

Storm King 221

Chapter 221: Smuggler's Cave II

After taking a few dozen steps into the cave, Leon felt like he passed through a thin curtain and the darkness instantly receded.

"Looks like there were more enchantments at the entrance than just those blocking my magic sense..." he muttered.

He tried to project his magic sense again, but once more his magic was instantly scattered as it exited his body.

"I guess we're doing this the old-fashioned way," one of the fifth-tier knights behind him said after trying the exact same thing.

The team advanced deeper into the cave, their way lit by cheap yellow magic lanterns and the occasional candle. About two hundred feet in, the tunnel they were walking in opened up into a massive natural cavern with a huge crack in the ceiling, through which moonlight was pouring in. In fact, the light was great enough that Leon and the team wouldn't specifically need their night vision, though they kept utilizing the technique so the darker corners wouldn't fade from view.

The floor of the cavern was rough and uneven, being made up of the same trap rocks as the Border Mountains and covered in piles of dirt and dead flora that fell in through the crack in the ceiling, so the height difference between neighboring sections of floor varied greatly. Consequently, the eight single-room wooden huts that the team could see in the cavern were all raised on stilts. Some of these huts had light shining through the cracks between wooden planks, and Leon could hear a number of different voices coming from within.

"Let's proceed slowly," he whispered to his team, and he led them onward. They advanced through the cavern, taking advantage of the larger space to spread out and cover more ground.

Once the team approached to within twenty feet of the closest hut, Leon tried one last time to project his magic sense, and to his great surprise, his magic power wasn't scattered this time. Leon called the group to a halt with a quick hand gesture, then silently told them to spread out as much as they could on the broken ground while he spread his magic sense out as far as he was able to within the cavern.

He managed to squeeze half of the huts within his magic sense's radius, and he counted about ten more smugglers, plus dozens of crates of what he assumed were more Silverleaf. None of the smugglers seemed to know he and his team were there, as they were lounging around reading, playing cards, or sleeping. The strongest mage he could see was one more fourth-tier mage—a woman who appeared to be a native citizen of the Bull Kingdom.

Before Leon decided what to do next, he carefully examined the ambient magic that permeated the cave. The auras of mages would disturb the magic in the air, so he tried to determine by how the magic flowed if there were any more strong smugglers around. Generally speaking, this was an unreliable technique, as there were hundreds and thousands of ways for magic in the environment to be disturbed, but Leon figured he'd give it a try since an almost completely sealed cavern wouldn't have quite so many factors involved that might alter the way magic in the air moved.

From what he was able to glean, there didn't seem to be any radical currents of magic that would indicate the presence of strong mages, but that could just mean that any strong mages could be restraining their aura. Regardless, Leon felt confident that he and the other three fifth-tier knights were the strongest mages in the cavern.

But that still left how he was to deal with the smugglers. He could simply order the knights and men-at-arms to storm the huts and kill everyone within, but these were smugglers, not bandits, murderers, or monsters. The more he thought about the problem, the more his thoughts turned back to Trajan's goal of making the Bull Kingdom safe and secure for everyone, to make it a place that wasn't prejudiced and was ruled by fair and impartial laws.

Every time Trajan spoke with Leon about these things, he would always phrase it in a way that was, in Leon's opinion, a little naïve, but it was still rhetoric that was hard to argue against without sounding like an asshole. At the end of the day, Leon believed that Trajan genuinely wanted to make the Bull Kingdom a better and brighter place, and he had agreed to help the Prince do this to the best of his ability, all for the Prince's support in finding his family's enemies.

To that end, Leon didn't think simply charging in and killing the smugglers was the best option. He was even starting to regret attacking the smugglers outside without giving them a chance to surrender first, especially since they had seemed so willing once they saw the odds they faced. These weren't barbarians intent on raping, burning, and pillaging, and they weren't monsters that would fight to the bitter end.

After several seconds of thought, Leon decided to give them their chance. None of the smugglers he could see were armored, anyway, so he figured the risk of his decision was worth it if they could end this quickly and without further bloodshed.

So it was that Leon whispered to his team, "Get ready, I'm going to order them to come out here."

The knights nodded, though a few curious glances were thrown his way.

Leon took a deep breath, and with the feeling that he was making a grave and deadly mistake that made his heart beat like it was trying to break free from his chest, he shouted so the entire cavern could hear, "THE ROYAL LEGIONS HAVE YOU SURROUNDED! COME OUT UNARMED AND WITH YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEADS, OR WE WILL COME IN AND *GET* YOU!" He backed his words up with some of his magic and let the sound carry a fraction of his prodigious killing intent to the ears of the smugglers, simultaneously signaling to them both his seriousness and his power.

There was a brief silence from the huts, followed by a lot of shouting and moving around. Leon could see the smugglers peeking out through any hole and crack they could find to get a look at the soldiers blocking them off from the exit, and then the telltale sounds of blades being drawn. Leon sighed and summoned his sword, as did the other fifth-tier knights who could see what was happening.

For a moment, Leon thought about ordering the smugglers to come out again when a better thought occurred to him. His voice, even backed with his aura and killing intent, clearly wasn't enough, so he decided to try something a little showier. He called upon his power, conjuring a dozen small bolts of golden lightning that sprouted from his sword and arced between him and several nearby trap rock pillars and filling the cavern with the booming sound of thunder.

Leon's thunder echoed throughout the cavern, even shaking the crude huts a little. Once these echoes faded away, silence again descended upon the cavern.

And then, Leon heard the dull sound of metal hitting the wooden floor of one of the huts, followed by several more of the same. He heard a little more arguing, but he couldn't pick out anything more than, "... paid you to... render?" and "... ot dying for... got nothing in this..."

Several seconds later, the doors of several of the huts opened and smugglers began to file out of them with their hands in the air with not a single weapon to be seen. The fourth-tier woman was the last to file out, and the look on her face was certainly not one of acceptance. That being said, when the team rushed forward and the smugglers felt the weight of the auras of four fifth-tier mages, any lingering thoughts of resistance vanished; Leon's team bound the smugglers' hands and took them into custody.

"We've got them," the first knight reported to Leon.

"Good. Take three guys and watch over them," Leon ordered. "Everyone else, check the rest of the cavern, make sure no one else is still here!"

"Yes, Sir!" the others shouted as they spread out among the huts.

Meanwhile, Leon, Alix, and Anzu took a more leisurely pace as they poked around in the first hut. There wasn't much to find in there, as it was nothing more than a barrack for about fifteen people. The next hut they explored was the same, as was the third.

It was only in the fourth hut that things began to get interesting, as it was clearly the residence for the fourth-tier mages. Unlike the other barracks, this hut had a small but private bathroom with a functioning toilet and shower. Apart from that, there was space for three people to live quite comfortably, though it was clear that only two of the bunks were in use.

