

Storm King 201

Chapter 201: Beginning the Investigation

As Leon's group drew closer to the village, he noticed stakes partially buried and pointed outward as crude fortifications, and the few villagers he could see were carrying axes, knives, and farming equipment as weapons. They moved quickly, as if they were nervous to be outside even in broad daylight.

"Looks a little tense around here," Leon remarked.

"Five of their people were just abducted, and the only one they found was completely drained of his blood," Adalgrim responded. "Can you blame them for being nervous and wanting to defend themselves?"

"Not really..." Leon admitted.

As the squad rode into the village and made its way toward the center, the few villagers in their way looked up and the anxiety and subtle fear in their faces immediately brightened.

"Them knights are 'ere!" one young man who had been keeping watch on the road began shouting. As other villagers glanced over and saw the dozen riders enter their village, the young man's shout was picked up and carried all the way to the center of the village.

In the few minutes it took Leon and Adalgrim's party to arrive at the center, the village mayor was waiting for them with a look of complete relief on his face.

"Good Sirs and Ma'ams!" the mayor shouted as he opened his arms in welcome. "All of us are happy t' see ye 'ere with us!"

Adalgrim, once he brought his steed to a halt, jumped down and handed the reins to his squire to hold. With a quick glance back, he wordlessly invited Leon to join him, who did likewise.

"We've come from the Bull's Horns," Adalgrim said with a bright and comforting smile. "We received your report of what happened to your people, and we're here to find whoever is responsible and bring them to justice!"

The crowd that was forming around the village square was too wound up to break out into cheers, but there were a few cries of joy and more than a few eyes tearing up in relief.

"And we're truly grateful t' Good Sir," the mayor said as he rushed forward to shake Adalgrim's hand. "Are yer people hungry or tired? We can set aside some space fer ye to rest..."

"I don't mean to disrespect you, or to reject your hospitality," Adalgrim said as he shook the mayor's hand, "but I would feel a lot better if we could get to work as soon as possible."

"O' course!" the mayor replied. Any apprehension the mayor had in Adalgrim's purpose or in the knight himself evaporated under Adalgrim's warm and comforting gaze.

The knight spoke for a little while with the mayor, arranging for a place for his squad to store their horses and to arrange food and shelter in case they had to stay the night. Once that was done and the

mayor scurried off to arrange everything, Adalgrim turned to Leon and said, “You *could* stand to look a little more comforting, you know.”

Leon had been standing silent and stock-still with his arms crossed, but he raised his eyebrow in confusion and looked at Adalgrim inquiringly, asking, “What does how I look have to do with the job?”

“Part of our job is to make these people feel better. They cooperate more with our investigation when you make them feel safe. It’s our job to bring safety and security to these people, and keeping your face concealed can make them nervous or scared, which can then lead to them hiding clues or otherwise not cooperate with us.”

To emphasize his point, Adalgrim turned his warm, dark brown eyes to the crowd, gave everyone a confident and comforting smile, then waved. Again, the crowd didn’t cheer, but Leon could see the grips they had on their axes, shovels, and other improvised weapons loosen, and they started talking amongst themselves a little bit more.

“I see...” Leon muttered, suddenly feeling awkward for continuing to wear his helmet. Not that he took it off, though.

After several minutes, the mayor returned and said to Adalgrim, “One of our other farmers ‘as decided to lend ye his barn fer storin’ yer ‘orses.”

“Sounds wonderful!” Adalgrim replied. They then worked out the details, and most of the squad left to get the animals secured in the farmer’s barn, leaving only Leon, Anzu, Alix, Adalgrim, and the latter’s squire with the mayor.

The mayor gave Anzu an odd look, as he expected the young griffin to accompany the horses to the barn, but when he glanced at Leon, whose face was completely hidden behind his helmet, he decided not to question it.

“Now,” Adalgrim continued, his bright and cheery demeanor taking a serious turn, “why don’t you show us the body of the man you found.”

“Uh, sure thing,” the mayor agreed with a frown appearing on his face that, in Leon’s eyes, seemed equal parts terror and revulsion.

The mayor then turned around and began leading them through the dirt streets of the village, past people whose scared and harried eyes would light up at the sight of the armed and armored soldiers passing by. Their destination was a hut on the outskirts of the village, beside a farm with several acres of apple trees planted in a rough grid. Leon’s mouth couldn’t help but water at the sight of the bright red apples, as the group didn’t stop to eat lunch on the road, but work came first so he followed Adalgrim and the mayor inside. He paused only to wave at Anzu, telling the griffin to wait outside.

“This ‘ere was Theobald’s place,” the mayor said, nodding to the bed where Leon could see something human-shaped beneath a blanket—Theobald, no doubt. The hut had begun to stink, and the cause was most certainly the poorly-stored corpse.

“Ugh,” Adalgrim grimaced as he pulled the blanket back and saw the dead grey skin of the man underneath. “You *really* should have tossed him in a freezer or something... There should be something

like around here, right? Something big enough to store your harvests in before they're taken to Ariminium?"

"Aye, we do," the mayor admitted. "We got several, but no one wanted a dead person stinkin' up the place..."

"That's unfortunate," Adalgrim quietly responded as he turned his attention back to the corpse.

To Leon's eyes, the dead man seemed little different than any other he'd seen—though, admittedly, the vast majority of other dead bodies he'd seen had died in battle, and so were far more damaged than Theobald. But, Adalgrim seemed to know exactly what he was doing, as he turned Theobald's head to the sides until he saw two tiny puncture marks on his neck. Then, he poked the man a few times in the stomach.

"There's some evidence of demonic power here..." he said with a deadly serious look.

Leon's heart almost leaped out of his chest in shock before, a second later, his logic kicked in and he realized that Adalgrim wasn't talking about him. Still, he was so suddenly put on edge that he didn't dare ask for clarification as he didn't think he could keep his voice steady. Fortunately for him, the mayor had no such hang-ups.

"Whaddaya mean?"

"I think someone might have tried to manipulate this man's corpse with... *fire*... yes, fire..." Adalgrim responded absent-mindedly, almost as if he were talking to himself rather than responding to the mayor. The knight then lifted Theobald's shirt and, sure enough, there was a fist-sized hole surrounded by burned and blackened skin in the center of the man's chest.

"Hmmm," Adalgrim hummed in thought. He then stuck his finger into the hole and wiggled it around.

"Yup, his heart is missing..."

The mayor's face was one of complete revulsion, and it was clear that the man was fighting the urge to vomit. Leon, Alix, and the other squire were a little more composed, but no one was going to interrupt Adalgrim until he was done with his investigation.

The knight closed his eyes and scanned the body with his magic senses a few times, and visually scanned both Theobald and the farmer's hut before finally turning back to the mayor.

"This man lived alone, right?"

The mayor, still slightly sickened at seeing the state of Theobald's body and Adalgrim's subsequent investigation, could only nod.

"And the other four, they were single men living alone?"

Again, the mayor nodded.

With a sigh, Adalgrim sat down in one of the few chairs in the hut and said, "Well, this seems like a fairly standard set-up, then. This is definitely the work of a vampire."

"But what was that stuff ye said about demons?" the mayor asked.

"A vampire becomes what it is by consuming blood, usually at the behest of a demon as part of a ritual to grant the demon more power. Some of this power is then shared with the person performing the ritual. Eventually, however, their body will adapt to the consumption of blood, and then the creature will *need* to consume blood to survive. It's actually a clever trick on the demon's part—get some hapless power-hungry sap addicted to blood, and then every time they feed, the demon gains power through their contract."

"That's..." the mayor sputtered, unable to finish expressing his horror.

"Indeed," Adalgrim whispered. "All that being said, there is one thing I'm curious about..."

"What is it?" the mayor hurriedly asked, desperate to change the subject to something that carried less horror.

"Why was there no word sent about this man's missing heart? Did you somehow miss the hole in his chest?"

"We... um..." the mayor began, searching for the right words to use that wouldn't make him look completely incompetent. "... When we found Theobald, 'e looked like *that*, and there were them bite marks on 'is neck. 'E was already dead, and we knew what done it, so we didn't check further..."

Adalgrim sighed again. "His missing heart does change some things, but shouldn't be anything too major... Let's check out the homes of the other missing people, why don't we?"

The mayor immediately led them out of the hut and walked toward another isolated hut on the outskirts of the village. Adalgrim silently walked through it, paying special attention to the windows and doors. The group then moved on to the next hut, and then the next, and so on.

Throughout the entire process, Leon himself didn't say a single word. Watching the brown-haired man go to work, he could tell Adalgrim was well-used to identifying demonic power; he was just such an expert in demonology that Xaphan had once warned him about when cautioning him against leaving corpses Leon killed with the demon's power.

Needless to say, Leon suddenly found himself uncomfortable around the older knight. Unfortunately, Xaphan had felt somewhat depressed and slightly insulted that Leon had caught up to him so quickly, and so had spent the past year or so completely focused on recovering his power. Consequently, even if Leon called out to the demon, he was likely in such a deep meditative trance that he wouldn't respond.

By the time they reached the last hut, the rest of the squad caught up to them, having secured the horses in the offered barn.

"So," Adalgrim began outside of the last hut, "here's what I think happened. The vamp we're looking for probably rolled in several days before the disappearances and spied on the village for a while. It identified several people it could snatch without immediately raising the alarm. After kidnapping these people, it immediately sacrificed one of them by draining him of blood, then ripped out his heart to try and puppet his corpse with magic. After failing, the corpse was dumped in the forest where it was later found by a village hunter. The status of the other four kidnapped men is currently unknown. Oh, and this vampire seems to be contracted with some kind of fire demon."

“Doesn’t sound too unusual,” one of the men-at-arms in the squad said, “though it might’ve been easier to simply incinerate the body somewhere else.”

“True, but when have you ever seen demon worshippers doing something logical?” Adalgrim responded. “That being said, for a vamp to take the risk of kidnapping five people at once is fairly rare, so assume we’re dealing with a strong creature. Don’t go anywhere alone, and if you happen to see it, fetch either me or Sir Leon, here.”

Leon looked up, slightly startled at the other knight mentioning his name.

“Don’t look too surprised, Sir Leon, as I said, this vamp is likely very strong; you’re probably going to get a chance to fight before this is over...”

A smile broke out over Leon’s face and his hand went for his hip again. However, once again, it grasped nothing but empty air, and he was left profoundly unsatisfied.

“Now, then,” Adalgrim continued, “Let’s get started on tracking this monster down!”

The soldiers began to stretch and make last-minute checks on their armor and weapons while Adalgrim leaned in closer to the mayor and began asking about the surrounding forest; specifically, he was looking for the most likely place for the vampire to hide.

“Is there anywhere that is particularly hot, or at least, a place that has been notably warm over the past few weeks?” the knight asked.

“Actually, there are a couple places that spring to mind,” the mayor responded.

Adalgrim flashed him a vicious smile, the kind that graces the lips of a predator that just caught a whiff of its prey. “Show me,” he growled.

Chapter 202: Vampire’s Den

The first place the mayor led the group to was a nearby section of forest that had burned down several years before. Much of the flora had regrown during that time, but there were still a handful of burned and blackened stumps here and there.

“This isn’t it,” Adalgrim stated almost instantly upon arrival. “This place makes for a poor hiding place, and any fire magic in the air that the forest fire may have produced has long since dissipated.”

“T’ be honest, I didn’t really think the monster would be ‘ere, either,” the mayor admitted.

“Then why show us?” Adalgrim asked.

“It’s on the way t’ a much likelier location: where we used t’ burn our dead,” the mayor responded. “It’s a small mausoleum that ‘asn’t been used in years, not since we built a new place closer t’ the village.”

“Sounds promising,” Adalgrim replied with a vicious smile.

The mayor continued to lead them onward. As they walked, Leon pulled out a finger-sized strip of mashed meat and bone, a special meal that the beastmasters had been providing him with to feed Anzu. The young griffin happily swallowed it whole when Leon held it before him.

“Why doesn’t he ever do that with me?” Alix wondered aloud from just behind them with a hint of bitterness in her voice. Even after a year of nearly always being in her presence, Anzu still refused to eat anything she gave him, despite being comfortable enough around her to snuggle and allow her to groom him.

Leon silently chuckled, but he didn’t have an answer to give her that he hadn’t already offered before. He had imprinted on Anzu, and so the griffin considered Leon to be his parent—or family, at least, as Anzu could probably identify that he and Leon weren’t visually similar enough to be parent and child.

“I guess he knows that I’m just that much more likable,” Leon replied sarcastically.

“You know, that won’t come true no matter how many times you say it out loud,” Alix shot back with a playful grin.

“Really?” Leon asked with faux confusion and fear. “Anzu, who do you like more?”

As if understanding Leon’s words, the rapidly growing griffin then rubbed itself against Leon’s legs, like a housecat.

With a smarmy smile, Leon glanced back at Alix. After more than a year getting to know each other, she didn’t need Leon to remove his helmet to know his expression. She responded by sticking out her tongue, leading them both to chuckle.

The two had a somewhat unique relationship compared to all the other squires and knights they had met, a fact that they were well aware of after a year at the Bull’s Horns. That being said, they were close in age, they had a similar amount of battle experience, and Trajan had even promised Alix a place in his retinue after she achieved third-tier and Leon knighted her. Of course, she knew that this was mostly a formality; almost all squires joined their knights’ units, usually under their direct command. She didn’t honestly believe that her skills had impressed the Prince enough to make the offer out of a genuine desire to add her to his retinue. Still, she was happy to receive the offer, as being in the retinue of a Prince was perhaps the single best job a soldier could land, and certainly not one a young woman from a nowhere town near the border ever expected to have.

So, with the knowledge that they wouldn’t be knight and squire for long, and that they’d probably be fighting side-by-side for a while longer, Leon and Alix relaxed around each other, and neither held the other to the expected standards of formality that other more noble knights might insist upon.

