted at the news to come.

"What's happened?" Siveril asked.

Baron Iemes motioned to his knight, Ser Grisom, who unrolled a scroll. "Scouts report that the Lymtorian army and the thirteenth are moving to engage each other."

Siveril gestured to Helvek. "Your thoughts?"

The man pursed his lips for a moment then nodded to himself. "We need to prepare to defend Larton. They caught the thirteenth off guard and the royals are going to be struggling to get their line set up before they get hit by a fresh Lymtorian force."

Iemes interjected, "But the thirteenth has numbers on their side."

Helvek shook his head. "I don't think it's going to go the way we hope it will. I'd rather err on the side of caution."

Siveril nodded in agreement. "Let's get to work. Larton must hold."

Oxylus

The commander saluted. "I'll get on it, milord."

As the men dispersed, Siveril's gaze returned to the map, his mind racing with strategies to withstand the storm that was fast approaching.



The late autumn chill hung heavy, laden with the metallic tang of iron and the acrid stench of piss mingled with other, less identifiable odors.

The field once destined to bloom into lush greenery with the arrival of spring, now lay ravaged and desolate; a wasteland now scarred by the brutal clash of thousands of soldiers. The earth was strewn with the bodies of the fallen, indiscriminately mixing friend and foe. This was the aftermath of the Aviran Royal Army's devastating defeat, their remnants now scrambling in a desperate retreat.

General Dellona Raloren stood on a small hill as she scanned the battlefield. Her forces, a mighty legion thousands strong, had executed a masterful maneuver, decisively outflanking and overpowering the more numerous, but weary, Avirans. Central to their triumph was the surprise attack by her magi cohort, which obliterated an enemy cavalry charge in a stunning display of magical prowess. The sheer force and unpredictability of this magical assault had shattered the morale of the Aviran troops, allowing Dellona's legion to press their advantage ruthlessly.

Those same magi continued their magic, targeting pockets of Aviran soldiers trying desperately to retreat. Their spells arced through the air or tore forth from the ground like a lethal dance of power and precision as they thwarted any hope of escape for the beleaguered Avirans.

On the ground, the Republican cavalry moved like a dark tide with their blades flashing in the fading light. They showed no mercy as they cut down soldiers who had survived the magical onslaught. Few managed to slip past, and she knew those that did would struggle to make it to safety.

As the cacophony of battle subsided, an eerie stillness took hold, occasionally broken by the faint moans of the wounded and the steady, disciplined march of the Republican soldiers securing the field. Dellona's gaze drifted across the sea of bodies, acknowledging the grave cost of the conflict. Each fallen soldier represented a life cut short, a story abruptly ended, and a community left to grieve. The weight of this loss weighed heavily on her, and she felt a deep responsibility for every soul under her command.

Not that she would change a thing. They had given their lives for their nation, and she would happily make sure the Avirans gave theirs first.

Turning away from the grim scene, Dellona was eager to distance herself from the pervasive stench of magically charred flesh. She acknowledged her subordinates with a nod, confident in their ability to handle the aftermath. Their tasks were clear: secure prisoners, tend to the wounded, and collect the fallen. Dellona's thoughts were already shifting to the next phase of their campaign. The victory here, though significant, was merely one part of a larger, escalating conflict—a conflict that had only just begun to unfold.

A spark that had only just ignited.

With a final look across the scarred landscape, General Raloren turned and walked back to her command tent. The plans for the next move awaited her, and she was determined to lead the legion to ultimate victory. As she entered, she was greeted by the sight of an aristocratic man poring over a map.

She greeted him as she moved to pour herself a glass of liquor.

“The battle is won, Consul,” she announced.

The consul looked up, meeting her gaze with a smile of satisfaction. “And well fought, General. I must admit, I had my doubts about the aggressiveness of your strategy, but it proved effective in the end.”

Dellona approached the table, her eyes scanning the map. “Indeed, the thirteenth has been routed, clearing our path to the Duchy of Tiloral.” She pointed to a location on the map. “Larton is our next target. It's strategically positioned to maintain our supply lines during the winter. We'll secure the town before preparing for a northward advance.”

“While you were organizing the battle, a scout brought a report. The locals have gathered a sizable force at the castle there.”

Dellona was unfazed. “The Royal Army had no answer to our magi. I doubt the local nobility will fare any better.”