Leon quickly began to poke around in the drawers, causing Alix to ask with a slight tone of offense, "What are you doing going through a lady's things, Sir?"

Leon, with a complete lack of shame, answered, "Looking for any sign of who these people worked for."

"And how is going through their clothes going to help?"

Leon paused for a moment as he glanced back at Alix. Anzu, meanwhile, was poking around the place himself, though Leon didn't actually expect the griffin to find anything he'd be interested in.

"About two years ago," Leon explained, "my father and I participated in a raid on a bandit fort back in the Northern Vales. After we took the fort, we discovered that the men leading them hadn't sterilized their clothing; we found shirts, tabards, and a bunch of other things emblazoned with the crest of Marquis Grandison, leaving no doubt as to who they served. Grandison sent hundreds of his personal soldiers north to steal, pillage, and enslave, and we know this because we went through the clothes of the bandits we killed."

Alix nodded in understanding, but her mouth still continued to curve downward in a disapproving frown.

"All right, then, if you feel so strongly about it, then *you* search this stuff!" Leon said in a mock-offended tone as he stepped aside.

The squire's frown disappeared and all but dove into the fourth-tier woman's drawers, causing Leon to think, *'I guess it was just me going through a woman's things that she was offended by...'*

He shrugged, then moved over and started searching the rest of the barrack.

Unfortunately for them, these people were either not in the direct service of a noble, or they were far smarter than those who Marquis Grandison sent north, as neither Leon nor Alix found anything that would suggest the fourth-tier smugglers were knights in disguise.

With empty hands, Leon, Alix, and Anzu stepped back out into the cavern where the second knight was waiting for them.

"Sir!" the knight called out.

"What is it?" Leon asked.

"We found a couple hundred crates full of contraband. We're checking them now, but they all seem to be more Silverleaf."

"Keep it up," Leon ordered.

"Yes, Sir."

Leon glanced over at the captured smugglers, then said to Alix, "Have everyone outside come in. No point in guarding two separate groups when we can consolidate."

Alix nodded, then took off for the entrance while Leon walked over to the storage huts to inspect what his team had seized.

As the second knight had told him, most of the cargo was Silverleaf, with three of the four storage huts dedicated to the drug precursor. The last hut, however, held something quite a bit different: weapons and armor, for the most part. There were a few crates with luxury goods like glassware and wine in unmarked boxes, but for the most part, there were swords, spears, axes, individual plates, suits of scale and mail, and most egregiously, several hundred Legion shields.

"Arms smuggling?" Leon wondered aloud.

"Indeed, Sir," the second knight said. What had been found in that last hut was enough for the fifth-tier knight to monitor personally. "We also found a stash of several million silvers and a small office area. We're seizing every paper we can find."

"Good. Oh, and send someone back to the Horns and report to His Highness and Dame Minerva. Make sure they know to send reinforcements, there's too much here for twenty people to deal with on our own."

Chapter 222: Decimius' Losses

"Three tons of Silverleaf, enough military equipment to field half a battalion, four million three hundred and seventy thousand silver coins, almost fifty crates of wine and glassware, and twenty-six smugglers captured," Trajan listed, reading from the report Leon had given him that morning.

After capturing the smuggler's cave, Leon had a messenger dispatched back to the Bull's Horns to report their success and pass along Leon's request for additional soldiers to help with the clean-up. Minerva responded immediately to Leon's request, sending out another hundred soldiers and twenty wheel-less carts before the sun rose the next morning. Leon's team was relieved when these reinforcements arrived, and they accompanied the three squads assigned to escort the prisoners back to the Horns.

This had been Leon's first command, and it ended in victory, so understandably, the young man eagerly wrote his report as soon as he returned home and sent it to Trajan before passing out from having been awake all night. Once he woke up, he was ordered to meet with Trajan to go over the results of his mission.

"Dame Minerva will squeeze those smugglers for any information they have, though I'm not expecting too much," Trajan said to Leon.

"Yeah, I think I was a little too hasty when I ordered the opening attack," Leon responded with a frown. "The galley's captain and that foreigner who met with him probably knew a lot more than most of the rest of the smugglers. Still, we might get *something* out of that other fourth-tier smuggler..."

Trajan sighed as he glanced up at Leon. "I can't say that you did poorly, as your mission was a success by any metric, and I'm glad you're thinking about it—shows you're learning from any mistakes you made. Why don't you tell me what you think your biggest mistake here was?"

"I treated the raid on the smugglers as a military operation," Leon instantly responded. "I... shouldn't have done that. After killing a few of the stronger smugglers, the rest surrendered far too quickly for the level of force I used..."

"I agree," the Prince replied. "I doubt any of these smugglers were particularly invested in the operation, and they clearly weren't willing to die for what was probably just the best job they could find in their own unique circumstances. Better to be imprisoned for a handful of years than to be killed protecting some rich asshole's property."

Leon nodded in understanding. "Were I to go on another mission like this, I think I would try and take everyone alive that I could. Open up with a demand for the significantly less-armed and armored people to surrender."

Trajan sighed again. "A good idea and one I wish occurred to more knights. Too often, a knight will be sent in to deal with bandits and the like, and their first instinct is to kill *everyone*. A side-effect of training people to fight and kill foreign invaders only to turn them loose on our own lawbreakers, I suppose. I've been hoping to speak with my Royal Brother about that, about codifying the difference between domestic criminals, foreign enemies, and magical monsters, and having separate and, more importantly, *specific* regulations for dealing with each, though the opportunity hasn't arisen yet. There's always been something else that's come up that demanded my attention."

"Aren't there already specific regulations for dealing with monsters?" Leon asked.

"Some. Not enough. There are a few guidelines, but they *really* need to be codified. That being said, it's the designation of military targets versus civilian targets that needs to be cleared up."

“Makes sense to me, there wasn’t a single class at the Knight Academy that dealt with criminals and the like. The training was entirely geared toward countering an enemy army in various forms, not with less organized criminals from the common sectors.”

Trajan leaned back in his seat with his hands behind his head. This had been a problem he’d been aware of for a long time, but with the recent riots and the smuggling problem they uncovered, the issue had come to the forefront of his mind. Knights were expected to be both soldiers and law enforcement, but Trajan had come to learn in his position that the problems encountered when fulfilling each of these separate duties couldn’t necessarily be solved with the solutions that would apply to the other.

“I don’t suppose *you* have any suggestions?” Trajan asked, pulling out the obsidian plate and shining red ruby that housed the magic body of Caecilius, the founder of the Bluefire Guild.

The gem was silent, with no voice emanating from it.

“What’s up with him?” Leon asked.

“Upset that I dissolved his guild, I expect,” Trajan replied. After another moment of silence, Trajan laughed and ran his fingers through his salt-and-pepper colored hair. “Whatever,” he said, bringing the conversation back to the matter at hand. “I’ll leave the specifics that need to be sorted out to the lawyers and other people that I pay to be more knowledgeable about these things. For now, you and that squire of yours just got back from a successful mission, so take the next week off.”