“We’re almost there,” the mayor announced, putting a severe dampener on the mood. Leon and Alix immediately put on their serious faces and Anzu, noticing the change in demeanor, went from happily trotting along at Leon’s side to moving through the underbrush like he was stalking prey—though his bright white fur and feathers that stuck out in the underbrush of the forest ruined his attempts to be sneaky.

“There it is,” the mayor said, pointing to a small square kiln made of simple clay bricks, just large enough to hold half a dozen bodies. There was a small unused and overgrown dirt path leading from the front all the way back to the village, but it could barely be seen anymore, making it clear just how little the villagers used this crematorium.

Adalgrim felt like this place was a little too small, but that was going merely by the place's outside appearance, and he wasn't going to take chances with a vampire. He made a few hand gestures, and his squad spread out, surrounding the entire building. Meanwhile, he, Leon, their squires, and two more members of his squad cautiously approached the door. There weren't any windows in the crematorium, so the only way in and out was the front door, an intimidating thing made entirely of iron and lightly enchanted to resist the heat of the crematory fires. It didn't seem locked, though, which was yet another sign that told Adalgrim his quarry wasn't present.

Leon began to summon his power, letting it fill his body and ready him for battle, while from his soul realm he called forth his sword—he'd managed to get a handle on that power after about four months of practice, and he gained enough confidence in using it that his soul realm was where he stored his sword now. His family's deceptively simple and inornate weapon appeared in his hand with a flash of blue light, while Adalgrim beside him retrieved his own sword, and one of the soldiers accompanying them stood by the door. With a nod from Adalgrim, the soldier kicked the door in and the others raced past him into the building.

The soldiers surged into the small building with no attempts at being subtle. Leon and Alix's swords were raised and Anzu was at their heels, ready to tear into anyone that threatened them. However, the only room in the crematorium was deserted, devoid even of ash or dust.

"Yeah, this didn't seem like the place, but we had to check," Adalgrim said, following his statement up with a booming laugh.

Leon, Alix, and Anzu relaxed, though the latter needed Leon to scratch him on the head before his back straightened out and he retracted his wings.

Adalgrim looked around for a little while, but after not finding anything, he led the small group back outside. "Nothing here," he explained, putting the rest of the squad at ease. "Is there anywhere else that might have a high concentration of fire magic? Or at least, somewhere that would offer a good hiding place?" he asked the mayor.

The mayor thought for a moment and was about to answer in the negative, but then he suddenly caught himself as he realized something. "There is actually, somethin', Good Sir! There are a bunch of old mines 'bout five miles north of 'ere! They went dry couple centuries back, so they completely slipped my mind!"

"Abandoned mines? You're just telling us about those *now*?" Adalgrim asked in disbelief.

"Probably should've led with that information," Leon drily remarked. "Feels kind of like we wasted our time, now..."

"Terribly sorry, Good Sirs, my village ain't been a minin' town for a long time, it's easy t' forget they're there!"

"Whatever, just take us there!" Adalgrim said.

"That's... a long ways..." the mayor said dejectedly. He wasn't even a first-tier mage, and not a young man either, so his 'about five miles' would take all day.

"If time is of the essence, you could show us where to go on a map," Leon suggested. "If we can't find the mines, we can always come back and have you lead us there..."

Adalgrim nodded his assent, as the weakest mages among their party were Alix and his own squire, both being at the second-tier. They could travel those five miles in an hour or two, despite the rough and wild forest between them and their destination.

The mayor eagerly accepted the proposal, and in twenty minutes, the soldiers were marching off into the brush. A short hour and a half later, the group arrived at the base of a series of shallow hills, every one with the entrance to a mineshaft built somewhere upon it.

"Oh this is going to be fun," Leon said sarcastically once he reached the top of the first hill and saw the dozen or so mineshafts before them. "We're going to have to clear each and every one of these, aren't we?"

"That shouldn't be necessary," Adalgrim said with a confident smile. "How much did the Knight Academy teach you about identifying signs of demonic or vampiric activity?"

"Nothing at all," Leon answered. "They mostly focused on vampires themselves, rather than how to find them, and demons weren't even touched on."

"That's a shame," Adalgrim remarked with a frown. "Well, no reason this can't be a learning experience. Reach out with your magic senses and inspect each of the mine entrances."

Is it 'senses', plural? Or should it be singular?' Leon asked himself. With a shrug, he followed that up with 'I suppose it doesn't really matter...'

Leon did as instructed, projecting his magic power outward and feeling his spine resonate in response. Over the past year, Trajan had him practicing this technique as much as possible, as his ability to project his senses using magic was one of the most versatile powers in a higher-tiered mage's wheelhouse. By now, Leon had gotten a good enough handle on the power that he could cover everything within about a hundred feet of him if he tried. In this case, he saved power by not needing to see behind him and only needing to scan the mineshaft entrances.

His range could only cover about half of the entrances around the squad, but he could sense every little detail in them, down to the grain in the wood of the sealed doors. He was about to ask what he was looking for when he sensed something strange coming from one of the entrances. It was a familiar feeling, a few stray wisps of power that almost resembled Xaphan's demonfire that he had frequently called upon. It wasn't an exact match, but he could say with some certainty that he had found where the vampire was hiding.

"I... think our vampire is hiding in there," he said, pointing to the mineshaft in question.

"Not bad," Adalgrim said with an impressed smile. "You got that on your first try!"

Leon's face went red, and he was once again grateful that he hadn't removed his helmet.

'Perhaps I should have waited for him to tell me what to look for...' he thought to himself.

"Well, I think I can sense some kind of fire magic coming from there," he explained, as he felt that it needed an explanation.

“Your senses are sharp, that’s the place I would’ve guessed as well,” Adalgrim said. The older knight then led the group onward, toward the mineshaft he and Leon had identified. He didn’t stop to question Leon further and didn’t seem suspicious at all as to how Leon located the mineshaft so quickly, much to the younger man’s relief.

As they drew closer, Leon could sense the strands of demonfire much clearer, and took a few moments to study it; he hadn’t seen any demonic power aside from Xaphan’s before, and he was interested in seeing the differences, if there even were any to be seen. He didn’t have the time for an in-depth study, though, but what he did see gave him a small measure of comfort. The demonic fire magic he could sense in the air was barely any different to the fire magic he’d seen before when he was younger, and when he was training with Trajan’s other knights. If he wasn’t already aware of what demonic fire felt like, he doubted he would’ve ever thought that what he sensed was any different to normal fire magic.

This lessened his fear of Adalgrim perceiving Xaphan’s power within him a little bit, but that didn’t mean he was about to let loose with a blast of demonfire, either.

“Let’s get this door open, then,” Adalgrim said. He stepped forward, waving toward a soldier with a hatchet hanging from his belt, but when he touched the supposedly sealed door, it immediately swung open. “What the...” Adalgrim muttered in confusion.

“I... guess the vampire *does* need to get outside somehow,” Leon said.

The boards that made the door look sealed were still there, but there was enough space for the soldiers to shimmy past if they wanted. They didn’t want to, though, and the soldier with the hatchet took a few moments to remove the boards that were in their way.

And then they were in, descending into the darkness of the old mine. The light and breezy atmosphere quickly turned tense and charged in the darkness of the mine, even though everyone was able to see well enough in the dark. Alix gripped her sword tight enough to turn her knuckles white, while Anzu grew more and more nervous and jittery, constantly glancing back toward the rapidly shrinking light of the open door.

Leon himself wasn’t feeling comfortable descending into the ground, but he was comforted immensely with his sword back in hand.

The squad moved deeper into the mine. There were a few forks, but each time Adalgrim was able to sense the demonic magic and lead them in the right direction—after leaving a marking on the wall so they could find their way out again, of course. Still, the group only became more and more tense with every step.

The air grew still and cold as they pressed deeper. The darkness weighed down on them, even though they could still see with a bit of applied magic. Making matters worse, the aura of demonic magic grew thicker and more intense, until all but Leon felt it pressing down upon them.

Suddenly, the group turned a corner and were nearly blinded by the light of a small candle. They had to hurry to throttle the magic flowing into their eyes before they could see again.

“We’re getting closer,” Adalgrim whispered, confirming what they all knew at that point. “Keep an eye out for traps...”

The air began to grow warmer now, and they could hear a strange sound coming from up ahead. After a few dozen more steps, they found that the sound was that of a man shouting in frustration.

“... isn’t it working?! I’ve done everything asked of me!” cried the voice.

Rounding one last corner, the group found themselves looking down from wooden scaffolding into a small cavern. There were a few boxes, tables, and a bed in the corner, but the most eye-catching thing was a massive bonfire in the center of the room. The fire burned dark red, and despite its size, produced no smoke.

“Demonfire...” Leon whispered.

“Indeed,” confirmed Adalgrim.

Across the cavern lay four bodies, each upon a table. Each one was shirtless, and the group could see that they all had similar holes and burn marks on their chests as the man the villagers had found abandoned in the forest.

Hunched over one of the bodies was the source of the cries of frustration: an inhumanly-pale figure, with little muscle to speak of and veins and arteries visible beneath his skin. His bare back was covered in horrific scars as if someone had tried to burn him alive and failed.

The figure was pressing down on the chest of the body he was hunched over, doing something that was producing a lot of orange light. Whatever he was doing didn’t seem to be working, as he only grew more and more frustrated and began to swear and curse as loudly as he could.

“Spread out, and let’s take him,” Adalgrim whispered.

Chapter 203: Fire Demon

The demonic aura of the cave permeated everything within, including Leon himself. Traces of this aura seeped into his body, where it was carried to his heart and into his soul realm. This foreign magic power wasn’t nearly enough to do even superficial damage, but it was certainly enough to be detected, even by those not paying attention.

Case in point, Xaphan, who had been silently focusing on his recovery for several months, suddenly opened his eyes upon the aura’s entrance to Leon’s soul realm. He hadn’t so much as moved, let alone spoken aloud for three months, so focused was he on regaining his power faster than Leon was growing stronger, but this aura immediately caught his attention and pulled him out of his meditative trance.

“This aura...” the demon whispered in a hoarse and guttural growl, “I know it...”

Xaphan rose from his sitting position on the island, the flames covering his body burning orange and his eyes a bright gold. The more of this aura he sensed, the more enraged he became, and his fire burned higher and greater until not even the shadow of his obsidian body could be seen within.

“Amon...” Xaphan spat, packing more hatred and anger into that name than he could ever properly express.

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The soldiers spread themselves out on the scaffolding, which encircled the cavern to provide support and stability. There were a few creaks and moans from the wooden planks as they moved, but whatever the vampire was doing below them seemed to be taking up all of his attention.

“What is he doing?” Leon asked, whispering in Adalgrim’s ear.

“I think he’s trying to make ghouls,” the older knight responded.

Leon frowned but was grateful that the vampire seemed to be failing at his task. Ghouls were corpses that were controlled by a demon worshipper to perform basic labor not dissimilar to stone giants or the bronze golems he’d encountered in the past, only instead of a manufactured body, ghouls were made by puppeting corpses, making them much weaker and prone to rot. Creating a handful of ghouls was one of the first steps older and stronger vampires took in their establishment of a nest.

But, for one reason or another, the vampire below them couldn’t accomplish his task. He kept injecting his magic power into the corpse he was leaning over, but it remained inanimate.

“GET UP!” the vampire roared at the corpse. “DO SOMETHING!” The creature forced something that glowed red deep into the corpse’s open chest and waited. For several seconds, he stood there, watching in frustration as the glowing object slowly dimmed.

The vampire then turned back to the bonfire and walked to a small table with several bowls placed upon it. He reached for the largest, made of dark grey metal and covered in glowing red runes. The bowl could easily hold several gallons of blood, and from the stains on the sides Leon guessed it frequently did, but now it was almost entirely empty.

Dropping to his knees, the vampire begged, “Please, my Lord, tell me where I have failed in my task. Bestow your knowledge unto me, that I may bring others into your glorious light!”

Once he finished his plea, the vampire then picked up the bowl, brought it to his lips, and began to drink the last dregs of blood within.

“We can’t let him finish...” Adalgrim said quietly. Looking around, the soldiers had mostly gotten into position and were waiting on him to give the word. The vampire below was chugging the last drops of blood which was causing the demonic aura that pervaded the cave to roil and churn, so Adalgrim didn’t hesitate to raise his hand and make a fist—his silent signal to attack.

Immediately, eight soldiers leaped down from the scaffolding, including Adalgrim, and attacked the vampire. Three of them were wielding spears, and they plummeted toward the creature seeking to impale him as they landed. Adalgrim led the attack, while his squire, Leon, and Alix watched. Leon was a little curious as to why the fifth-tier Adalgrim wasn’t using elemental magic, but it was already too late to ask.

Whether it was by his magic senses or by hearing their descent, the vampire realized what was happening and barely managed to dodge the spears by the skin of his teeth. This might’ve left the three spear-wielding soldiers vulnerable, but Adalgrim charged with his sword drawn and closed the distance between himself and the vampire in less than a second; the vampire never got a chance to retaliate against the spear-wielders.

However, even when surrounded and heavily outnumbered, the blood-sucker was a terrifying foe. He dodged Adalgrim's opening sword stab and responded with a blast of fire, sending the knight reeling. Three more soldiers attacked from behind, preventing the vampire from capitalizing on the knight's brief vulnerability. Adalgrim took the opportunity to regain his footing and charge again, ignoring the embers that smoldered in his armor.

The vampire was cornered and desperate, with strong, armored, and experienced soldiers completely surrounding him, and it was only the liberal application of demonfire that kept them at bay. There was no witty banter, no pause to speak; Adalgrim and his soldiers were the pictures of professionalism, and they didn't give the vampire a single moment to recover, constantly attacking when his back was turned and when the demonfire dissipated.

After almost a minute of applying pressure, though, the vampire began to slip up. First by only sustaining a few nicks and cuts, but eventually, Adalgrim stepped back and conjured a small ice spike about the size of a large nail in the air. This spike was launched straight into the vampire's back, eliciting a blood-curdling cry of pain. The soldiers on the other side didn't waste this opportunity, and charged, with one cutting off one of the vampire's arms and the other two stabbing him in the chest.