The consul's smile widened. “Excellent. I'll return to Meris with the news of our victory. The rest, I leave in your capable hands until spring.”

She would indeed handle it. Dellona had proven that the Avirans were not the indomitable force they claimed to be. The next steps were already in motion.



The Lymtorian fleet had left the port city of Shelford the night prior under the cover of a cloudy, moonless sky. They'd navigated the river's mouth, emerging into the vast expanse of the Aegis Sea, and

set their course northward into Gryffon Bay toward the sole Aviran port of Maireharbora. The objective was clear: to engage the Royal Aviran Fleet in a decisive naval battle before sieging the port.

Onboard the flagship, the air was thick with anticipation and the scent of salt and iron. Sailors scurried across the deck, a symphony of disciplined chaos, as they prepared for the looming confrontation. Catapults, their arms like the limbs of giant, slumbering beasts, were being loaded with deadly projectiles. Bolt throwers, aligned in menacing rows along the ship's sides, were readied with bolts capable of piercing the heart of enemy vessels.

In the command office, the atmosphere was a stark contrast to the bustle outside.

The navarch, a seasoned veteran of many naval campaigns, sat with the captain of his flagship—both engrossed in a sea of maps and plans. His focus was abruptly interrupted by a series of urgent knocks on the door. Grumbling under his breath, he rose, his hand instinctively reaching for his saber—a constant companion through years of service. The captain nodded to him and moved to the door. As he opened the door, a young sailor, his face etched with urgency, snapped to a salute.

“Sirs, the enemy fleet has been sighted,” the sailor reported, his voice betraying a mix of fear and excitement.

The captain's eyes hardened, a steely resolve setting in as he turned to the fleet's commander. “Navarch, your orders?”

The older man looked up from what he was doing. “Sound the alarm. Prepare for battle. Signal the fleet to form battle lines,” he commanded, his voice carrying the authority and confidence born from years at sea. The sailor nodded sharply and turned to relay the orders.

The navarch stepped out onto the deck with the captain a step behind him, the sea breeze tugging at his coat. He gazed out at the horizon, where the faint outlines of the Aviran fleet were now visible. The sun hung low in the sky, casting a golden hue over the sea, a stark contrast to the dark shadow of war that loomed.

As the alarm bell rang out, reverberating across the fleet, the ship transformed. Sailors, who moments before had been preparing the ship for battle, now moved with renewed urgency. Orders were shouted, and the crew responded with practiced efficiency. The ship's masts creaked and groaned as the sails were adjusted, catching the wind and propelling the vessel forward.

The Lymtorian fleet was a formidable array of ships, and on command from the navarch, began to align into a battle formation. The central ship, the flagship, took its position at the forefront, leading the charge. The captain stood at the helm, his eyes fixed on the enemy, his mind racing with tactics and strategies.

Manabound - Resilience

Below deck, the magi, specially trained for naval warfare, readied for battle. Their magic was to be a crucial element in the Lymtorian naval strategy that could turn the tide of what was to come.

They'd practiced relentlessly for this.

On the deck, archers took their positions, their quivers filled with arrows. The ship's artillerists checked and rechecked their catapults and bolt throwers, ensuring they were ready to unleash their deadly payloads. The air was filled with the tension of impending battle, each sailor acutely aware that the coming hours would test their mettle.

As the distance between the two fleets closed, the sea became a chessboard of strategic maneuvers. The Lymtorian ships, adept in navigating the treacherous waters, used their knowledge of the sea to their advantage. The Aviran fleet, formidable in its own right, responded in kind, adjusting their formation to counter the Lymtorian advances.

The Navarch, observing the movements of the enemy fleet, issued a series of commands. "Bring us in. Ready the starboard catapults. Archers and magi stand by." His voice was calm but carried an undercurrent of urgency.

The Lymtorian flagship veered to the right, its side now facing the approaching Aviran vessels. The tension on board was palpable like a taut string ready to snap. The sailors waited for the captain's next command, their eyes fixed on the enemy ships that now loomed ever closer.

As the two fleets converged, the sea became a cacophony of shouts, the clash of metal, and the thunderous roar of naval artillery. Catapults hurled their deadly missiles, and bolt throwers sent their bolts slicing through the air. The magi unleashed their spells, creating waves of fire and ice that swept towards the Aviran ships.

The battle for Gryffon Bay had begun like a clash of titans on the high seas.



Marchioness Ashera Tiloral was not having a good day.