Leon nodded gratefully, but as he rose from his own seat across the table from the Prince, he asked, “We still on for morning training?”

“Not trying to weasel out of your morning beatings, are you?” Trajan asked with a challenging smile.

“No, just making sure the ‘week off’ didn’t apply to that,” Leon answered, countering Trajan with a smile of his own.

“See you tomorrow morning, then,” the Prince replied. “Get some rest, because I’ve got something special in mind for tomorrow that you haven’t seen, yet.”

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Far away from Leon and Trajan’s joking atmosphere, more than a thousand miles to the west of the Bull’s Horns, Duke Euphemius Decimius was practically pulling his hair out from stress. His finances were in tatters, he was behind on his payments to his knights, and Heaven’s Eye refused to cooperate with him whenever he tried to fix his financial situation.

“Why did you suddenly change the policies on me *again*?” he demanded of the Heaven’s Eye representative sitting across his desk from him. His face was pale and gaunt, his clothes lacked the garish colors and decorations that otherwise would’ve been present, and there were a few empty alcoves and bare spots on the walls of his office where expertly carved statues and exquisite tapestries could once be found.

Every time the representative’s eyes passed over one of these spots, he struggled not to smile. Heaven’s Eye made it almost impossible for Euphemius to access his vaults and accounts on a regular basis, and it

was clear that Euphemius' financial situation was at the point where he was starting to sell some of the ostentatious trappings that nobles of his caliber surrounded themselves with.

"It's only a security measure," the representative said with a dismissive smile, pausing in his answer just long enough for Euphemius to know that he was being disrespectful on purpose.

"*One hundred and sixteen years* I have been alive," Euphemius said, his pale face flushing red with anger. "*One hundred and sixteen years*, and you have never *once* brought up these concerns with me. Not once have you brought up these concerns with any of my ancestors, either! And yet, now, suddenly, you're telling me that I can't access more than a *single* vault every month?! You *can't* deny me access to my resources like this!"

"It's an order from the top, Your Grace," the representative said, not even trying to make his tone sound reassuring.

"From Lady Emilie, then?" Euphemius belligerently demanded, the last year of being forced to accept his financial losses leaving him with only a fraction of the patience he once possessed.

The representative simply smiled back at him without bothering to hide his pleasure at the noble's fury and indignation.

Euphemius took a deep breath and stood up. He glowered down at the seated Heaven's Eye representative and growled, "Leave."

The representative acquiesced, rising and giving the Duke a slight, almost sarcastic bow, then walking out of the office.

Euphemius waited an entire minute to ensure the representative had left earshot, then he screamed in rage and scattered the papers on his desk. With a wave of his hand, he conjured a blade of ice and started laying into his desk, his chair, and all the rest of the furniture in his office. In five minutes, everything within was little more than a pile of splinters, but Euphemius was feeling much better—he was still indescribably furious, but he no longer felt like strangling the first person he saw.

When the Duke left his office, there were three servants waiting outside almost shaking in fear. They had clearly heard what the Duke had just done, but after his little bit of catharsis, Euphemius was back to the smiling, jovial, and kind nobleman that he always pretended to be.

"Please clean all of that up," was all he said to the servants as he made his way to a small meeting room where his smuggling contact and the leader of his Shadow Guards were waiting for him.

"I take it the meeting went poorly, Your Grace?" the Shadow Guard said, easily seeing through his lord's mask of serenity.

Euphemius glanced at his guard, the man's pitch black eyes giving nothing away; the guard's expression was neutral, his black clothes were simple if of obvious quality, and all of his hair had been shaved, leaving him appearing as nondescript as possible. The only thing anyone would be able to find noteworthy about the guard was a ring on his left hand set with a sparkling emerald.

"That base-born maggot has locked away all of *my* property in Heaven's Eye vaults!" Euphemius raged, his hatred, wrath, and disdain evident in his tone despite his meager attempts to control himself. He was

able to control his outburst about the rest of his finances, though, as he didn't want to let his contact with the smuggling network know how bad of a state he was in. At the moment, the revenue brought in from Silverleaf production and smuggling was the only thing keeping Euphemius' head above water, as even glass and wine were barely bringing in a tenth of the silver they did only a year ago.

But, Euphemius quickly found out that his involvement in smuggling wasn't as secure a revenue source as he had thought when the smuggler said in a grave tone, "We have another problem: our eastern route has been severed."

"What?!" Euphemius exclaimed.

"We lost contact with our people in Ariminum several weeks ago. It seems they flipped when questioned by Prince Trajan's people because a couple days ago our closest storage point to the city was raided by a team of Legion knights."

Euphemius fought to keep his temper under control, and quietly asked, "How much did we lose?"

"Well, I ordered that everything stored there be moved once it became clear that our guy in Ariminum was arrested. Still, we lost more than half of what we tried to move through there during the past three months."

"*How much?!*" Euphemius demanded. Once the smuggler informed him, the Duke shot to his feet in anger and almost stormed out of the room. His sixth-tier aura burst from his body and filled the room with so much killing intent that both the smuggler and the Shadow Guard captain froze up for a brief moment.

The Duke didn't angrily leave the room, though. Instead, he slowly turned back to the smuggler and asked, "How much can we move by the southern route?"

"We don't have a strong presence in the western coasts of the plane," the smuggler explained. "Since there's not many wind mages in Samar, moving much more Silverleaf than we have been doing lately won't be cost-effective."

"Transport as much as you can. Take my glass and wine with you, as well. If I can't sell those things for what they're worth here, then someone somewhere else will buy them for a decent price that isn't mitigated by taxes and tariffs..."

"Not much choice until we get another eastern route established," the smuggler said with a shrug.

"How long until you get that sorted out?" Euphemius asked.

"A year, maybe longer," the smuggler responded.

"Then get on it."

With that, the smuggler rose and left, pointedly not bowing or lowering himself to the Duke before doing so, which only enraged the Duke even more. Despite this, Euphemius managed to contain himself.

Turning to his Shadow Guard, he asked, "How many of the Kingdom's surveyors are on our borders?"

"About three dozen," the guard replied.

"I've stalled as long as I could. Prince Octavius has yet to get them to leave, and I'm running out of excuses to stop them from entering my lands. See to it that they get attacked by 'bandits' in the near future."

"Yes, Your Grace," the Shadow Guard replied, his face twisting in a vicious smile.

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Euphemius collapsed into a chair in one of his sitting rooms. This room was being used as a temporary office until his actual office could get new furniture. As the Duke stared at the financial report his accountants made to replace the furniture he destroyed, he sorely regretted losing his temper, as he couldn't afford unnecessary expenses at the moment.

At the current rates, his already high taxes and incomes from his rented lands could only support about half of his expenses. The wine and glass used to be enough to pick up the rest of the slack, and more besides. Originally, his allowance for the growth of Silverleaf on his land and to facilitate its transportation was only to make a little bit more on the side.