"Nooo..." the vampire moaned as his blood poured out of him and he sank to his knees. His sunken, blood-red eyes turned to the bonfire as Adalgrim stood behind him, ready to cut the creature's head off.

"Maybe you could've used that ice spike from the beginning?" one of the other soldiers said.

"Yeah, could've saved a ton of time," another responded.

Adalgrim chuckled as he raised his blade and said with equal amounts of sarcasm, "I suppose that would've been better, but I didn't want all of you to feel useless..."

The vampire continued to stare into the fire throughout all of this, completely unmoving. He didn't even try to rise from his kneeling position. Leon followed the vampire's gaze out of curiosity, wondering what the creature found so compelling—assuming it wasn't just dejection from being abandoned by the demon he worshipped.

Leon froze as he stared into the fire. He saw eyes, barely visible but still distinct enough for him to know that it wasn't a trick of the writhing flames. These eyes seemed to stare back at him.

Suddenly, as Adalgrim was bringing his sword down to strike the killing blow, the vampire burst into dark red flames hurling him backward and a voice boomed throughout the cavern, shaking the rocks and causing long streams of dust and soil to fall from the ceiling.

"YOU HAVE BEEN REMARKABLY DISAPPOINTING. AS YOU CANNOT PROVIDE ME WITH ANYTHING OTHER THAN MORTAL BLOOD, I WILL TAKE MY DUE FROM YOUR OWN FLESH..."

Leon stared in horror as the vampire burned. The creature screamed and thrashed around, desperately trying to beat out the fire that consumed him, but demonfire isn't so easily extinguished when provided with a steady supply of magic power. A couple of soldiers instinctively tried to get close and put out the fire, but the power radiating out from it prevented them from getting close enough.

[Don't let that being die by fire!] shouted Xaphan, taking Leon completely by surprise. [Kill him now! Don't let that demon take him!]

Leon didn't question his partner—if this was important enough for the demon to break his months-long silence, then the least Leon could do was to take it with the utmost seriousness. Leon called upon his magic power, channeled it into his right arm, and conjured a golden lightning spear. The spear was so bright that it illuminated the entire cavern, making even the bonfire seem pale in comparison.

Taking only a second to aim, Leon hurled the spear at the vampire, who had fallen to the ground and ceased to move. The spear impaled the vampire and exploded into a shower of sparks and smaller arcs of lightning, enveloping the vampire completely. The force of the blast was enough to knock back several of the other soldiers who were standing too close, and everyone had to avert their gaze to prevent the lightning from searing their eyes.

The lightning dissipated after a moment, and everyone opened their eyes to see the vampire lying charred and smoking on the ground. He was dead as far as anyone could tell, with not even the faintest wisp of magical power detectable upon his corpse.

The bonfire in the center of the cavern, however, was still burning just as brightly, and the eyes within stared back at Leon. There was no hatred or anger to be seen within them, but Leon could see faint annoyance in that demonic gaze. Hatred and anger, however, he could feel rippling out from Xaphan like tidal waves.

[Amon...] Xaphan whispered almost too quietly for Leon to hear.

The bonfire then extinguished itself, plunging the cavern into darkness.

[What was *that*?] Leon demanded while Adalgrim and the other soldiers swore and tried to get their bearings in the sudden dark.

[... Nothing...] Xaphan muttered.

[My ass that was *nothing*!] Leon shouted back. [I can feel your anger, demon! We're connected by our contract, you can't lie to me! What was *that*?]

Xaphan was silent for a moment, debating with himself how much he wanted to say, but he could hear the insistence in Leon's voice and knew that he wasn't going to give this up, so he said, [That was Amon, one of my rivals from back when I was still competing to become a Lord of Flame. It was over his corpse that I claimed the title of Lord.]

[That fire didn't seem particularly corpse-like,] Leon pointed out.

[No, it didn't,] Xaphan admitted, his anger cooling with every second that passed. [But he was dead at my feet! I checked countless times—he was dead! But now I have my proof... Amon yet lives...]

['Proof'?] Leon asked. [So you suspected this guy was still kicking?]

[I was told that he survived, and while it was by a trustworthy source, it still doesn't quite compare to encountering evidence of his survival in some random cave in the middle of a lower plane!]

As they spoke, the other soldiers finished channeling magic into their eyes, adjusting their vision to the dark, and started getting organized.

"Let's try and grab these bodies!" Adalgrim called out. "If we can transport them back to the village, then we should!"

"What about the vamp?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Leave it," the knight responded.

Leon and Alix jumped down to help out while Anzu stayed up on the scaffolding shaking like a leaf in the wind. The young griffin wasn't taking this experience well, what with descending so deep underground and the primal fear of fire. Leon wasn't needed to help with the bodies, so he and Alix returned to the top of the scaffolding to comfort Anzu. The griffin had laid down on the ground and folded his wings over his eyes, shaking all the while. Leon knelt down and began stroking the fur on his back, while Alix made soft humming sounds.

It worked, as when the soldiers climbed back up the scaffolding with the bodies of the villagers, Anzu had stopped shaking, stood up, and tried to curl up into Leon's arms. He still wouldn't let Alix touch him, though, snapping at her when she tried.

"That's rude," Alix said with a frown, trying not to sound too offended.

"I'm sure he'll come around eventually," Leon said sincerely. It was starting to grate on his nerves a little how much Anzu depended on him, especially since he wouldn't eat much unless Leon himself fed him.

Regardless, the griffin had calmed down enough to follow Leon and the rest of the soldiers as they marched back out of the cave.

[So, can you tell me any more about this 'Amon'?] Leon asked as he walked.

[... No,] Xaphan answered.

[Really? After what I just saw?! That demon looked like it was going to try and burn us all to death!]

[That would've been impossible,] Xaphan replied. [All he was trying to take was the magic power within that vampire, and he wasn't being gentle about it.]

[And you didn't want him to take that power, so you had me kill the vampire,] Leon observed.

[Right. It's only denying him a minuscule amount of power, but I still couldn't stand to let him have it!]

Leon waited for Xaphan to continue, but after several seconds he realized the demon wasn't going to. [Very well,] he said. [I'll let you keep this secret for now, but I expect a story one of these days...]

[That's... fair,] Xaphan responded.

The rest of the walk back out of the cave was done in silence.

Chapter 204: No Time to Rest

"Uggh, fighting in caves is the *worst*," Adalgrim said with relief as he led the group out of the mine.

"Does this sort of thing happen often? Fighting in caves, I mean," Leon asked.

"Not so much as to be expected, but certainly enough for me to know that I hate it with a burning passion!" Adalgrim responded. "Uhh, no pun intended..."

The rest of the group walked out of the mine, and all seemed to share Adalgrim's sentiment; their faces brightened with joy as soon as the shadows of the mine were firmly behind them. None, however, were as happy as Anzu to be out of that dark and confined space, as the griffin displayed when he ran outside jumping and rolling around in the grass.

"Shit," Leon muttered as he watched Anzu celebrate.

"He's going to need a *serious* bath when we get home," Alix observed.

"I know," Leon replied with a weary sigh. Since Anzu generally didn't appreciate being approached, let alone touched, by anyone except Leon, it would then fall to him to make sure the griffin was clean when they returned to the Horns. Anzu tolerated Alix enough that she could help out a little, but it would still fall to Leon to do most of the work.

"I have to say, seeing a tamed griffin is exceedingly rare," Adalgrim said while the rest of the group got a few minutes of rest. "I'm a little jealous."

"It was luck that brought him to me," Leon said. "His mother abandoned him, probably for being an albino and a runt, and she left him almost absurdly close to me. He wasn't old enough to have opened his eyes yet, so that gave me the opportunity to imprint on him."

"That *is* lucky," Adalgrim replied with a smile of appreciation. "He's going to be one hell of a war mount when he gets bigger, I can tell. Griffins are fast, strong, and one of the fiercest beasts in the entire Kingdom."

"Have you ever fought one before?" Alix inquired.

"I have," Adalgrim answered, not bothered at all with Alix's question despite her lower rank and status. "About ten years ago, just before I ascended to the fifth-tier, I and my commander were sent out to find a man-eating griffin about fifty miles north of here."

"I assume you managed to kill it," Leon guessed, to which Adalgrim nodded with an expression of pride. "How did you keep it from flying away?"

"My commander was a wind mage. We tracked it for two weeks, and when we caught up to it, we ambushed it while it was sleeping. My commander shredded the beast's wings with a few wind blades. Despite these injuries, it still killed more than half of our squad before we ended its life. Griffins are strong beasts and have immense natural talents for wind and lightning magic. As I said, they're strong and fast, and their abilities with magic only make that even truer."

"That reminds me," Leon said as he glanced back at the mine, "why didn't you use your ice magic from the very beginning of that fight? It seems to me like you could've ended that vampire before he had a chance to fight back..."

"Oh... that..." Adalgrim murmured with a bashful look. "I... Well, with one of the Prince's own men watching, I suppose I wanted to show what my squad could do... I didn't want to end the battle so quickly that it made the rest of my squad look superfluous..."

"I see..." Leon muttered, failing to hide the hint of disapproval in his voice.

"Why don't we head back to the village and report our success?" Adalgrim suggested, trying to divert attention away from his embarrassment. "If we hurry, we can even make it back to the Horns by nightfall."

The prospect of sleeping in their own beds got the tired squad back on their feet and moving back to the village. In fact, they reached their destination in less than an hour, they were so motivated. Then, after informing a grateful mayor of their success and handing over the dead villagers for cremation, the squad jumped on their horses and started making their way back to the Horns.

Since this was his first time performing the job expected of all the Bull King's knights, Leon still had a couple questions for which he needed answers. To that end, not long after leaving the village, Leon spurred his horse forward to ride next to Adalgrim. Normally, no one was to ride next to the leader of a Legion party, as it was expected that only the leader would take the lead position, but since Leon was the same tier as Adalgrim and served a Prince, no one batted an eye.

"Sir Adalgrim," Leon began.

"Please, call me Grim," the older knight replied with a good-natured smile. "Most knights are pretty informal with each other after they've been in battle together, no reason we can't be as well, right? Besides, I know my name's kind of a mouthful..."

"In that case, please just call me Leon," the younger knight responded, bringing a smile to Adalgrim's face.

"So, what do you need, Leon?" Grim asked.

"Out of curiosity, how routine was this? Is this what I can expect if Prince Trajan were to send me out again?"

"Well, I suppose it went pretty well, all things considered. There are always a few complications in these kinds of missions that you need to watch out for, chief among them is whether or not the vampire sticks around after its first couple of victims," Adalgrim explained. Leon listened intently, trying to soak up all that he could so that he wouldn't be caught off-guard in the future.

"And is it often that you arrive only to find the beast is already gone?" Leon asked.

"I've been sent out to investigate more than two dozen vampire attacks, and I'd say in about half of those cases, the creature fled before my party could arrive. This hunt was actually pretty straightforward in that regard. In my experience, vamps will observe their target settlement for a few days, single out enough people who seem like easy prey, then seize as many as they can in a single night. The smart ones then hide as best as they can, and the *really* smart ones take their captives and get the hell out of there as fast as their demon-worshipping asses can manage."

"How about other monsters?" Leon eagerly asked. He had been hoping to test himself during this mission to see how far he had come in his training with the Prince, but in the end, he hadn't actually done much. From the slightly dissatisfied look Alix had behind him, he could tell she felt the same. Anzu, meanwhile, just happily ran alongside Leon's horse seemingly without a care in the world.

"Like I said before, I was sent after a griffin once," Grim said. "There were also a few werewolves I was called in for, and quite a few other less exotic animals that were harassing people out in the countryside."

"And how often are you sent out?" Leon continued, causing Grim to chuckle in amusement.

"Usually once or twice a week, depending on what I was sent out for last. I think my squad and I are looking at a good week off after dealing with a vampire... If we were sent after something like a third-tier bear or a wolf pack led by a relatively strong alpha, then we could be sent back out within a few days."

"Interesting..." Leon muttered as he lost himself in thought. The job wasn't always exciting, mostly just hunting beasts and monsters who had grown too strong for local militia and Legion patrols to deal with. And, as Grim continued to elaborate on, going after smaller and less significant beasts was the norm; vampires and werewolves made up only a fraction of what a knight in the Bull Kingdom would have to deal with to keep the peace.

The two knights continued to speak for several hours about the duties they perform, though it was mostly just Leon asking more in-depth questions and Grim answering to the best of his ability. By the time they started drawing near the Horns, it had grown dark and they were still talking. So enthralled were they in their conversation, in fact, that they didn't notice the soft glow in the distance until Alix spoke up.

"Um... Sirs, look at that!" she said in alarm once they drew close enough to be sure of what the glow was.

Leon, startled by Alix's loud outburst, glanced over at what she was pointing at: the city of Ariminium that the Southern Horn watched over. Much of the city was obscured in smoke, but they could still see the source: one of the southern districts of the city was burning.

"That district is home to Ariminium's mage guilds!" Grim said with a slight degree of panic.

"Let's get back quickly!" Leon responded, to which Grim nodded. The entire squad spurred their horses onward; there were seven miles between them and the post houses by the Northern Horn, and it would take them about half an hour to arrive.

Once they reached the stables, Grim shouted at his squire to take care of the paperwork to sign the horses back in, then he turned to Leon and said, "We need to check in with our bosses!"

"Right!" Leon shouted back. The orange glow of the fire raging in the city illuminated the entire overcast sky, and even from down on the plains they could hear the shouting and alarms coming from the Horns.

"Let's go!" Leon said to Alix, and they and Anzu sprinted up the ramp. Those manning the gatehouses had to stop them to check their ID's, but with the current emergency, they didn't make Leon's small group wait, rushing them past to make way for the other soldiers who were coming down the ramp.

"Where should we go?" Alix asked.

"The keep, to check in with the Prince," Leon responded.

"What if he's not there?" she replied.

"I'm sure he'll be there coordinating the response for whatever started that fire," Leon said.