Their country was at war in the northern regions and various factions were now closing in on her family's House with her daughter at the center of it all in the capital. While her father dealt with ducal matters, Ashera had been rigorously dealing with disloyal nobles within the duchy, diminishing the influence of the Crown Prince's little lapdog, Count Angwin, by strategically seizing businesses tied to his House. The only asset left to Angwin was his family's manor within his county in the western part of the duchy.

So, of course, the Republic of Lymtoria had decided it was a great time to try and settle some debts.

They'd coerced the Kingdom of Meris into supporting their military endeavors by hosting and supplying their armies. Ashera suspected that Lymtoria's ambitions might extend to annexing Meris, should the war go as the republic pleased.

Between dealing with internal issues and managing the kingdom's port during a crisis, Ashera was a busy woman. Her husband was still in the Sovereign Cities conducting business for the family. Add in the stress of knowing her daughter was in potential danger and one could tell she had very little patience for incompetence. Luckily, her father had sent for Roslyn's return, so that was at least something she didn't need to focus on.

As the next in line to the duchy, her status granted her the title and responsibility of the Marchioness of Maireharbora. Part of that duty was to command the ducal navy.

Despite her high status and the weight of her responsibilities, Ashera could not personally oversee every military operation. She relied on a team of advisors and commanders to manage martial affairs and keep her informed. However, she was no stranger to the challenges of leadership, including dealing with incompetence among her ranks.

Which brought her to the situation at hand.

Today, such incompetence had drawn her to the naval fortress, a bastion of the city's maritime defense that stood at the mouth of the harbor. Accompanied by knights and marines of House Tiloral, Ashera made her way through the city with purpose and determination. Her presence commanded respect, and none dared hinder her progress towards the commander's office.

Upon entering the commander's office, Ashera was greeted by the sight of an older telv man, his face etched with scars that were remnants of a fight with some beast or another. He rose and bowed respectfully. "Marchioness," he greeted, his voice attempting to maintain his confidence. "T-to what do I owe the pleasure?" And he lost it.

Without wasting a moment, Ashera addressed the pressing issue. "Why have you not reported on the return of the *Ballarat*? Why are our forces not ready as I ordered? Ships are idly docked when they should be at sea. The fortress is going about as if it is business as usual," she demanded, her tone sharp with urgency.

The silence from the royal fleet was disconcerting, a deviation from the usual protocol and a potential indicator of unseen troubles at sea and the *Ballarat*—along with its escorts—had been sent out to investigate.

Upon its departure three days ago, Ashera had ordered all forces in the city to arms, a command that, frustratingly, the commander of the naval fortress had neglected. She had expressly demanded a report upon the flagship's arrival, and since its arrival this morning she'd heard nothing.

With the land war against the Republic of Lymtoria starting, she knew that their naval forces would soon pose a significant threat. The ducal navy, therefore, had to be mobilized at sea without delay. If the royal fleet was lost, then they had to defend the port.

"I was waiting for Admiral Gael's return," the man responded. "With respect, Marchioness, there's no reason to—"

She narrowed her eyes and was considering the logistics of how to defenestrate someone from a windowless room when the door to the command room opened, and a distinguished high elf man entered.

"My apologies for interrupting... but Marchioness, you're here," he greeted respectfully.

Ashera acknowledged him with a nod. "Admiral Gael. You've returned."

"We have indeed, My Lady," Admiral Gael responded. "I sought you at the Residence initially but was informed you were here."

Ashera, her focus still on the negligent commander, said, "Yes, Admiral. You are to replace him with someone who will follow orders."

The commander, taken aback, stood taller, his fists clenched in protest. Before he could voice his objection, Admiral Gael intervened. "You are dismissed, Commander. We will discuss this matter after the Marchioness departs."

The commander, visibly disgruntled, left the room under the watchful eye of a knight.

Turning to Ashera, Admiral Gael sought clarification. "Milady, may I inquire about the reasoning behind the commander's dismissal amidst these tense times?"

Ashera explained, her voice laced with urgency. "The Republic is advancing into our southern borders through Meris, circumventing the Edimiss Line. We are officially at war. The commander blatantly disregarded my orders for readiness. He will be demoted to a sailor's rank and tossed onto whatever ship you deem necessary."

Gael went rigid for a moment before nodding. "That's clear, then. We encountered no sign of the royal fleet during our patrol. The seas near Meris appeared calm, and our reconnaissance yielded no leads."