Now, with most of that additional revenue gone and his vaults effectively seized by Heaven's Eye, he had about two months of liquid assets left before he would have to start disbanding his army or selling his private land. He'd even had to stop sending bribe money months ago to Tiberias for the other knights in Tiberias' Legion, which was still based uncomfortably close to his land.

"Shit," he muttered, seeing few ways out of this desperate situation.

Chapter 223: Trajan's Retinue

Leon didn't know what to expect when he, Alix, and Anzu walked into Trajan's training chamber, but since the Prince had hinted at having something special in mind, he was a little cautious and apprehensive. He most certainly didn't expect to see about a dozen other knights he'd become acquainted with over the last year in Trajan's retinue, the three Legates that led the Legions stationed at the Horns, and several of the Tribunes within those Legions. He paused a moment as he stepped into the chamber, as every eye instinctively turned in his direction when the door was opened.

Alix had a similar if much stronger reaction; she almost completely froze when all the other knights looked in their direction. So many relatively powerful mages with their attention on her was incredibly intimidating.

"Sir Ursus!" shouted the booming voice of Trajan from within the sandpit. The Prince waved at his youngest knight to join the rest of the knights in his retinue, to which Leon complied. Alix, however, walked over to join the squires who lined the walls of the chamber. Leon noticed that Charles, Henry, and Alain were all in that group of squires, so he nodded to them in greeting as he joined the knights.

For their part, Leon's three friends were more than a little stunned to see Leon doing so. They knew that he was a fifth-tier mage and served the Prince, but to see him actually stand among the older higher-ranked knights and be called out personally by Trajan was something else entirely. They were so taken aback that they didn't pick their jaws up off the floor until Alix slid into the group to stand beside them.

"Hey, I think you're going to get dehydrated if you don't tighten up those slack jaws of yours," Alix playfully poked at them.

Alain maintained a dignified silence, Charles smiled at her in greeting, and Henry gave a few embarrassed chuckles, but they all quickly composed themselves and turned their attention back to the sandpit in the center of the training chamber. They didn't make any more conversation, though; the presence of so many high-ranked knights, and even a member of royalty, ensured that even the noblest of squires among their group kept their quiet.

That being said, there wasn't much going on in the sandpit, either. Trajan was there having a quiet conversation with Minerva and the three Legates who led the Legions, but the rest of the knights were simply hanging out between the pillars of the peristyle around the pit waiting for whatever the Prince had in mind to start. Fortunately, they only had to wait about five minutes for the last couple knights to arrive before Trajan broke off the conversation he was having with the Legates, and the four sixth-tier mages joined the rest, leaving Trajan alone in the sandpit.

"Good morning, everyone!" the Prince loudly exclaimed, instantly quieting the entire chamber. "I doubt there's any need for it, but just in case, I'll introduce myself. I am Trajan Anastasius Taurus, Prince of the Bull Kingdom!"

Trajan paused a moment for the traditional bowing of all the surrounding knights.

"I've assembled this group as part of a little tradition I enjoy," the Prince continued. "Every time a new Legion is transferred in, I like to have some of the highest ranked knights in all three Legions and a handful of the knights in my retinue participate in a little competition—all in good fun and to welcome the incoming Legion, so we won't be competing for anything substantial, only your pride and honor as knights.

"Under normal circumstances, I would've called you all here much sooner, but the recent riots and the clean-up associated with that have postponed this little get-together. However, with the city and fortress calming down, I thought it was time for us to welcome the 23rd Legion to our humble abode!"

Leon began to smile as he glanced around the room. There were several dozen Tribunes in every Legion, but since the Legates only brought a few Tribunes with them, they made sure to bring the best. To be fair and ensure that his side had equal numbers, Trajan only invited Minerva and a couple of his own Tribunes, in addition to Leon.

"Here's how this is going to work," Trajan explained, "as is tradition, one of the incoming Legions' Tribunes must fight first! They can call out any knight in any other unit that they wish to, but if they don't, then any other knight may volunteer to spar with their new comrade! And I *do* mean 'spar', there is to be no spilling of blood here! We're here to promote trust and cooperation, not to dishonor and humiliate any of our fellow knights!"

Trajan punctuated his explanation by looking around the room, making eye contact with everyone present, including the first and second-tier squires. His body radiated power, enough to ensure that the knights took him seriously, but also enough for him to leave unsaid the threat of what would happen to them if they caused any substantial damage to their opponent during their spar.

After using his aura to impress his seriousness upon everyone present, Trajan continued, "After the first spar, the victorious unit will send another knight into the ring! The Legate may choose to send another Tribune, or they may decide to venture out into the sand themselves! At that point, the knight sent out

will either challenge another from a different unit or wait for a challenge to come to them! After that sparring match is finished, the victor's unit will send out another knight, and so on!

"I authorize the use of elemental magic, but be sure to *control yourselves*! Everyone *will* fight! The squires will fight as well, but only once the knights have finished! No one may fight battles consecutively! They *must* take at least one round to rest!

"Everyone understand?!" Again, Trajan cast his gaze around the room, almost as if he were challenging anyone to argue with the rules. Instead, all he saw were the eager faces of knights looking forward to challenging each other. Already, he could see several of the knights eyeing up those they wished to challenge. He noted that many of the knights were staring at Leon in challenges of various subtlety.

This wasn't lost on Leon, who made sure to answer with stares of his own. Most of the knights who so clearly wanted to challenge him were those who had been around the Bull's Horns since before his arrival, and they wanted to see first-hand exactly what the eighteen-year-old Tribune could do. Some of them were jealous of his youth or position of favor with the Prince, some simply wanted to fight a strong opponent, but regardless of their specific motivations, Leon welcomed any and all of their challenges. And his opportunity to showcase that willingness came quickly.

The first person to be sent out into the sand was Dame Ateia, Henry's knight. She was a tall woman, with a heavy tan and long black hair tied into a tight bun. Her full lips were perpetually turned upwards in a smile as if she were chuckling at a private joke, and her deep brown eyes projected a sense of warmth and security. She was in her mid-fifties, but as a fifth-tier mage, she barely looked to be in her late-twenties.

Ateia stood in the center of the sandpit, bowed to Prince Trajan, then began to almost theatrically scan the small crowd of knights. She spun around once, looking each possible challenger in the eye before she turned her mirthful gaze to Leon. She lowered the spear in her hand until the spearhead pointed directly at him in a direct challenge.

Leon smiled and grabbed a training sword from Trajan's collection, from which Ateia had also gotten her spear, and jumped out into the pit. From the sidelines, many of the knights began to whisper amongst themselves as the two fighters prepared themselves for their duel. Trajan's knights and those from Ateia's Legion, however, weren't so subtle as they called out for their person to win.

"Show him the strength of the Twenty-third!"