They ran through as much of the Northern Horn as they could, but there were many baileys separated by walls and more gatehouses to get past; it took them almost another hour to finally enter the Southern Horn.

"There's something definitely wrong here," Leon observed as they wound their way through the baileys of the Southern Horn. He could hear the sounds of armed and armored soldiers preparing for something, and the glow of the burning city hadn't diminished.

"If this were a normal fire, then it would've been taken care of by now," Alix added, noticing the same thing Leon had.

Their observations didn't make them stop; rather, they sped up, reaching the keep fifteen minutes after arriving at the Southern Horn. There, they found the Prince standing in the main bailey surrounded by Legates and Tribunes, while hundreds of soldiers quietly waited in formation.

Noticing them arrive, Trajan shouted, "Sir Leon! Get over here!"

Leon hurried forward with Anzu at his side, while Alix went to wait with the other squires.

"Your Highness," Leon said, bowing slightly to the Prince. His manner was sloppy, and under normal circumstances would've elicited a few disapproving looks from the nobler Tribunes and Legates, but now was not a time to focus on etiquette, and no one paid him any mind.

"You got here just in time," the Prince said with a deadly serious attitude, "we need everyone we can get. One of the five major mage guilds in the city has rebelled."

"They *rebelled*?!" Leon asked in shock. "*Here* of all places?!"

"We're still getting to the bottom of why but dealing with the situation at hand is more important," Trajan said, waving his hand to a map of the city on a temporary table set up just for this meeting.

The delta of the Tyrrhenian River formed a number of large islands, and Ariminium sprawled out over all of them. This meant that much of the city was separated by branches of the river that flowed into the Gulf, and even these islands were filled with small canals.

"The Bluefire Guild has seized control of the entire guild district," Trajan explained, pointing to one of the largest of the southern islands. "We've contained them there, but it's going to take a large push to get past the barricades they've erected on the bridges and enter the district."

"Your Highness, what about using the navy?" Minerva, the sixth-tier Legate and second-in-command of the Bull's Horns, asked. Leon, looking around at the suggestion of using ships, noticed that the Legate in charge of the fleet stationed at the Horns was conspicuously absent.

"Legate Merovic has indicated to me that he's not going to move without a direct order from the Consul of the Gulf," Trajan said with a furious look. "When we regain control of the guild district, I swear I'm going to have a *long conversation* with that man about desertion and dereliction of duty!"

Leon looked back at the map. If the navy wasn't going to help them get to the burning island, then that left one option: forcing their way through the three bridges that connected the island to its neighbors.

He sighed, but inside he felt a sense of exhilaration. He wasn't able to test himself against Amon's vampire, but this would be the perfect time to see how much his skills had improved over the past year of training.

Chapter 205: Crossing the River

Huge formations of soldiers streamed through the streets of Ariminium toward the guild district. Their first point of order was to reinforce the units already posted on the islands that surrounded the guild district, but it would take a while for the ten thousand soldiers that had been mobilized to make their way through the winding streets and arrive at their destination. Slowing them down even further was the continued refusal of the Legate in charge of the local fleet to transport troops, so all of the soldiers had to pass through the narrow streets and bridges, forming bottlenecks that took an inordinate amount of time to get past.

"At this rate, we'll be lucky if we can launch our attack by morning," Minerva said to Trajan as she frowned at the sight of thousands of soldiers attempting to cross a bridge only wide enough for five or six at a time.

"I actually have an idea that should help speed things up a little," Trajan said, turning Minerva's attention toward the smoke and fiery glow in the distance. There were still several miles of two, three, and four-story buildings to get through before they arrived at the closest bridge to the guild district, so they couldn't see their goal, but the light of the fire reflecting off the thick clouds in the sky couldn't be missed.

"What's the plan?" Minerva inquired.

"I don't want to explain it more than once, so let's wait until we can form up with the rest of my knights before we speak further..." Trajan said. "Plus, I sent Sir Aquillius and some of his people ahead to try and calm things down. Clearly, that hasn't happened, but they and Sir Avremar should have some more information to tell us when we arrive."

"Is that who you picked to lead the quarantine?" Minerva asked with a slightly disapproving look, referring to Avremar.

"Do you have a problem with that?" Trajan asked without a hint of challenge in his voice. Minerva was the second strongest mage at the Bull's Horns, behind only himself, and he greatly valued her opinion.

"Nothing major," Minerva replied, her frown lessening slightly. "I just think he's a little over-cautious. I would prefer if those in the Legions led their soldiers with a little more aggressiveness..."

"Ah, I've the same opinion of him, but his cautious and defensive nature was why I sent him to hold the bridges and keep the rioting mages from spilling out into the rest of the city."

As the two spoke, they quickly moved toward their forward operating base, the front line command post which had been established in a small market square only two blocks away from the river and four blocks from the closest bridge to the guild district. All of the stalls that normally filled the square had been moved out and replaced with half a dozen tents, and the streets were deserted of everyone but the soldiers.

When they arrived at the base, they wasted no time entering the central tent. Waiting for them were Aquillius, Avremar, and about a dozen Tribunes and Legates in Trajan's retinue, including Leon. They had all been sent ahead while Trajan and Minerva kept an eye on the half-Legion marching through the streets; the latter only made for the base when it was clear that the ten Tribunes leading their battalions were keeping everyone moving in an orderly fashion.

"What's the situation?" Trajan asked Avremar.

"The Bluefire Guild has effectively seized the island," the Tribune instantly responded. He started with information everyone already had to make sure everyone was on the same page.

"And the other guilds?" Trajan asked.

"From what we can tell, almost all of the smaller guilds managed to evacuate, while most of the lower-tiered mages in the other five major guilds joined them," Avremar explained.

"And from what we can tell, the higher-tiered mages in the other major guilds stayed behind to prevent the riots from touching their guild halls," Aquillius added. "However, Dame Anna received some reports that a few mages from the Sanctified and Iron Dove Guilds have joined the rioters."

"Where did these reports come from?" Minerva asked the cheery young knight standing next to Aquillius.

"Some of the rioters were captured when we first tried to retake the bridges," Anna happily said with a huge smile of pride on her face. "I told a few of them that what they had done counted as treason, punishable by death. They were only too happy to give me the information they had to lessen their sentence..."

Several of the knights around the tent were a little taken aback at how bubbly Anna was as she explained her manipulation—the rioters had committed serious crimes, but not quite enough to be charged with treason, though with Trajan now taking charge, that would change for the rest of their comrades. The disconnect between her attitude and her words threw these knights for a loop, though Leon and Alix both seemed unfazed. Anna was a fifth-tier mage and an important diplomat, they knew, and her demeanor wouldn't shift much no matter her topic of conversation.

"Did they tell you the reason why they started the riot in the first place?" Minerva inquired.

"Apparently the Bluefire Guild tried to change their payment mechanism," Anna said.

Most mages that belong to guilds were essentially contractors, hired out to perform any conceivable job that might need a mage. A request would be made of the guild, the guild would receive payment, and mages could then take on the requests for a portion of that payment—the exact portion varying between guilds. These requests could be anything from creating a freezer by inscribing an ice rune to hunting rare and valuable beasts and monsters. There were even a few jobs where mages could be hired as mercenaries or bodyguards.

A significant amount of money that flowed in guilds, however, were from the businesses they ran—mostly alchemists, enchanters, and doctors. The best of each of these fields worked for Heaven's Eye, but more than half of the alchemists and enchanters in the Bull Kingdom worked for one of the big guilds in some way.

“They wanted to take all of the payment for themselves and pay their mages with some kind of ‘contribution credit’ that could be used to purchase guild products,” Anna continued. “Most of the mages took exception to that and began a protest, preventing anyone from entering the Bluefire guildhall regardless of whether they had a request or were fellow guildmates. The higher-ups in the guild tried to break up the protest, things got violent, and then everything just spiraled out of control from there... Apparently, they even tried to extend this to their enchanters, doctors, and alchemists, which only provided additional kindling for the riots.”

“Fucking *idiots*,” Avremar muttered. “You don’t fuck with people’s money, to do so is just inviting trouble that we inevitably have to clean up!”

“You’re not wrong,” Minerva conceded, but her eyes were sharp and glaring at Avremar, “but you don’t have to phrase it so crudely.”

“I’m sorry Ma’am,” Avremar immediately realized his mistake and apologized while straightening up. His battalion had failed to break through the barricades on the bridges hours before and he had been under a great deal of stress since. However, he knew that he would find no sympathy in this crowd as a little stress was no reason for a lack of formality when the situation called for it.

Sensing the need to move on, Trajan walked forward and examined the map in the center of the table they had all gathered around. “It’s going to take a few hours to get the battalions into position...” he said, glancing around the table and making sure everyone was paying attention. After ensuring that all eyes were on him, he continued, “but there’s no reason we can’t get started right away.”

He began to mark a few positions around the map, six in total, all along the riverbanks of the three islands around the guild district.

“We’re going to have six groups of three or four of our best fighters cross the river at these points and infiltrate the guild island,” Trajan explained. “They will then converge on the bridges, two teams per bridge.”

The knights around the table visibly tightened up. They would storm the bridges when their soldiers got into position, and while it would be dangerous, with their formations up and three thousand soldiers at their back, the risk was minimal until they entered the district itself. The six teams, on the other hand, would be moving through a hostile district while it burned around them.

“Are there any volunteers?” Trajan asked, glancing around the room.

Minerva immediately said, “I’m in.” She was swiftly joined by six more fifth-tier knights—including Adalgrim—and two sixth-tier knights in Trajan’s retinue. The sixth-tier knights were Trajan’s personal soldiers, and without Legions of their own to command, they didn’t see much point in joining the shield walls.

Leon, too, didn’t see much point in his taking part in the main assault on the bridges, if only because he didn’t have a shield. So, when Trajan’s eyes swept over the assembled knights again, Leon said, “Count me in, as well.”

Alix beside him trembled at his volunteering them, but she quickly nodded in solidarity when he glanced over to her. Anzu, as if sensing the increased tension in the tent, stepped closer to Leon for comfort; it was clear that the griffin wasn't going to leave Leon no matter what.

After a few more minutes, the six teams were filled out with powerful volunteers, and a time to begin was set. The rest of the meeting was spent going over which battalions would go where and coordinating them to ensure their assault coincided with the six teams' own attack.

Knowing that the two had just returned from a mission together, Minerva had Leon and Adalgrim join up in a team of their own. So, when Trajan decided that they were ready and dismissed everyone to prepare, Adalgrim and Leon left together.

"Well, I honestly didn't expect us to work together again so soon," Grim said good-naturedly. "However, I'm glad to be paired with someone I know to be dependable."

"Same to you," Leon replied, smiling at the other knight.

Their team consisted of the two knights, their two squires, and Anzu.

"Is your griffin going to accompany us?" Grim asked him, glancing down at Anzu who, as always, was right at Leon's side.

"I hope so," Leon replied. "I've had to take him to the beastmasters several times in the past year, to ensure he remains healthy and growing well, and each time they've given him a long bath in a large shallow pool. Apparently, it's supposed to help the beasts grow accustomed to water, but we've yet to test it out. He doesn't struggle as much when being bathed, though."

"I can certainly join you in hoping the little guy joins us," Grim replied. "Even at the size he's at, I can guarantee that he'll tear through first and second-tier mages fairly easily."

"It would be his first time in actual combat, and there are thousands of rioting mages in that district," Leon muttered as he looked down at Anzu. The griffin looked back at him, his bright red eyes communicating nothing but trust and confidence to Leon. His pure white body radiated the same strength as a second-tier mage, but Leon still couldn't help but worry that Anzu was going to get hurt.

"I can't help but be a little jealous, Sir," Alix stated. "Anzu and I are the same tier, but you're only worried about him!"

"I know what you can do," Leon replied. "We've fought together before, and I have faith in your abilities. Anzu is yet to be tested in battle..."

"That little beast is ready to spill some blood, trust me," Grim stated.

"I agree," Alix added.

"I guess that's that, then," Leon said with a sarcastic smile. "Anzu is perfectly ready to join us in battle."

Throughout their conversation, the team had been walking through the evacuated streets of Ariminium, with the clamor and din raised by the soldiers fading behind them. Their assigned crossing point was about a mile from the closest bridge, so they couldn't waste too much time crossing the river before the assault would begin. But, they still reached the Tyrrhenian River in good time despite their conversation.

“There doesn’t seem to be any sentries posted this far away from the bridges,” Grim’s squire whispered from atop a nearby villa. The team hadn’t walked along the riverbank to prevent the rioting mages from seeing them and raising the alarm, but that also meant that they couldn’t see the other side. Consequently, before they exposed themselves, Grim had his squire do a little scouting.

“Then we should be able to make it to the other side without trouble,” Grim said. He then looked at Leon and continued, “Let’s do this now before anyone shows up.”

Leon nodded, and the team walked out to the riverbank. Both sides of the river had been reinforced with the same concrete that the wall between the Horns was made of, and the team was about ten feet above the waterline. Fortunately, the crossing point was picked specifically because there was a small private dock nearby that gave easy access to the river.

The team quickly scurried down the wooden ramp and onto the small pier. The boat that was to dock there was absent, but they didn’t think it would be there to begin with, given what was going on over on the other side.

“This is going to be a fantastic swim,” Leon said sarcastically as he stared at the distant riverbank, more than a thousand feet away. He didn’t have the hours it would require for him to pull his armor into his soul realm—and doing so would leave him so drained as to be almost worthless in battle, besides—so he was going to have make this crossing in full kit.

“It’s not going to get any closer, no matter how long we stare,” Grim said as he crouched down and slipped into the water—his armor was much lighter, being little more than gambeson and a leather boots and bracers. Alix and his squire quickly followed suit. None of them hesitated, despite being armored themselves.

Leon sighed, then slowly lowered himself into the river. He flinched a little when his feet brushed the cold water, but the others were staring at him expectantly, so he didn’t waste any more time and dropped himself in.

Immediately, he began to fight to keep himself above the water, and he flailed a bit until he grabbed ahold of the pier and held himself up.