Ashera's frown deepened. "That's... concerning. Admiral, I urge you to ready the fleet for combat. We must be prepared to defend the city if the need arises. The safety of our people and the integrity of our borders are paramount."

Oxylus

“Indeed,” Gael agreed. “While I do not believe Lord Nevens would have done anything reckless, I cannot help but be a bit apprehensive as well. The man was conservative to a fault, he wouldn’t have committed to an attack without warning us. Well, me at least. He’s one of the prince’s bootlickers, he didn’t like you too much. However, rest assured, the ducal fleet will be fully deployed by day’s end. Our fleet will be ready to serve.”

“Prepare for the worst,” Ashera instructed.

Admiral Gael smiled reassuringly. “Always, milady. I’ll keep you updated.”

As Ashera turned to leave, she paused at the door. “And please ensure the former commander appreciates his spared life.”

Gael’s laughter had a dark edge. “After what I have in mind for... *corrective actions*, he might wish you hadn’t.”

As the admiral moved to execute her orders, Ashera’s thoughts turned to the missing royal fleet. The uncertainty of their fate weighed heavily on her mind. She knew the importance of maintaining a strong defense, especially in these tumultuous times when the tides of war could shift unexpectedly.

Exiting the commander’s office, she glanced out towards the sea, its vast expanse a reminder of the unpredictable nature of naval warfare. Her city, a beacon of strength and resilience, stood vigilant against the unknown threats that lurked beyond the horizon.

The knights, sensing their leader’s resolve, followed her with renewed purpose.

As Ashera made her way back through the fortress, her mind was already strategizing, considering every possible outcome and planning contingencies. The safety of her city and its people was her utmost priority, and she would do everything in her power to ensure their protection.

The Marchioness’s leadership and foresight were the bulwarks against the tides of uncertainty and danger. In her, the people of the city found a source of strength and assurance, a leader who would stand unwavering in the face of adversity.

The sea continued to churn but with Ashera Tiloral at the helm, the city and its fleet stood ready as a unified force of determination and resilience, prepared to face whatever challenges the future might bring.



One afternoon, atop the castle walls, Siveril’s attention was abruptly drawn to a distant commotion. Faint shouts from the outer wall reached his ears, soon drowned out by the loud creak of the gates. He

quickly focused on the cause of the disturbance: riders approaching rapidly. Their horses thundered along, stirring clouds of dust and dirt with each urgent hoofbeat.

It didn't take him long to join Baron Iemes and Commander Helvek at the gate. The trio converged just as the lead rider, breathless and dust-caked, halted his horse before them and dismounted.

The rider relayed the dire news with a sense of urgency: the thirteenth had been utterly decimated. Siveril's face tightened into a mask of concern. The Lymtorian army, which was now regrouping, appeared to be readying to march north instead of back south like he'd hoped. And worse, the legion didn't appear to have lost much in the way of forces. The man gave his estimates of their numbers, and it didn't sound good.

If they were marching, that would make the force a mere two to three days out.

Baron Iemes's expression turned grim. "We must prepare our defenses immediately," he declared.

Commander Helvek quickly responded, "We'll reinforce our positions. Every capable person in Larton must stand ready to defend. The town has good walls, and the castle is sturdy. With the mage corps, we should be able to hold on. We'll only need to last four days until the ducal army arrives."

Siveril interjected, "We need continuous scouting. Keep a vigilant eye on their advances."

The rider, regaining some composure, noted, "They are not hiding their movements. I believe we were even seen. It's as if they wish us to anticipate their arrival."

Baron Iemes nodded. "A show of power. They're confident after their victory. But Larton will not fall easily."

Siveril faced Helvek. "Mobilize our forces. We face a formidable challenge, but we have the numbers to hold against a much larger force. Expect surprises. Especially if they were able to wipe out a larger army with as little losses as it appears, then they have something the royals did not."

Helvek frowned. "Mages."

The count nodded. "It's the only thing I can think of. Coordinate with Ser Theran, tell him to expect equal or more enemy mages. The corps has been practicing to combat other magic users."

As the rider was dismissed to rest and refresh, the three leaders quickly moved to action, coordinating their efforts to bolster Larton's defenses. Siveril, with a determined look, knew that the days ahead would test their resolve and the fortitude of Larton.

What I would give to have a certain mage who's proven the capability to take on an army alone...