"Get her!"

"Don't go easy on him just because he's young!"

"You've got this, Ursus!"

Leon and Ateia each nodded gratefully to their respective sides before turning to face a smiling Prince Trajan.

"You two ready?" the Prince softly asked.

"Yes, Your Highness," Ateia immediately replied.

"As am I, Your Highness," Leon said.

“Good!” Trajan said as he moved to the edge of the sandpit. “Then you may begin!”

Leon didn’t need any more encouragement; as soon as he could, he summoned his power and launched into a blistering assault on his opponent. His goal was to win before Ateia could set up a proper defense, and with the enhanced speed he gained from lightning magic surging through his body, he felt that he had a damned good chance at doing so.

Unfortunately for him, while Ateia wasn’t as quick to move, she was fast enough at summoning her own power. Leon’s strikes aimed at her vitals—her torso and midsection—were blocked by a swiftly summoned layer of thick ice.

Leon rolled with the setback and kept pushing against Ateia. The latter had a spear and he a sword, so he was determined to stay close enough that she couldn’t bring her weapon around. Ateia, however, had other plans, and summoned an ice spike out of her shoulder right in front of Leon’s face, startling him and forcing an instinctive step backward.

Ateia took full advantage of the interruption in Leon’s assault and gained some distance, covering her movements over the sand with ice and keeping Leon from pressing again without fear of slipping and losing his footing. Ateia expanded on this by stabbing her spear into the sand, causing the ice on the ground to thicken.

Leon could tell that she was preparing to launch much thicker spikes at him, so he called upon his magic again and felt his chest heat up. That heat spread from his chest into his left arm, and from his left hand sprang a bright red-orange flame.

The eyes of the entire group of spectating knights widened in surprise. It was common knowledge that Leon was a lightning mage, and though he’d made no real attempt to prevent knowledge of it spreading, few people knew that he was a fire mage as well.

Ateia, however, was one person who knew about his fire, as she had seen Leon use his fire magic before when retaking the guild district. Knowing what was coming, she flicked her fingers and conjured a wall of ice in front of her just as Leon extended his hand and let loose with his fire.

The battle between fire and ice raged for what seemed like hours for the two combatants but was in actuality only about five seconds. In the end, Leon was forced to stifle off his magic power to take a momentary break, while Ateia was knocked off balance with the destruction of her ice wall.

Still, Ateia had come out a little further ahead, as even though her wall was destroyed, it had done its job. And she didn’t intend to let that slight advantage slip by; while Leon was preparing himself to conjure more fire, Ateia suddenly rushed forward straight over the ice she’d summoned and stabbed toward Leon with her spear.

Leon was a little taken aback, but lightning magic still coursed through his veins, so he just barely managed to dodge out of the way in time. Leon raised his blade and knocked Ateia’s spear away from him, allowing him to take a couple steps toward her and get in close. Leon didn’t think he’d be able to penetrate Ateia’s icy armor with his weapon, as nothing had meaningfully changed since he had failed to do so previously, so instead, he lowered his weapon and charged with all the speed he could muster.

Ateia knew he was going to try and close the distance, to get in close where her spear couldn't help, but she didn't expect this. Before she could conjure an ice spike out of her body, Leon crashed into her, almost knocking her to the ground. As it was, he still got her off balance and might have managed to tip her over and win the duel if another wall of ice hadn't sprung out of the ground behind Ateia, giving her something to brace against.

Ateia pushed back against Leon, dropping her spear in the process to get both arms in play. Leon lost a little ground as she pushed back until they both found a kind of equilibrium with both pushing against each other to no avail.

Leon found her surprisingly strong—though as she was a fifth-tier mage, he by no means expected her to be weak in any sense of the word. Rather, she was strong even for an average fifth-tier mage, who was already almost guaranteed to be in peak physical condition. It was hard to see through her loose training clothing as her outfit didn't expose much skin, but Leon had been able to feel before he was pushed back Ateia's extraordinarily muscled body.

The two fighters were left there in a stalemate for a couple seconds, staring at each other with less than a single foot between them, feet planted and arms pushing against each other as they jockeyed for position. In the end, though, they both realized in the same instant that the battle could only be decided with magic, not with raw strength or skill with their dropped weapons.

Leon once more summoned his fire, while ice burst forth from Ateia's forearms like gauntlets. However, before either could make another move, Trajan waved his hand and broke the stalemate by causing the sand beneath them to shoot up and knock them away from each other.

While they were reeling back, both thought to keep attacking each other, but the sand solidified and formed a wall separating them.

"I think that's enough," Trajan said with an amused tone. "As I said before, we're not trying to kill each other..."

"Yes, Your Highness," Leon and Ateia said in unison. They both reluctantly lowered their arms and allowed their magic to recede back into their blood and soul realms.

"We'll call that a draw!" Trajan boomed.

The watching knights were a little disappointed, but the battle had been fast, intense, and flashy, and everyone had gotten a good idea of what each was capable of.

"That was a good fight," Ateia said with a grateful smile as she took a few steps toward Leon after Trajan dissipated his wall of sand.

"It was indeed," Leon said with a matching smile on his own face.

As the two warriors clasped each other's hand in the center of the sandpit, to the muted and dignified cheers of the others in their units, they could see in each other's eyes the desire to continue.

"We ought to finish this fight, one day," Leon whispered, squeezing Ateia's hand.

"I look forward to it," Ateia responded, her face breaking out into a look of great expectation. She squeezed Leon's hand back and pulled him a little closer. "When we do, I'm going to *win*."

Chapter 224: Alix v Henry

It was clear to everyone that both Ateia and Leon had held back quite a bit in their fight, though their competitive sides were beginning to show through when Trajan stopped them from escalating the fight. Neither fought with anything close to the ferocity and ruthlessness they would've in a real battle, and neither did they use killing intent. Still, despite the lack of clear resolution, both knights walked out of the sandpit with a much higher level of respect for the other.

As a side-effect, many of the knights that wished to challenge Leon began to have second thoughts after his display of power. Since it was clear to everyone that he was holding back, it was just as obvious that he wasn't a soft noble that coasted to the fifth-tier by flooding his body with expensive potions. But that wasn't to say that all desire to fight him died down; on the contrary, for a few of the more battle-happy knights, that desire actually increased.

However, Leon and Ateia had fought their fight, and so earned their one round of mandatory rest. And since the fight was a draw, Ateia's 23rd Legion had to fight again, with the Legate in charge sending out another fifth-tier Tribune.

This time, the Tribune didn't challenge anyone; instead, he allowed anyone else to make their own challenge of him. A knight of the 21st Legion took advantage and joined the other man in the sandpit. After a flurry of swords and elemental magic, the 21st Legion knight managed to disarm the other knight and claim the victory.

The next match was between the 21st Legion and the 19th Legion, with the 19th coming out on top. Following that was a draw between the 19th and the 23rd.