“I do *not* envy you right now,” Alix playfully whispered. She was wearing her own armor, but much like Grim’s, it was considerably lighter than Leon’s. “Regretting your choice of attire?”

“A little,” Leon admitted.

“You’re a fifth-tier mage, you should be able to reach the other side in a single breath,” Alix responded. “That would hardly be comfortable, but if you have to resort to it, we’ll pull you out on the other side.”

“Thanks,” Leon said with only a hint of sarcasm. He then glanced back at the pier, where Anzu was staring at him. The griffin was hanging off the pier, desperate to follow him but extremely apprehensive about the river.

“Come on,” Leon said, coaxing the griffin into the river. “There isn’t anything in here that you need to fear, it’s only a little water...”

After a few seconds, Leon managed to get Anzu into the river, though the griffin certainly didn't look happy. And with that, the team pushed off from the pier.

As soon as his hand left the pier, Leon struggled to keep his head above water. The current wasn't too strong, but it still threatened to sweep them all into the Gulf. Fighting both the current and gravity, Leon forced himself to concentrate simply on kicking his legs and keeping himself moving; his fifth-tier strength was great, and he was extremely grateful for it, as he doubted that he'd have been able to keep going with all of his armor if he were any weaker.

Still, he could see that the other three were able to keep moving, and even Anzu was keeping pace, so there was no way he could stand to fall behind.

It took the team fifteen freezing, agonizing minutes to make it to their target island. There was another private dock on the other side, and they were able to pull themselves up there. Leon made it, despite the weight of his armor. Anzu, however, was having some trouble getting out of the river on account of not having any arms. He whimpered and cried as he kept himself afloat, and Leon lay down on the dock, reached back into the river, and grabbed the griffin. Anzu had started to flail around in panic, but as soon as Leon's arms wrapped around him, he stopped and allowed Leon to lift him out of the water.

Everyone was breathing hard, and Alix and the other squire were shivering. Unfortunately, they were unable to take much time to rest.

"There are soldiers over here!" came a shout from above them. "They crossed the river! They're attacking!"

Chapter 206: The Guild District I

The shout came from above them, behind the concrete riverbank and parapet. The team immediately leaped to their feet, knowing their cover had been blown.

Leon and Grim glanced at each other, then jumped clean over the riverbank, with their second-tier squires not far behind. Little Anzu, meanwhile, shrieked at being left behind and sprinted up the ramp connecting the pier to the riverbank.

The team was faced with half a dozen young mages, dirty and ragged after spending most of the day looting the island. Four of them were armed with swords, while the weakest two had only their fists. They were standing in the small courtyard of U-shaped villa and seemed to have been dividing the spoils of their looting when they heard the team pull themselves out of the water. The villa itself had been enchanted to prevent it from burning down, but there was broken and burned furniture all around from when the place had been ransacked.

'One fourth-tier, two third-tier, a second-tier, and two first-tier mages,' Leon quickly identified.

"Drop your wea-" Grim began, but Leon didn't wait; he lunged forward before anyone could blink and skewered the closest mage to him—one of the first-tier mages—then allowed his killing intent to erupt.

The first-tier looters collapsed in fear, while the second and third-tier looters froze up. Only the fourth-tier looter was strong enough to fight off Leon's killing intent, even though it took him several seconds. By then, Leon had already killed the third-tier looter and Grim quickly advanced toward him.

The fourth-tier looter raised his sword, ready to fight, but he was so surprised and terrified from Leon's blisteringly fast attack that he didn't even realize how much stronger Grim's aura was compared to his own. The looter lunged forward, fighting through the fear brought on by Leon's intense killing intent to slash down at Grim's head. Grim, almost with disdainful ease, blocked the strike and, with a flick of his wrist, sent the looter's sword flying through the air.

In this time, Alix and Grim's squire had engaged the other two second-tier looters, with Alix killing hers. Anzu had also joined the battle, sprinting up from the pier to tackle the remaining first-tier looter and tear out his throat.

Less than a minute after hearing the shout, Leon and the rest of the team had killed the entire group of looters save for the fourth-tier mage, and even he had been disarmed and disabled by Grim.

"Do you think maybe you could wait for me to finish asking them to surrender before you attack next time?" Grim asked Leon with exasperation.

"Did you actually think they were going to surrender?" Leon countered with a look of confusion.

"No, but while they are violent rioters, they are also citizens of the Bull Kingdom. We should at least ask for their surrender first before killing them."

"They were given their chance to give up hours ago, when Sir Avremar first tried to retake the district."

Grim sighed, knowing that Leon had a point, but killing these young men without warning still didn't sit right with him.

"I'm with Sir Adalgrim," Alix said. "We should try and take as many of these people prisoner as we can!"

"I'm pretty sure that with Prince Trajan now here, this has been classified as a rebellion," Leon mentioned. "Everyone participating in the looting is going to be executed for defying a Prince so violently, or at least imprisoned for life..." As Leon spoke, he glanced down at the first-tier mage he killed. The boy barely appeared any older than Leon did. "... But, fine, I can wait a few seconds if you want to ask the next group of rioters we come across if they're willing to surrender."

"That's all I ask," Grim said, while Alix smiled at Leon's agreement.

The fourth-tier looter was tied up and knocked unconscious before they left. Grim would have him picked up when the district was retaken. It wasn't that difficult to knock him out, as he had been staring in horror at Anzu tearing apart his first-tier comrade; the griffin hadn't stopped at the mage's throat, and was using his claws and beak to rip the mage to shreds.

"Anzu!" Leon shouted while Grim saw to the fourth-tier looter. The griffin froze, and Leon curled his finger in a 'come over here' gesture. Anzu complied, hanging his head as he could tell from Leon's tone that he'd made a mistake. Leon stared at the albino griffin, shaking his head at the bloody mess that marred his fur and feathers. "You're getting a *long* bath when we get home," he said.

"Let's get moving," Grim whispered after he finished tying up the last looter. "We only have about an hour before the assault is supposed to begin, and we don't know how much of the district is passable."

Leon nodded, and the team swiftly departed the villa.

The guild district had been built upon one of the islands in the Tyrrhenian river delta that had been inhabited for thousands of years. It was a small fishing village before the Bull Kingdom had been formed, then turned into a fort not long into the reign of the first Bull King. Ariminium was slowly built up over the following five thousand years.

Unfortunately, the age of the settlement on the island meant that the guild district was one of the few islands in the delta that wasn't built on a grid. The streets were paved over old dirt paths, and they weaved in and around each other making navigation through the district nearly impossible for anyone who wasn't already familiar with the layout. The fire ravaging the district only exacerbated this problem.

As soon as they left the villa, Leon and Grim took a hard right, but were immediately stopped in their tracks; their path was blocked by a neighboring building that had collapsed. What was worse, the ruins were still burning in an almost monumental bonfire.

"Shit..." Leon muttered. "Where to now?"

"We should be able to go around," Alix replied. She had brought a map and had broken it out as soon as she saw that their original path was a no-go. "This way," she said, pointing to another street ahead of them.

They were standing in a small square with a small obelisk in the center. It was actually quite similarly laid out to Leon's home back in the Forest of Black and White, but Leon actively prevented himself from thinking about that, as he had a job to do. Across the square were two more narrow streets that led away at seemingly random angles. They were as winding and twisted as all the other streets in the district, so the team couldn't see far down them.

What was more, the fire in the district had filled the streets with smoke. However, that wasn't enough to completely blind Leon. He smiled at the opportunity to finally make use of one of the powers he had been training for over the past year and released his magic senses. He couldn't cover that great of a distance, only about fifty feet, but it was enough that he was confident that they weren't going to be ambushed.

Feeling the surge of magic power and knowing what it meant, Grim whistled appreciatively; his own magic senses were slightly inferior to Leon's, but only by a handful of feet.

Without another word, the team plunged into the depths of the smoky district. The air was hot, and it was hard to breathe, but they kept a good pace.

"Right," Alix said, staring at her map and directing them through the narrow streets and alleys. "Left... Right... Right... Straight ahead..."

"Hold up," Leon whispered, calling the group to a halt. "Rioters ahead!"

"Let's check it out," Grim muttered, and the four began to creep forward, keeping low and in any shadows that the fires left. Even Anzu kept low and quiet, sensing the need for stealth from Leon's body language.

They quickly caught sight of their enemy: seven more rioters, three of whom were actively spreading the fire by hurling burning pieces of wood into nearby buildings and cackling like maniacs. The other four

simply watched and chatted amongst themselves. None of them had any idea that Leon and the others were less than thirty feet away.

Leon glanced at Grim, wordlessly asking the other knight if he was going to demand these mages surrender. Grim shook his head, as it was clear from their actions, bloody clothes, and slight aura of killing intent that they probably weren't going to surrender, and Leon jumped straight into the air.

Leon put serious strength into his jump, easily reaching high enough to pull himself up to the roof of the four-story row of townhouse-like villas next to them. In the same movement he used to pull himself up, he began sprinting over the roof toward the rioters and called upon his magic. He could feel his mana change into lightning magic and channeled it into his right arm, where the runes on his gauntlet began to gently glow. There, his magic formed a brilliant golden lightning spear.

In only a few short strides, Leon arrived just above the rioters and jumped again. This time he wasn't going for height but plunged down toward his targets with tremendous speed. As soon as he landed, he slammed his lightning spear into the ground like an over-sized stake, causing it to erupt in an explosion of golden sparks and arcs of lightning right in the center of the seven rioters.

The three spreading the fire were the weaker of the seven, being third-tier or weaker, and they were killed instantly by Leon's lightning. The other four were all of the fourth-tier, but they were caught completely off-guard and with their magic uncalled. Leon's magic ravaged them, his lightning scorching and searing their flesh and rampaging through their internal organs. Two of them were dead before they hit the ground, and the last pair of rioters died after taking a few ragged breaths.

"I guess that's one way to eliminate the threat," Grim drily stated as he and the rest of the team emerged from behind the debris they'd been crouched behind. "Though, I *would* appreciate it if you left some for the rest of us..."

"To the fastest goes the glory," Leon said with an enormous smile. He felt amazing, if a little drained, after releasing his power without holding back. It was one thing to spar with Alix or Trajan, and another to let loose against hostile mages.

With that feeling of strength and power, he suddenly understood why it was fairly common for some mages to become drunk on their own power and disregard the law in favor of their own whims and desires.

Grim chuckled at the obvious challenge, then said, "We need to keep moving; only a few more minutes until the assault begins."

It was late and much of the district was still burning, so there weren't many looters and rioters still out on the streets. Consequently, Leon's team arrived at the place they were to wait without encountering any more enemies with only ten minutes or so to spare. They quietly infiltrated a small clock tower and waited for the horn blast that would signal the Legions' assault. The few rioting mages that were still outside were mostly concentrated around the bridges, with the exception of a few scattered looters still running around.

"Looks like fifty down there," Alix said as she stared down at the barricaded bridge a couple hundred feet away from the top of the tower.

"I counted sixty," Grim said.

"And I only got forty-five..." Leon replied.

"I suppose the *exact* count doesn't matter that much," Grim conceded. "We just have to secure this side of the bridge and help the Legion tear down those barricades."

"How many guild mages do you think are in the surrounding buildings?" Leon asked, glancing at about a dozen conspicuously unburnt villas next to the bridge. He tried to see within using his magic senses, but his magic was scattered as soon as it touched the buildings.

"Could be as many as several hundred," Grim responded. "I heard from Sir Avremar that the first time we tried to take these bridges, they had been guarded by about five hundred mages apiece..."

Leon frowned a little; five hundred guild mages against a battalion of Legion soldiers would've been massacred if they had been fighting out in the open. Instead, the Legion had to cross a bridge filled with wooden barricades and covered in trap spells. Re-taking the district would require a serious push to get past the bridges.

As Leon sat and thought about the problem at hand, Anzu curled up by his leg and started pressing himself against Leon like a cat that wanted attention. Leon complied and rubbed Anzu's feathered head.

"Only five minutes left..." Alix reminded.

"Let's get ready," Grim said.

Leon and Alix smiled at each other in anticipation. Despite already exerting themselves in the two small skirmishes they'd had, both were looking forward to the battle ahead of them. They'd been stuck in training for far too long.

Chapter 207: The Guild District II

"Sound the horn," Trajan commanded, his cold and ruthless gaze turned toward the guild district and filled with killing intent. Amid the mass of restless soldiers, even Trajan's tremendous killing intent faded into the aura all of these assembled mages created, but it was still enough for Avremar, who was standing right next to the Prince, to shiver.

Avremar nodded to the soldier holding a large horn, and a moment later, the deep horn blast was heard over almost the entire city. The soldiers had been assembled in an open square and several adjacent streets not too far from the bridge, and at the signal started streaming in formation toward the bridge. Trajan took the lead, with his gleaming plate armor and red cloak making him instantly identifiable.

"FOLLOW ME!" he roared, as was Legion tradition when leading such a large charge. His skin hardened into stone beneath his armor and he charged down the bridge with four thousand Legion soldiers at his back. These soldiers were locked together in a shield wall, so they couldn't move as fast as Trajan could, but Avremar and a sixth-tier Legate were with him.

The first obstacle was nothing before the three powerful mages. Trajan slammed a massive war hammer into it, and the flimsy wood splintered and broke apart. It hadn't even been enchanted.

However, as soon as the Legate took advantage of the massive hole the Prince made, he was enveloped in a pillar of fire.

'This wasn't here to stop us from passing, it was here to stop us from seeing the mines!' Trajan thought with only a slight degree of concern. He smiled derisively and thought, *'A good idea, but it's not enough to stop us...'*

The Legate emerged from the flames with barely a hair out of place—though his bright green and gold armor was a little charred. He laughed and swung his sword, causing what appeared to be shining white drops of liquid light to be flung off of him. These hundreds of tiny drops hovered in the air around the Legate for a moment before suddenly falling to the ground like rain and destroying the trap spells placed on that side of the obstacle.

The bridge was lit up with flashes of multicolored light as traps of almost every element were obliterated by the Legate's rain of light.