Things continued on in this vein for the entire afternoon. After a while, the knights started to relax and chat amongst themselves, just as Trajan intended. Healthy rivalries were stoked, the knights were given an opportunity to fight equal opponents without their lives on the line, and all in all, everyone had a good time. Even Leon managed to relax and smile a little, as he was challenged six times including his fight with Ateia, double that of the next-most challenged knight, and he won four of the resulting duels—the last was as inconclusive as Ateia's had been.

By lunchtime, Trajan's retinue eked out with the most wins out of the thirty total fights, at eight compared to the 19th Legion's six, the 21st Legion's five, and the 23rd's seven. The remaining four duels were declared draws when it became clear that to win, one of the knights involved would need to use significantly more lethal force than Trajan desired for the friendly competition.

When Trajan called an end to the knights' competition and they broke for lunch, Leon was pulled into a conversation with several other knights who wanted to discuss the fights—though it was more like they talked at him while he stood there silent and awkward and very much wanting to be with his friends instead. But Henry, Charles, Alain, and Alix were all squires, and he was a knight, and he couldn't just blow off the other knights to spend time with lower-ranked soldiers.

Fortunately, he didn't have to endure this light social pressure for long, as Trajan called them all back to the sandpit after an hour.

“Well, we’ve all had our fun sparring with each other,” Trajan said as the knights gathered around, “but we would be remiss in our duties as teachers and leaders if we didn’t cut our subordinates in on the action a little...”

The older knights who had been around for many of these competitions that Trajan had organized started to smile, snicker, and shoot the squires appraising looks. A few even started to whisper amongst themselves, and from what little Leon was able to hear of their short exchanges, they were making bets on the squires.

“It’s time for our squires to get out there and uphold the honor of their knights!” Trajan shouted, causing many of the other knights to shout and make noise in excitement and battle-mania—not unlike sports fans, Leon noted, though the knights were significantly more invested in these fights than in gladiatorial games.

“The rules will be the same as with the knightly competition,” Trajan continued, bringing the noise level of the less restrained knights down. “Twenty-Third! You’re up first!”

The Legate of the 23rd Legion glanced over at the four squires brought with his group. All twelve squires were of the second-tier, so there weren’t any issues there to worry about, but he still didn’t know Charles, Henry, or Alain well enough to make a quick decision about who to send out. His brief indecision was brought to an end when Ateia leaned over and whispered into his ear before sending a challenging look Leon’s way.

“Henry!” the Legate boomed, causing the younger man to almost jump out of his skin.

Composing himself with remarkable swiftness, Henry nodded to the Legate and started making his way to the sandpit. Just before he passed the columns, though, he was stopped by Ateia, who whispered a few things to him that Leon couldn’t hear. Henry glanced at her, then at Leon, then nodded.

Leon felt like he knew exactly what was coming, and most of the other knights seemed to have picked up on it, too. As the other squires gathered around the sandpit to watch, Alix took her place next to Leon.

“He’s going to challenge you,” Leon said quietly to her.

“I figured,” she whispered back.

“He’s not bad with a blade, don’t hold back,” Leon replied.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Alix stated, her face lighting up in a smile of anticipation.

Leon nodded, then sat down on the edge of the sandpit with Anzu. The griffin was sensitive to the energetic auras of all the mages around and was getting restless, so Leon pulled him closer to calm him down while he watched the fight.

Henry bowed to the Prince as all the other combatants had done, then was about to make a show of looking around at the other squires, but Alix pre-empted him by stepping directly into the sandpit. Henry chuckled, bowed slightly, and asked, “Miss Alix, would you honor me with a dance?”

Alix’s eyes immediately narrowed in anger; Henry clearly thought he was being suave and witty, and she didn’t think he meant any offense. Over the past couple weeks that they’d known each other, she

understood that he was just being friendly, but the way he said it, it still came across as dismissive and arrogant.

And with the honor of herself, Leon, and even Trajan to some extent, on the line, she wasn't going to let something like that slide.

With a bow, Alix wordlessly told Trajan that she was ready to fight. She then drew her training sword and shot a glare at Henry that could've instantly solidified a lava flow. Henry immediately realized that he'd made a mistake somewhere along the line, but he didn't get a chance to ask because Trajan shouted, "Begin!"

Alix moved first, lunging forward to stab at Henry's midsection with devastating speed. Henry just barely managed to bring his own weapon up in time to block, but that did him little good. Alix hadn't bet everything on that first assault, though she certainly held nothing back, and she put the year she'd been training with Leon and Trajan on full display as she elegantly and almost seamlessly pivoted away from Henry and slashed at his back thigh.

Henry was again able to block, but only by the skin of his teeth. Alix didn't let up even then, twisting her blade to lock it against Henry's and advancing forward, pushing him off balance.

But Henry wasn't done, either, and he wasn't about to let himself be defeated in front of so many high-ranking knights in the opening moves of the fight. In the space of those few seconds since the duel started, he managed to compose himself after his realization that he'd offended Alix had left him flustered, and he pushed back against her. He didn't get far, but he managed to stabilize his footing and give himself a bit of room to strategize.

Seeing that Henry had pulled himself together despite her ferocious opening assault, Alix pulled back, as she knew she didn't have enough of a strength advantage to keep up that kind of pressure. Instead, she decided to focus on her superior speed and skill.

Henry tried to take advantage of her withdrawal from their stalemate by pressing forward and stabbed toward her, putting as much of his own strength behind the blow as he could. Unfortunately for him, Alix was still faster, and she deflected the blow aimed at her chest upward and Henry's strike passed harmlessly over her head. She then followed that up by shoulder checking Henry. She intended to knock him down, but his footing was more stable than she realized, and she almost bounced off the larger man.

Seeing the opening, Henry brought his blade back down, trying to strike the slightly off-balance Alix in the shoulder—it was heavily discouraged to strike the head or neck with training weapons, otherwise her head is what he would've targeted. Henry's sword bit into Alix's shoulder, and for a moment, Henry felt the pride of a man who'd just seized victory after a hard-fought battle.

And then he felt Alix's blade hit him in the stomach. The pain lanced through him until it reached his head, and that's when everything went dark.

Henry fell backward into the sand, completely unconscious. He'd over-committed to an attack that only left one of Alix's arms disabled, leaving him open to her far more effective counter-attack.

Alix stood there in the sand, staring down at the unconscious Henry with a look of smug satisfaction on her face. Her right arm hung limply at her side, and she loosely held her sword in her left hand; she'd almost dropped it when Henry's strike landed, but she managed to catch it with her off-hand and slice into Henry's exposed midsection in one fluid movement.

Trajan's knights immediately began to laugh and cheer, while the 23rd Legion's knights were gracious in defeat, and significantly more subdued than the others.

Alix stood there and reveled in her victory for a few more seconds, then turned and walked back to Leon's side, leaving Henry there in the sand for his comrades to pick up.

"Good job," Leon said with a smile.

"Thanks," Alix replied with obvious pride in her voice.

Her face was practically split in half due to her smile, and it only grew wider when Anzu crept out from behind Leon's legs for a moment and nuzzled against her limp hand before quickly darting back behind Leon.

After carrying Henry out of the sandpit and arranging for the other squires to wake him up, Leon and Ateia quickly locked eyes. Leon grinned at the lady knight, gloating in his own understated way in his squire's triumph over hers. For a brief moment, she considered taking offense—the well-bred noble in her certainly demanded it—but she didn't think Leon was being too serious. Their little competition was hardly something that warranted such gravity, after all. So, her response was to simply smile and nod back at him, acknowledging Alix's victory.

She and Leon would have to have a rematch, though, of that she was determined. She could acknowledge her defeat in a proxy battle fought between their squires, but she wasn't going to let that be the end of it. She and Leon would spar again, and she wasn't intending to lose. She even began to smile in anticipation of their next fight.

Noticing her smile and guessing at the reason, Leon also began to feel his heart rate increase in excited expectation. He instinctively tried to rest his hand on the sword that wasn't at his hip, but before he could even sigh in dejection, the door to the training chamber burst open and a Tribune rushed into the room.

"What is this?!" Trajan angrily demanded. The squires that were about to fight immediately froze, as did the newcomer.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, but I have an urgent message from Sir Constantine!" the Tribune hurriedly responded.

Trajan's frown deepened. Constantine was the Legate he'd left in charge of the watch detail that manned the fort and accompanying watchtowers to the east. He only commanded a force of about five hundred soldiers, slightly less than half of Trajan's personal retinue, but his position was so critical that he was seen as the de facto third-in-command for the entire fortress complex. His only job was to fan out across the few dozen square miles of Bull Kingdom territory to the east of the Bull's Horns and watch for anything approaching the fortress. If he had sent a message of such urgency that the Tribune bearing it interrupted the competition, then Trajan knew the message didn't contain good news.

The Tribune handed over the message he carried, then hurriedly bowed and took a few steps away from the Prince.

Trajan's eyes fell as he read the letter. Constantine was not one to mince words, and his message was short and to the point.

"An army from the Talfar Kingdom is marching toward the border. It numbers at least two hundred thousand strong."

Chapter 225: Preparing for War

Trajan read and re-read the letter Constantine had sent him. The others around him waited for an explanation, or at least for the Prince to allow the competition to continue, but the Prince was silent for a long moment. Trajan knew that things were going to get loud and busy, so he savored this one last moment of quiet and calm.

As soon as that moment was over, he flew into a flurry of activity.

"That Talfar army that has been assembling in Briga is now marching for our borders, their force is much too large for it to be anything other than an invasion!" he exclaimed, to the shock and anger of the knights and their squires. He saw Leon tense up, though it was subtle enough that he doubted anyone else did. Minerva walked over to stand at his side, ready to get back to the Northern Horn at his command to get the garrisons ready. Everyone else waited on his word.

"All members of your Legions who aren't here at the Horns are to be recalled. I want us as close to one hundred percent readiness as we can get to in two days."

They had trained for this. The last foreign war the Bull Kingdom had fought had been fifty years ago when they had subjugated the Serpentine Isles far to the west, and thirty years before that had been the last war with Talfar that been won by such a wide margin that Trajan didn't think they'd try another invasion in this generation. But even though it had been a long time since war had last been visited upon the Kingdom, Trajan kept the twelve Legions under his command in the Eastern Territories in shape and ready for when it would next arrive.

And that time was now.

Trajan dismissed the Legion knights, and the three Legates departed the chamber with haste as they hurriedly issued orders to the knights they had brought with them. It wouldn't be a monumental task to get all three Legions formed up and ready for battle in two days, but they would still need every second they had.

Minerva, Leon, the two other knights, and their squires all remained, along with the messenger from Constantine waiting to take Trajan's response back to the Legate.

"Tell your commander that I will be personally visiting him within the next few hours to confirm his report and to gather more details," Trajan said to the messenger, who instantly bowed and began his run back to Constantine. "Get the Northern Horn in order," Trajan said to Minerva, trusting her to do what she needed to do.

"Yes, Your Highness!" she responded, and she, too, left the training chamber.

That left six others.

"Follow me," Trajan said to them as he led them out of the chamber and toward his office. There were a great many things that needed to be done, and he'd need all of his knights on deck.

The first order of business was to send messages to the capital and to every landed noble in the Eastern Territories. Trajan also needed to make sure the other nine Legions in the east were ready for deployment as well—he couldn't call upon all of them, as that would essentially leave almost half of the land in the Eastern Territories without peacekeepers and law enforcers, but he felt like he could safely pull two or three down to the Horns to defend the Kingdom.

What concerned him much more was the situation in the capital. When Talfar attempted their last invasion eighty years ago, his brother Julius Septimius had only been King for a handful of years, and the Talfar King thought that he could steal the Bull's Horns while Julius was still consolidating power.

Instead, Julius had reinforced the Bull's Horns with ten Legions he'd gathered from the Central, Northern, and Southern Territories, along with the personal armies of a dozen high nobles including Archduke Kyros Raime. Against such a mighty force, the armies of the Talfar King were repulsed from the Horns again and again, and the Bull's Legions pushed them back deep into their lands.

As punishment, Talfar only had to sign a fifty-year truce, pay a huge amount of gold and silver in one lump sum, pay a substantial tribute for twenty years, and cede an inconsequential amount of land east of the Bull's Horns.

Julius had hoped that by showing a modicum of mercy, peace would be maintained. And it was, for eighty years the Talfar Kingdom had kept a respectable distance from the Bull's Horns.

'Of course, part of the reason why they did that was that the Han Kingdom has been rather violently disputing Talfar's eastern border...' Trajan cynically noted.

Eighty years ago, Trajan, Kyros Raime, and Julius Septimius Taurus led an army composed of twelve Legions, along with four of the seven Paladins of the time against the armies of the Talfar Kingdom.

This time would be different, Trajan knew. Constantine's estimates put the Talfar army at about the same size as it was eighty years ago, but the Bull Kingdom was in a much weaker position. The Bull King was indisposed, House Raime was effectively gone, Trajan couldn't count on the presence of any Paladins, and he couldn't count on any Legions outside of those directly under his command coming to reinforce the Horns without the King.

Trajan glanced at Leon, the last scion of House Raime. The Prince couldn't help but feel a slight pang of regret that even after its effective destruction, House Raime still provided all it possibly could to the Kingdom—regardless of Leon's specific reasons for being there.

'I would trade all the gold in my vaults to bring Kyros back for a single hour...' Trajan thought, his apprehension growing stronger the more he thought about facing down an opposing army almost five times the size of his own while lacking such brilliant and experienced commanders as Kyros, Julius, and the Paladins of his youth. The death of the Blackstone Paladin forty years ago, in particular, had a terrible impact on the potential military force the Bull Kingdom could bring to bear. Only the Bronze and Penitent Paladins could've ever compared to her, in Trajan's mind.