While he was taking care of the traps, Trajan hammered the obstacle a few times, rendering it into nothing more than a pile of wood splinters. Avremar then summoned his own magic and hurled most of the splinters into the river with a great gust of wind.

The three men weren't stopped for long, but it was enough for the front line of the four battalions behind them to catch up.

Trajan took a look at what was happening farther down the bridge. He trusted Leon and the other team to have been in position in time, so when he saw the guild mages preparing to use their own magic against the advancing Legion, he wasn't overly concerned. He simply smiled at the thrill of battle—something he had to savor as he rarely experienced it in his position—and advanced.

—

Leon and the others in his team heard the Legion horn loud and clear. Leon and Alix were about to charge downstairs and out the door, but Grim shouted, "Wait!"

Leon and Alix froze and turned to stare at Grim.

"What are you doing?" Leon demanded in confusion. "The battle's starting!" From the top of the clock tower, the team could see Prince Trajan appear on the far side of the bridge, and Leon didn't want to wait around when the battle was starting.

"Just wait for a few seconds," Grim said as he pointedly looked down at the unburned villas by the bridge. After several moments, guild mages started pouring out of the houses to reinforce the fifty or so mages standing watch. "Wait for all of the enemy to show themselves so we know what we're dealing with..." Grim muttered.

It took a few minutes, during which time Leon could see the Prince and one of the Legates penetrate the first of seven barricades set up along the bridge. This was the largest of the three bridges, wide enough to allow for about fifteen people to walk side-by-side, so this was where Trajan had decided to make the main push. He had four battalions with him, while a pair of Legates led the assault on the other two bridges with three battalions each.

Still, the bridge was two hundred and fifty feet long, and the guild mages were clearly going to make the Legion soldiers fight for every foot. Some of the mages jumped over the barricades and waited for the soldiers along the bridge, and from the way they seemed to pick up speed while in the air Leon guessed that the more solid-looking barricades had been enchanted to prevent the Legion from jumping over.

Finally, mages stopped streaming out of the houses, leaving the Legion facing down what Leon's team counted as around five hundred guild mages.

Without waiting for Grim, Leon started sprinting down the clock tower's stairs with Alix and Anzu hot on his heels. Grim and his own squire didn't waste any time either, as they could see the Prince starting to engage the guild mages in the distance.

The team burst from the clock tower and charged through the last few narrow streets and emerged out into the main thoroughfare, one of only two straight streets in the entire district. The Legion attack had captivated the attention of most of the mages, but a few were still attentive enough to what was going on around them that they saw the four-man team arrive.

"Legion behind us!" came a shout, and several dozen mages turned to face Leon's team.

Grim glanced around, looking for the second team that was supposed to meet them there, but he didn't see them. He wasn't too concerned; they were probably just a little bit late. Leon, however, didn't even take that one look. As soon as the mages turned, he, Alix, and Anzu charged at the enemy.

Most of the guild mages in the rear were first and second-tier, so when the fifth-tier Leon began to spark and flash with lightning, panic immediately began to spread. Leon tore into the first couple of mages in front of him, the force of his first slash almost cutting one mage in half while a blast of lightning channeled through his sword fried the man behind the mage. The runes on his armor flashed with golden light, helping him to channel his lightning, and his magic flowed almost effortlessly through his weapon.

With his magic sense, Leon could perceive that Alix and Anzu had each killed a mage of their own, so he moved on to his next target. Ahead of him was a third-tier mage fumbling around in his pocket—for a spell, Leon guessed. Or at least, that's what Leon would do if he encountered a mage two tiers higher than him, and he even had several of the white-fire spells Xaphan had taught him stashed away in his soul realm for just such an occasion.

He wasn't going to let this mage use his spell, though, and he surged into the crowd of startled guild mages faster than they could react. In fact, with his magic flowing through him, his limbs sparked enough that he almost seemed to turn into lightning, and his speed and strength drastically increased.

The third-tier mage didn't manage to pull out whatever he was searching his pockets for, and Leon stabbed him through the chest before he could process his fear and disappointment. Leon was gratified to see that most of the mages this far back weren't wearing armor, as it made his job much easier; he called upon his magic again, conjuring a lightning spear. He was almost surprised at how easy this was with his enchanted armor.

But, he couldn't revel in his power forever, so he slammed the lightning spear into the ground, catching eight nearby guild mages in another lightning explosion and ripping apart the street beneath his feet.

Grim wasn't going to be left out this time, and he leaped into the fray a mere few seconds after Leon had. He slashed through a few guild mages with his sword while forming three triangular plates made of ice. These plates were razor thin, and with a single thought, Grim launched them into the crowd of guild mages, slashing at throats and tendons. Seven guild mages were killed and ten more severely injured before the ice plates broke and splintered apart.

For these lower-tiered guild mages, the battle turned into a horror show; they were supposed to be the last line of defense for the bridge, and many had been planning on surrendering if the Legion broke through. All of the mages capable of fending off Leon and Grim single-handedly had gone to head off Prince Trajan and the other leaders of the Legion battalions. All they could hope to do now with Leon and Grim tearing through their group was to overwhelm the two knights with superior numbers.

Unfortunately for them, the few hits they were able to land on the two failed to penetrate their armor. Even Alix and Grim's squire were too skillful and armored to fall to their weapons, and Anzu was too quick for them to catch.

More and more guild mages fell by the second.

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Trajan burst through the third barricade and, for the first time that day, came face-to-face with a human enemy. The fifth-tier guild mage clearly thought that he could catch the Prince by surprise and had stood just on the other side of the barricade where he couldn't be seen. Once the barricade was brought down, he lunged forward and tried to impale Trajan upon his spear.

But Trajan knew that the mage was there thanks to his magic sense, but he barely cared. The spear bounced off his armor, and the Prince punched the foolish mage so hard that he was almost flung over the side of the bridge into the river. Trajan advanced, not paying the mage any further mind; the Legion soldiers behind him would finish the guild mage off.

As he strode forward, he saw five more mages—all fifth-tier—blocking his way, but he also saw golden flashes far behind the next barricade that he knew came from Leon's lightning magic.

"That boy made it," he whispered as a sense of almost fatherly pride welled up from within, especially as he noted the repeated use of golden lightning rather than Leon's normal silver with a blue tinge at the edges.

He slowly let the head of his hammer tap the bridge, and the stone bricks it was made of trembled in response. The mages watching him advance were almost frozen in fear; Trajan's killing intent was lost in the bloody and violent aura of the battle, but that didn't matter. The Prince continued walking forward with the confidence of a man who knew that he had already won.

One of the mages found his nerve as the Prince drew closer; he suddenly sprinted forward as the head of his spear was coated in bright blue light.

"You're not killing us today!" the mage shouted as he lunged forward, but Trajan made no effort to dodge the blow.

The Legate beside him acted fast, as his magic coated his sword in white light. This light extended out until it appeared that the Legate was holding a sword almost ten feet long. He didn't even have to break

his stride to block the mage's spear, and Trajan took the opportunity to smash his hammer into the guild mage's face.

The other mages charged, realizing from that show of force that they weren't going to stop the Prince with anything less than their combined effort. Trajan simply smiled and kept swinging his hammer.

—

Leon and his team managed to kill more than half of the mages behind the last barricade in about five minutes. The rest of the weaker mages, seeing the corpses of their fellows all around them, decided that they weren't quite as committed to their cause as they thought, and ran away as fast as they could.

For a moment, Leon almost gave chase, but he could hear Trajan's battalions advancing and he knew that he had a much more important job. He took a quick look at the rest of the team and saw that everyone was covered in blood and breathing hard, but none seemed injured thanks to their armor. Even Anzu seemed fine, though his white body was now almost as red as his eyes.

The team took this moment to rest and steady their breathing, but there were still a couple hundred guild mages between the Legion and the district.

"Let's finish this," Leon said.

"Right!" Alix said, and the team started walking toward the last barricade. It had been built up into a small wall, with crude ramparts and battlements and with the weaker mages gone, only guarded by a handful of third and fourth-tier mages.

"Easy enough," Leon muttered as he called upon his power again. In his hand appeared a golden lightning bolt, and he hurled it at one of the fourth-tier mages. The guild mages were far too busy watching the Legion advance, so they hadn't seen the mages in the street behind them retreat; the fourth-tier mage was completely unprepared for Leon's lightning bolt, and he was killed almost instantly.

The rest of the guild mages wheeled around and upon seeing scores of their dead comrades, jumped down to engage with the team. None of the fourth-tier mages hesitated, despite knowing that they were facing down a pair of fifth-tier knights; they understood that together, the nine of them were more than a match for two fifth-tier knights and their second-tier squires. However, just as they began their charge, a wind blade came rocketing out from an alleyway to slash one of the mages across the chest and a rock spike burst from the ground and impaled the leg of another.

The second team of knights had arrived, to the horror of the guild mages.

"Glad you could make it!" Grim shouted to the leader of the other team.

"It just wouldn't do if we missed this!" she responded.

With that, three more fifth-tier knights were added to Leon's side, as the other team was slightly larger. Without another word, they began to take the guild mages apart with earth, wind, ice, and lightning magic.

Chapter 208: The Guild District III

With a tremendous crash, Trajan slammed his hammer into the last of the mages that continued to resist his advance on the bridge. Before him lay one last barricade between himself and the teams he'd sent ahead, which Avremar and his Legate had already set about destroying.

Behind him, four thousand Legion soldiers waited patiently. They had suffered no casualties, partly because of their spectacular armor and shields, and partly because Trajan had gone out in front of everyone and drawn most of the attention from the defending mages. His armor was burned in places where spells and the occasional arrow had been fired at him, but nothing had gotten past it, let alone his stonesskin. Avremar and the Legate, too, were unharmed, thanks to their own armor.

Finally, the barricade came down and the battalions could pass. There were no more obstacles in their way, as Leon and the others had already removed the final barricade.

Seeing the dozens of dead and injured mages on the ground, Trajan shook his head in disappointment. "What a waste..." he muttered. Still, when he approached the two teams, he wore a bright smile and he heartily said, "Good work! All of you, good work!"

"Thank you, Your Highness," the five knights said in response.

"Everyone, you should know what to do! Get to it!" Trajan barked, and the Legion soldiers behind began to stream into the guild district. Only one of the battalions stayed behind with the Prince, while the others separated into their companies and began efforts to find the rest of the rioting mages and put out the fires.

Grim went with one of the companies, and the three knights from the other team split away as well. Out of both teams that had been sent to attack the bridge from behind, only Leon, Alix, and Anzu stayed with Trajan.

"I saw your magic from the bridge," Trajan proudly said to Leon as soldiers streamed past them. "You did quite well."

Leon knew exactly what Trajan was referring to: the color of his lightning. When he first started using his lightning magic, it was silver-blue, but he soon came to learn when training with Trajan that most lightning mages used golden lightning. It was only House Raime that had that color of lightning, so he put in an enormous amount of work to mask its color. It had taken him ten months of intense study, but the solution he eventually came to was to slow down and disperse his magic. This was an incredibly difficult feat to accomplish, especially when in combat, so he placed another enchantment upon his gauntlets that helped him to decompress some of his magic until it resembled that of other bog-standard lightning mages. So long as he wore his armor, he could use his power with impunity, and no one would ever connect him to his family's magic.

This weakened his power a little, but given how well he performed in battle, Leon wasn't too concerned. He also demonstrated how far his knowledge of enchanting had come when he included one more enchantment to disrupt the one that weakened his power, just in case his magic ever needed that extra little bit of punch.

The other enchantments in his gauntlets that aided him in channeling his magic power remained untouched, though.

“That being said,” Trajan continued, “was it unavoidable to kill all of these mages?”

Leon frowned a little, but he nodded and said, “Those that didn’t need to be killed ran away...”

“I see...” Trajan said sadly. But, he didn’t have the luxury of mourning such a loss of life while the guild district burned around him, so he quickly suppressed those feelings and moved on. “Let’s finish this!” he said firmly.

“I’m with you, Your Highness,” Leon replied.

Trajan led the way down the thoroughfare. It was a straight shot to the main square of the district, where the most powerful guilds in the city could be found. Now that he was past the barricades, he could see that the square didn’t seem to be burning; the light that illuminated it was the white-blue of street lanterns rather than the red-orange of fire.

Trajan walked confidently down the streets toward the central square. With Leon, Avremar, and his Legate at his side, and a battalion of soldiers at his back still in formation, any mages that saw him marching decided against challenging him. And he knew a few saw him, as he was periodically releasing his magic senses.

A mile and a half later, his group arrived at the spacious square, where another battalion was waiting for him, this one led by Minerva. The square was so large that even with a thousand soldiers moving around and preparing to storm the halls of the three guilds in revolt it still felt empty and desolate.

“Your Highness!” she called out upon his arrival.

“Dame Minerva!” Trajan responded. “I’m glad you’re here! What’s the situation?”

“We’ve locked down the halls of all six major guilds!” Minerva reported. “We’ve also established contact with Eternal Glory, Seventh-Fold, and Saber. Their lower-tiered mages evacuated when the rioting and looting started, but their stronger mages have been holed up in their respective guild halls to prevent the looters from entering.”

“And Sanctified, Iron Dove, and Bluefire?” Trajan asked, glancing at the guild halls in question.

“No contact yet,” Minerva stated. “However, we know that there are people within—we’ve seen them in the windows—but we’ve been unable to make much progress with the enchantments sealing the doors, yet.”

“That’s not going to help them...” Leon muttered.

“Indeed,” Trajan said with a sour look on his face. “If they had come forward to negotiate, then things might have been different. As it is now, we have to assume that those within those guild halls are hostile.” He turned to Avremar and the Legate and ordered them to help get the gates open, while he ordered the Tribune leading the battalion to aid in locking down the square. It would be a while before they breached the gates, so while they stood by, they might as well keep an eye on the halls.

“I want to speak with the masters of Eternal Glory, Seventh-Fold, and Saber,” Trajan said.

“We’ll get them out here,” Minerva responded, and a Tribune with her instantly sprang into action arranging for messengers to be sent to the three guilds.

While they waited for the masters to reply, Leon took a few long looks at the guild halls. The smallest was Sanctified's guild hall, but even then, it was still immense. It appeared to have a similar layout to the Cradle, with four wings of the building forming a cross and a big dome in the center, only it was made of gleaming white marble and granite, and the dome was topped with red ceramic tiles. The outside was also splendidly decorated with blind arcades, statues, and murals.

Iron Dove and Bluefire, meanwhile, favored a more austere look. Their guild halls were square monolithic buildings without much in the way of decoration. In fact, the only decoration each had was a marble statue of what Leon guessed was a dove outside of Iron Dove's hall, and a gigantic brazier filled with blue fire outside of Bluefire's hall.

Each of the halls was surrounded by tall stone walls, and Leon could tell that these walls were heavily enchanted just by the vast amounts of magic flowing through them. The steel gates were even more so and were so well fortified with enchantments that the Legion soldiers attempting to get through them were utterly failing.

"Remarkable places, aren't they?" Alix asked Leon as she joined him in admiring the halls.

"They sure are," Leon responded.

"Do you regret not signing up with a guild instead of the Legion?" she continued, cocking an eyebrow at him.

"Not really," Leon answered honestly. "They're obviously powerful guilds, but they're still not much compared to the Legion."

"And they clearly pay their mages so little that the mages start small rebellions," Alix added with a giggle.

"That too," Leon said with an amused smile. Seeing what lengths guild mages went to in order to try and protect their assets from their own guilds ensured that he had no regrets in signing up for the Legion. He may not have nearly as much freedom as he could have in a guild, but he at least didn't have to actively protect his possessions from higher-tiered mages.

"You know, I thought about quitting the Legion and joining a guild instead after Hakon's raid," Alix mentioned.

"Did you?" Leon asked.

"Mm hmm," she responded. "I didn't particularly want to be in that kind of position again, trapped in a tower with nowhere to run to, surrounded by wild warriors wanting to tear me apart..."

"Do *you* have any regrets?" Leon bluntly asked.

Alix looked at him, then to Anzu, and then to Trajan. "Nope!" she quickly answered. "I'm right where I want to be!"

Leon couldn't help but smile at the unexpectedly warm and friendly statement. And while Alix couldn't see his smile behind his helmet, she did notice that suddenly Leon seemed to not know what to do with his hands and he turned his head away from her. She knew he was smiling and was feeling embarrassed, but she was still quite happy with where her life had gone, and that she had said as much.

"Where's all this coming from?" Leon quietly asked. "Don't get me wrong, I consider you a friend and appreciate that you're happy with our circumstances, but this is still a little out of the blue..."

"Yeah," Alix admitted, "I know... I just don't want to be suddenly killed by a fifth-tier mage when we storm these halls and die not having said these things..."

"You're not going to die," Leon said with such confidence that Alix couldn't argue with it.

"I'm just glad to have said it," she replied with a happy smile.

As they spoke, the three guild masters of Seventh-Fold, Saber, and Eternal Glory came out and met with Trajan. They assured him of their loyalty to the Kingdom and that their mages had taken no part in the rioting. Trajan asked if they were certain about that, and they responded that they would not be defending any mages who were captured, and they wouldn't raise a fuss about any who were killed, regardless of which guild they belonged to.

Satisfied for the time being, Trajan let them return to their guild halls and turned his attention to the three guilds that were the cause of this mess, and Bluefire in particular that was at the center of it.

"Command staff, to me!" the Prince shouted, and all of his personal knights and high-ranking soldiers began to congregate around him.

"What's the word, Your Highness?" asked one of the dozen or so Tribunes.

"We're going to wait for the last battalion to show up," Trajan explained, "and then we're going to launch simultaneous attacks on the guilds. If anyone surrenders, take them prisoner. If they resist, then do what you need to do."

"Who will attack where?" asked Minerva.

"I'll have you take your people and bring down Iron Dove. Sir Attius can handle Sanctified when he gets here. I'll deal with Bluefire personally," Trajan said with a dark look in his eye. "I'll leave the specifics of getting into those guilds to your discretion. Let's get to work!"

"Yes, Your Highness!" the Legates and Tribunes around him responded in unison. Instantly, the square was filled with the sound of barking orders and soldiers rushing around following them.

"Ursus, you're with me," Trajan growled to Leon, to which the younger mage nodded respectfully.

The two walked over to a secluded corner of the square, away from the bustle around the three target guild halls. They were accompanied only by Anzu and Alix. The latter at first wanted to wait a respectful distance away, but the Prince told her to join them as well. As she was Leon's squire, she hadn't interacted much with Trajan, but he still treated her just as he treated Leon, which was considerably well.

"I haven't had a chance to speak with the two of you since you returned from that vampire hunt. How did it go?" the Prince asked, allowing his face to break out into a light smile.

"It went flawlessly, thanks to Sir Adalgrim. We got the monster," Leon answered.

“Good. I hope you learned something accompanying him today, he’s one of Minerva’s top knights. I assume then, that there were no problems fording the river?” Trajan continued.

“None to speak of,” Leon said.

“Well done, boy,” Trajan proudly replied. “You’re turning into quite the knight. I see little of the brash, reckless seventeen-year-old I feared you would turn out to be when Aquillius told me of what happened in the Crater Tribe.”

Leon’s face turned a little red and he shifted his gaze in embarrassment.

“... That being said, I think we could still work on your restraint.”

“Your Highness?” Leon asked in confusion, seeking clarification.

“I appreciate that you wanted—that you *both* wanted to test yourselves in a combat situation, but the essence of being a knight is not just killing the enemies of the Kingdom. Can you honestly tell me that you only did what was absolutely necessary? I think a good number of mages killed today could have been saved if we were all a little less zealous...”

Leon frowned a little. He couldn’t really refute Trajan’s claims that he could’ve spared some of the mages that he’d killed, but he also wouldn’t say that he hadn’t done what seemed necessary at the time.

“I’m not going to overly criticize—as I said, you’ve done remarkably well given your youth and level of experience—but just try to only lift your sword in the direst of circumstances.”

“Isn’t this one of those circumstances, Your Highness?” Leon asked.

Trajan sighed, then said, “I suppose it is. Many of the mages we capture today will be found guilty of treason and rebellion and executed, but many of them won’t be. They’ll be imprisoned for rioting and looting, but they’ll serve their time in prisons or I’ll send them to work in mines in the Royal Demesne. Killing them gets us nothing and deprives this Kingdom of potential.”

“I will... *try* to stay my blade when I can,” Leon conceded.

“That’s all I ask. How about you, young lady? How are you doing?” Trajan suddenly asked, pulling Alix into the conversation. “I can tell already that your aura has grown much more stable in these past few months since your ascension, I think you might reach third-tier quite soon!”

“I am doing well, Your Highness,” Alix quickly replied with a proud tone. “I have been training as much as I can, and I hope to serve you and Sir Leon well.”

“Such politeness! Even after all this time!” Trajan said, almost bursting out laughing. But, as he continued, he turned much more serious. “Listen, you’ve made great strides in your training, but you retreat behind the Tribunes if we encounter any fifth or sixth-tier mages. Dames Ateia and Romania will be accompanying us in our assault on Bluefire, stick with them.”

Alix wasn’t thrilled at the Prince’s order, but she knew that she couldn’t do much against mages that were so much stronger than her and would likely only get in the knights’ way. She regretfully nodded.

“Good. Now, let’s get ready to breach these damned walls!” Trajan loudly shouted as he led the group back to the rest of the soldiers.

Chapter 209: The Guild District IV

Leon stared at the massive steel gate between the battalion and the Bluefire Guild. Its heavy enchantments had prevented anyone from making so much as a dent in the thing, and Trajan was growing visibly impatient. Everyone could see the occasional shadow in the windows of the guild hall behind the gate, making it obvious that the mages inside were watching and waiting for the attack to begin.

About twenty minutes before, the final battalion of soldiers arrived, and Trajan briefed the Legate leading them on what was happening. Now, all three rioting guilds were surrounded, and soldiers were filling the district’s streets putting out fires and either killing or capturing the mages outside.

“I don’t want this to turn into a prolonged siege...” Trajan muttered as a Tribune again attempted to penetrate the gate with a concentrated blast of fire. The gate remained unblemished.

And suddenly, Leon noticed something. He could sense the magic flowing through the gate and outer walls of the guild, and even the magic flowing above them, which indicated how well enchanted the walls were; they wouldn’t even be able to throw things over the guild, not that that stopped some soldiers from trying earlier. But what he didn’t sense was magic coming from the ground.

“Would it be possible to try and attack from beneath the wall?” Leon asked Trajan.

Alix and several other Tribunes beside them gave Leon strange looks, but Trajan took him absolutely seriously.

“It would be difficult to get through the foundations if the walls are so well enchanted...” the Prince said, trailing off as something related occurred to him. “... but all we *really* need to do is to disrupt the enchantments, and then the walls can be more easily breached...”

Trajan stood there for several seconds as he projected his magic senses and scanned the gate and walls as closely as he could, trying to verify that his idea was possible.

He seemed to think it was, as he ordered the Tribune attempting to break through the gate to stand back as he raised his massive hammer. Few of the watching soldiers thought even Trajan with all the strength he’d inherited from the Sacred Bull could break through the gate with brute force, but fewer still even realized that that wasn’t his intention. Trajan brought his hammer down with tremendous force, but his target was the ground in front of the gate.

His hammer hit the stone tiles of the square like a meteor, sending cracks snaking from the point of impact all the way to the farthest corner. The ground shook as the Prince’s magic power exploded outward through the ground, and even Leon and the other Tribunes had to struggle to remain upright; many of the other soldiers failed in this task, and found themselves falling down. Most importantly, the wall before them trembled as Trajan’s magic hit its foundations.

“Hmm, I can’t attack beyond the wall, but I *can* do significant damage to the wall itself...” Trajan muttered as he raised his hammer for another swing.

This second swing caused another small earthquake, but it still wasn't enough. Leon figured that it would exhaust the Prince to bring the wall down at this rate, but he didn't have to do that; all he had to do was disrupt the enchantments within the wall, and the Tribunes could do the rest.

And it was working. The third swing caused a terrible ripple to spread out through the magic in the wall, and Leon could feel the magical fortifications grow weaker—some of the smaller enchantments had clearly been destroyed or otherwise disrupted.

With the fourth swing, the fortifications grew weaker still, and Trajan whispered, "Just one more should do it."

The Tribunes around him heard this and prepared themselves. The magic in the gate was less than half of what it was only thirty seconds before.

The Prince's statement proved almost prophetic, as his fifth swing shook the wall so hard that Leon guessed more than eighty percent of the enchantments had been broken. The gate was now nothing more than steel, and the Tribunes got to work.

They blasted the gate with fire and beams of light and hit it with stones the size of a full grown man's torso. The gate, which had been designed more for decoration than practical security, was ripped off of its hinges and fell backward to the sound of a handful of terrified screams. Without missing a beat, Trajan, Leon, and the rest of the Tribunes led the battalion of soldiers behind them into the guild hall's courtyard. There, they saw about fifty mages standing against them, plus another four or five that had been crushed beneath the falling gate.

However, the soldiers didn't immediately spring to battle. They rushed forward until they had surrounded and covered Trajan, and then they stopped with blades and shields raised, with killing intent soaring, and their auras at their peak. To the guild mages, this was a sight that absolutely struck fear deep into their hearts, which was just what Prince Trajan wanted.

"PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS!" the Prince thundered. "THOSE WHO INSIST ON CONTINUING THIS REBELLION WILL BE KILLED! PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS!"

For many of these guild mages, their initial protest against Bluefire trying to deny them their payment had long since gone way too far. It's not like each and every one of them wanted to start burning and looting the district or to fight the Royal Legions when they moved in to secure the island. So, before the Prince's forceful command had stopped echoing through the courtyard, there were already sounds of weapons clattering to the ground.

After a mere ten seconds, only ten mages were left still armed.

"You fucking cowards," one of these mages growled, but he and the other nine reluctantly dropped their weapons as well.

The Legion soldiers then surged forward, pushing each of the mages to the ground and taking them into custody. Leon himself bound the hands of the mouthy guild mage and kept a close eye on him, as he was of the fifth-tier and the restraints used by the soldiers wouldn't hold up against some applied magic.

However, for all apparent disgust at his comrades surrendering, he didn't move a muscle. The biggest reason was Leon standing over him with his sword at the ready and emitting enough killing intent that the guild mage knew that Leon wouldn't hesitate for a single moment to kill him.

Once these mages were secured, everyone re-formed on Trajan, leaving two hundred soldiers and a Tribune behind to watch over the prisoners in the square.

The Prince stood in front of the door, watching the windows in the guild hall. There were dozens of people in the windows, though being backlit and seen from behind thick glass, no one could discern any specific facial features.

"The Royal Legions will secure this building! Your attempts to deny the restoration of Royal laws and peace will bring you nothing but to an early grave! Open these doors and surrender, and your only crimes will be rioting and looting, instead of rebellion!" Trajan shouted. There was some more movement in the windows, with a few of the watching mages being pulled away while others simply stared back at Trajan. The doors did not open.

When it became clear that those who were in control in the guild were not going to surrender, Leon heard a quiet sigh from the Prince. Trajan waved his hand at the door, and a pair of Tribunes walked forward to begin prying it open. Leon readied himself for battle, as did Alix and Anzu behind him.

"We're in!" shouted one of the Tribunes by the door.

Trajan charged forward, barely giving the Tribunes enough time to get the door open before he barreled through. As soon as he passed the threshold of the guild hall, a wall of ice spikes burst from the ground and sped toward him. These spikes were unable to pierce his armor and stoneskin, however, and bounced harmlessly off. The spikes still blocked his progress, though, so he began to hit them with his hammer, to little effect.

To this, Leon could only smile in anticipation. He'd used more than enough lightning to figure out where he stood with that power, but there was something else he wanted to test as well. Leon stepped up and held out his hand, causing the fire enchantments on his gauntlet to softly glow. From his fingers burst forth bright red-orange fire that burned without a shred of demonic power.

Leon let the fire flow out of his hand and at the wall of ice spikes. The flames burned so hotly that most of the spikes melted in seconds.

"Good work," Trajan said appreciatively.

Behind the ice spikes were dozens of guild mages who stared in fear at the approaching soldiers. They were led by five mages who showed considerably less fear, and a trail of frost and ice showed that the ice spikes had come from one of these mages.

Naturally, this mage glared at Leon as he walked into the entrance hall just behind Trajan. The other Tribunes and soldiers streamed in behind them, forming a formidable shield wall in the spacious entrance hall which had columns and doors to other halls, and little else within.

The guild mages wasted no time talking, they were committed to their path. They charged at the Prince and the Tribunes, with the ice mage coming straight for Leon with a look of utter contempt and hatred on his face. Leon barely had time to register Trajan engaging with the leader of the guild mages, or

Dames Ateia and Romania engaging two more of the of the leaders right beside him; the ice mage's opening lunge came too quickly.

Leon charged to meet the ice mage, dodging underneath the spear thrust that had been aimed at his neck. With his off hand, Leon then grabbed the spear while simultaneously stabbing forward with his sword. The ice mage instantly let go of the spear and twisted out of the way, drawing an arming sword at his hip at the same time. However, instead of using the newly-drawn blade, the mage waved his hand and conjured an ice spike in the air, which he then launched at Leon. Leon responded with a gout of fire, which vaporized the ice spike while it was still in the air and washed over the ice mage's chest.

The mage screamed, but he still had enough control over his magic to conjure enough ice to cover his chest. However, he was still blinded by the fire and smoke, and so didn't see Leon raise his sword and bring it down on his shoulder with immense force, going right through the mage's thin icy armor that covered his shoulder. The ice mage screamed again and was so wracked with pain that he collapsed into unconsciousness.

Leon had won his battle with relative ease, and as he glanced around at the others, he saw that they had won theirs as well. In fact, they had won their fights so easily that when Trajan kicked the body of his defeated opponent away and took a few thunderous steps toward the rest of the guild mages, they all began to drop their weapons and surrender on the spot.

"Take them prisoner!" Trajan ordered, and the soldiers surged forward, securing the remaining mages and spreading out into the rest of the guild hall. With the death and capture of the last few strong mages that were leading the Bluefire guild mages, there wasn't anymore fighting apart from a few scuffles that were easily resolved by the Legion soldiers.

The Bluefire guild was secured within fifteen minutes of Trajan knocking down the gate. The Tribunes and Legate that Trajan brought with scattered to supervise the occupation of the guild hall, but Leon and his small party stayed with the Prince, so they were there when one soldier came running up to the Prince with a report.

"Your Highness! We've found the guild leaders, they were being held prisoner in the basement!"

"Good, I want to have some words with them, take them to the offices at the top of the building," Trajan said.

Chapter 210: The Guild District V

"You know, I wasn't really expecting to find you still alive, given how wrecked this district is," Trajan drily quipped as he, Leon, Alix, and Anzu stepped into the main office of the Bluefire Guild where the guild's master was waiting for them.

Leon could see that the office was supposed to be sumptuously decorated, but the marble floor tiles were cracked and broken, tapestries had been torn from the wall, painted murals were defaced, and most of the expensive-looking furniture had been smashed to pieces. In fact, the only relatively intact pieces of furniture in the office were a couple of chairs that had been brought in from the waiting room outside.

Bluefire's guild master was sitting on one of these chairs. He was a man of about average height with light brown hair that was streaked with blood. His round wrinkled face was lumpy from bruises and obvious ill-treatment, and one of his hazel eyes was blackened and bloody. His purple tunic and pants were ripped and torn, and Leon could see injuries on his neck and fingers that led him to guess that rings and a necklace had been taken from the guild master in a rather violent manner.

"It's good to see you, Your Highness. I'm as surprised as you are that I yet breathe, I genuinely thought that they were going to kill me a few times..." the master replied in a deep voice that didn't fit at all with his more modest stature and build.

"What were you *thinking*?" Trajan continued. "You had to know that refusing to pay your alchemists, enchanters, and contracted mages in silver would come back to bite you *hard*!"

"They agreed that this might happen when they signed the contract and joined this guild!" the guild master almost shouted. "Payment is to be made at the discretion of the guild, not with the person arranging the contract and certainly not with the mage!"

"As I recall, my Royal Grandfather made this sort of thing illegal more than three hundred years ago..." Trajan countered. The guild master paled a little under Trajan's withering gaze, despite both men being aged sixth-tier mages. Trajan let the guild master stew a little before he smiled and said, "Oh well. What happens to you won't be up to me; it'll be for an Arbiter to decide in court."

"I'm still being arrested?! I'm the victim here!" the guild master shrieked.

"You did something illegal and instigated a riot that has left hundreds dead!" Trajan shouted back. "You're lucky that I don't have you killed right here and claim that we found you that way!"

The guild master quickly quieted down, though he did try to rise before settling back into the chair with a wince of pain. He looked to Leon for a little assistance, but he couldn't even see the young man's stoic face behind his helmet, let alone his unsympathetic eyes. Alix, too, barely spared the guild master a look, but the latter wasn't expecting a second-tier mage to help, anyway.

"What's going to happen to me?" the guild master meekly asked.

Leon was able to control his surprise, but Alix couldn't help but lift an eyebrow at the sight of a sixth-tier mage giving in so quickly.

"As I said, you will go before an Arbiter for judgment. You can try to put up a defense if you want, but I assure that you will be held accountable for at least some of what happened today. Were I you, I would hope for exile at the very least. You could also be imprisoned or be given forced labor, but I doubt it—that would be a hassle that few Arbiters want to deal with, anymore. You'll most certainly be fined, and Bluefire as a guild will cease to exist."

"What?! You can't disband this guild!" the guild master suddenly shouted as he sprang to his feet, ignoring the injuries that kept him in the chair previously.

However, he swiftly lost this passion when Trajan glared at him and submerged him in a sea of killing intent. "Sit. Down," the Prince growled.

The guild master acquiesced, taking his seat again without a word.

"I have every right to disband this guild! It isn't a person, and so can't stand trial! All of the assets of your guild will be confiscated, and your guild will cease to be!"

With that, Trajan turned around and left, with Leon, Alix, and Anzu close behind. The group walked in silence all the way back out into the square that had quickly filled up with several thousand prisoners. The other two battalions had just as much success as they had, taking the Sanctified and Iron Dove without too much trouble once their gates were knocked down.

"So, what do you make of these guild mages?" Trajan asked Leon. They stared at the massive crowd of mages sitting in the middle of the square in restraints. Hundreds of soldiers were watching them like hawks.

"... To be honest, I think I expected a bit more from them," Leon answered honestly.

"How about you, Miss Alix?" the Prince continued.

"Ah! I mean, yeah, they weren't quite as strong as I imagined..." Alix nervously replied.

"And how about you, little one?" Trajan asked Anzu with an enormous smile on his face. The griffin simply stared back at the Prince, silent and motionless, almost hiding behind Leon.

Leon reached back to pat Anzu on the head a few times and said, "He did great. I don't think there was a single mage he went up against that could do anything to him."

"Good. Still, best to take him to his beastmaster once we get back to the fortress, to ensure that he isn't injured."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment.

"As for why these guild mages weren't as strong as you might have predicted... Well, they're no better than mercenaries at best, and magical handymen at worst. They don't have access to the resources of the Bull Kingdom, and as such their understanding of magic isn't nearly as deep as that of soldiers with comparable power," Trajan explained with a hint of pity and fatigue in his voice.

"They might not have all the accumulated knowledge of the Kingdom," Leon said, "but they still had some strong mages."

"And a ton of much weaker mages who surrendered as soon as they could," Alix added.

"Indeed, they don't work for a cause that they're willing to die for," Trajan stated. "They work to support themselves; an admirable enough goal, but hardly an inspiring one."

"But, to get back to my point, most of their jobs don't involve violence. Those who do ascend in the magical tiers aren't necessarily great warriors, in contrast to most soldiers who spend a great deal of time practicing how to kill people. Their strong mages were of comparable strength to our own Tribunes, but they have such little experience in the arts of war that they were quickly cut down before us."

"Remember this, both of you: magical strength isn't everything. You must temper your strength with skill, or you'll never gain *true* power. There are countless people working to make themselves greater at the expense of the world, and not enough people working to make it better for everyone. If you wish to

bring these people to justice and make things better not just for you, but for all of us, then you need true power.”

“I understand,” Leon said as the attack on his home in the Northern Vales flashed through his mind.

“As do I,” Alix whispered, remembering the harrowing journey back to Fort 127 after Sam had been killed.

“Hmm. I suppose this all sounds overly idealistic, doesn’t it? Especially after having just cut down several thousand of our own citizens...” Trajan said, glancing down at his blood-covered armor.

“Well, maybe a little,” Leon conceded with a smile.

With a sigh, Trajan looked out into the square and said, “What a waste...” After a few more silent seconds, he then said, “The rest of the night is yours. And take tomorrow off, too. Be ready for training at the usual time the day after, though.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Leon and Alix said in unison.

The two then departed from the district, leaving the clean-up to the half-Legion that was occupying the island. By then, the fires were mostly under control, and just about all of the rioting mages had been either killed or captured, so it was easy enough for them to cross a bridge and leave.

Their first destination was the Beastmaster’s office, where Leon had Anzu checked out. In twenty minutes, the griffin was cleaned and inspected, much to his obvious displeasure, and no injuries were found.

“This little guy is *really* unfriendly...” Alix muttered as they left the office and started making their way back to their quarters.

“He’s just not used to people,” Leon said with what Alix considered a strange amount of pride in the little griffin.

Anzu glanced up at Leon with shiny eyes, as if he knew what Leon had just said. He happily flapped his small wings and rubbed his head on Leon’s leg.

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“Uugh... I’m filthy...” Alix muttered as she pushed open the door to their quarters.

“You’re not the only one,” Leon said as he crossed the threshold after his squire. “But, at least *one* of us is clean...”

Anzu came in after Leon, clean as a whistle, and quickly jumped up onto a nearby couch and sprawled out over it.

“I *need* to get out of this armor,” Alix said, making for her room.

Leon felt the same way after spending the day riding, walking around a village, exploring an abandoned mine, swimming across the Tyrrhenian River, and fighting his way through the guild district. He almost stumbled back to his own room in his hurry to get changed.

Alix had much less complicated armor, so she emerged from her room a few seconds before Leon did. However, she didn't go to the bathroom to clean up just yet, choosing instead to wait for her knight.

When Leon walked out a few seconds later and saw her waiting by the sandpit with a smile on her face, he raised an eyebrow in a questioning look.

"I'm still a little keyed up from all that fighting," she explained. "Plus, I don't really feel all that satisfied from it..."

Leon smiled, as he felt the same way. They both had come to understand their own capabilities a little bit better from the battle, but fighting the guild mages hadn't been particularly challenging, leaving both feeling unfulfilled.

"Then how about a little sparring before we finish getting cleaned up?" Leon asked as he walked out into the sandpit.

"Read my mind, Sir," Alix stated as she followed him.

Anzu, meanwhile, had already checked out and fallen asleep on his couch.

Leon and Alix took positions ten feet apart from each other and readied their training weapons. Alix made the first move, lunging forward to stab Leon in the chest. However, Leon easily dodged out of the way.

"Going for a killing strike right away?" he asked with an appreciative tone.

"If I can't bring you down before you go on the attack, then I'm hardly going to get the opportunity after, am I?" Alix responded as she pivoted into a slash at Leon's midsection.

It almost seemed as if she was about to hit him, but out of nowhere, Leon's sword appeared to block her strike. But she wasn't disheartened; she shifted her weight and pushed to her right while reducing resistance and giving ground on her left. Leon's sword slid down her blade to the left and she used that pressure to try and impale him with the guard of her sword.

Unfortunately for Alix, though, this brought her close enough for Leon to sweep her front leg out from under her, sending her crashing into the sand.

"Not bad," Leon said with a smile.

"I'm not done, yet," Alix growled as she rolled to her feet and slashed at Leon's legs.

Leon took a step back and her sword tasted nothing but air, and in her split second of vulnerability, Leon moved in and rammed her with his shoulder, knocking her back down.

Their sparring continued in this vein for about half an hour, when they both finally managed to relax a little and the fatigue of the day caught up to them.

"Ahh," Alix sighed as she collapsed onto the sand for the tenth time. "I think I'm done for today..."

"Yeah, me too," Leon replied as he took a seat at the edge of the sandpit and leaned against a pillar. Anzu had woken up halfway through their sparring session and had come over to watch. Now that Leon

took a seat, the griffin shuffled over and lay down next to Leon while resting his head down on his front paws.

"I feel like I just stormed the Blue Heaven," Alix said, referencing a story she had just read a few days before as she spread herself out to get more comfortable on the sand.

"My lady, surely you aren't comparing yourself to a goddess, are you?" Leon playfully asked, understanding her reference.

In that story, the goddess Diana became alienated from her fellow gods and left her home in the Blue Heaven. She lived among humans and even took a human husband. However, a jealous god killed her husband, causing her to return to the Blue Heaven to seek revenge.

"Maybe I am," Alix said cheekily. "In all seriousness, though, I need a shower, and then I'm rackin' out."

"Be my guest," Leon said. Etiquette as a squire required Alix to wait for Leon to bathe first, but Leon wasn't that into formal etiquette; he freely gave her license to ignore those unofficial rules when they returned home.

With a happy cry, she leaped to her feet and hurried to the bathroom. She cleaned herself as thoroughly as she could as quickly as possible, as she didn't want to force Leon to wait on her. However, when she emerged about fifteen minutes later, she found him asleep at the edge of the sandpit, curled up right next to Anzu.

She couldn't help but giggle, and quietly walked around him; she knew he was a light sleeper, and she didn't want to disturb his rest.