He would have to make do with what he had. He lacked manpower, and those soldiers he did have, while well-trained, had cut their teeth on bandits and monsters, not on an organized and well-equipped foe like Talfar cataphracts or chariot teams.

There had been no formal declarations of war from either side, but regardless, war was now coming. Trajan didn't like it, but he had to accept it.

Once he and his knights reached his office, Trajan turned to them and said, "Let's get to work..."

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Briga was only twenty miles to the east of the Bull Kingdom, but that was only in direct distance. Owain's army had to march more than twice that distance past the southern reaches of the Border Mountains to approach the Bull's Horns. That still wasn't a huge distance, but his army was more than two hundred thousand strong, and an army column of that size didn't move quickly, ten miles a day if they were lucky.

They still made for a spectacular sight, despite their lack of speed. Owain led the army from the front atop a stallion that had been equipped in stunning silver armor adorned with blue war paint. He matched his horse, with a suit of glittering silver armor encrusted with sapphires and covered in blue druidic symbols.

Riding behind him was the stern and serious Arthwyn, dressed in his own silver and blue armor and riding a warhorse no less impressive than Owain's, though his was of a more rugged attractiveness while Owain's was the picture of well-groomed equine beauty. Following the two of them were the chariots, five thousand in all and each with a team of four operating it. Then came the heavily armed mounted cataphracts, the light cavalry skirmishers, the professional heavy infantry, and finally the light infantry of levied peasants, every one of them with their armor covered in blue war paint, showing their resolve to fight until the end for their Prince. The army was so large, in fact, that Owain knew that there would still be some of his soldiers in Briga by the time the front of the column reached the chosen site of their camp.

Owain couldn't help but feel conflicted about this. He was launching a campaign to raise his prestige and become acknowledged as King, but he still believed that they were marching in the wrong direction. He wanted to take the capital while his sister, Queen Andraste, was fighting the Han Kingdom in the east, not starting another war in the west with the Bull Kingdom.

But, in the end, Marshal Arthwyn had convinced him to march on the Bull's Horns, and whenever Owain voiced his doubts, the Marshal would always argue in favor of the invasion. As Arthwyn was his only official support in Talfar, Owain felt obligated to continue with his Marshal's invasion plan, though he still didn't like it.

"We're going to win this, Your Highness," Arthwyn reassured Owain. "Once we seize Ariminium, the Elders will appoint you to the Kingship for sure!"

Owain trusted Arthwyn not to lead him to disaster, but even still he was only able to turn and give his Marshal a half-hearted nod in acknowledgment.

Arthwyn hardly cared what Owain thought of him, though, just so long as his invasion was underway. Inside, he was a mess of excitement and anger, but his face and body language displayed none of it. He was before his troops, marching them west toward the Bull Kingdom, and he wasn't going to let them know anything of his agitation.

His old wound began to throb the more he thought about finally tearing down the walls of the Bull's Horns. He still remembered the massive man who gave it to him eighty years ago.

Arthwyn had only been a fourth-tier mage at the time, and his unit had been left behind in Briga when the army retreated in the face of the Bull Kingdom's counter-invasion. It was when the Bull King's Legions entered the city that he encountered Trajan, and after the encounter, Arthwyn had been left dying in the streets with the bodies of his comrades all around him. He'd only been saved when a nearby Legion medic recognized him as an officer and tended his wounds so that he'd live long enough to be ransomed.

The Marshal was unable to prevent a subtle smile from appearing on his face as he again thought about the destruction of the Bull's Horns. So many people close to him had died when the previous King had failed to seize the fortress, and now there was nothing he looked forward to more than the fortresses' destruction and the defeat of the Prince that had taken everything he cared about from him eighty years ago.

But Owain and Arthwyn weren't the only commanders of this army, as Arthwyn had utilized his contacts to bring another one hundred thousand soldiers to bear on the Horns, and these soldiers were the fifty thousand commanded by Marshal Bran, and another fifty thousand commanded by Marshal Gwen. Gwen's base of operations was much farther from Briga than Bran's, so she would reinforce them in several weeks, but Bran had arrived in Briga with his army several days ago. Now, the tall, inhumanely pale man was supervising the levied peasants further back in the column.

Arthwyn hated Bran in ways that he couldn't properly articulate—in fact, Trajan and maybe Kyros Raime were the only men Arthwyn hated more. The other Marshal had always stared at him with hungry eyes whenever there had been cause for the two to meet, and Arthwyn knew that the rumors that Bran was a cannibal had more truth to them than most people knew. When Bran arrived at the palace in Briga and Owain and Arthwyn greeted him, not even the Prince had been happy about the additional military support when he met the wolfish and disturbingly unblinking gaze of the Marshal.

As they rode along the road west, Owain thought to himself, *'Arthwyn will be the first to die when I'm King. But after him comes Bran... That man's a monster, and I want him eradicated...'*

With titanic effort, Owain turned his thoughts from his companions to the task ahead of him. The army had been raised and supplied, but now it had to seize the single most heavily defended fortress outside of the Central Empires. Thousands would die, but when everything was over, he would be King. And that's all Owain truly cared about.

Chapter 226: Florentine Problems

The lands east of the Bull's Horns had been won in the last war with the Talfar Kingdom, but they weren't particularly extensive. They sat in a small vale between the Border Mountains and the

Tyrrhenian River where the plain widened slightly, only to contract again further to the east. The land the Bull's Horns had been built upon was still the narrowest part of the region, though.

Over the next eighty years, numerous watchtowers and a small wooden fort had been built within this small vale, all designed to watch for invasion and to hold off any surprise attack long enough for the Legions at the Bull's Horns to get ready. These towers and fort were small, though, only needing five hundred soldiers from Trajan's personal retinue to properly man. The fort, barely more than a tower surrounded by a single wall was located on a hill small enough to barely be described as such, but with a commanding view of all the other towers.

Right now, Constantine, the commander of Trajan's five hundred men stationed in this vale, was on the eastern wall of his fort, staring out toward the Talfar Kingdom. He was joined by Leon, Trajan, and a dozen other high-ranking knights in service to the Prince. Less than ten miles away, they could see exactly what Constantine had sent word about: a massive army from the Talfar Kingdom setting up camp just on the other side of the border between their two Kingdoms, with thousands more continuing to stream in from further east with hundreds of wagons filled with supplies.

"Has your estimate of the size of that army changed any in the last few hours?" Trajan asked Constantine.

The short and stocky man quickly replied, "No, Your Highness. We still believe they number at least two hundred thousand, and probably a great deal more than that. My scouts tell me that their marching column hasn't even left Briga yet, there are so many."

Trajan frowned as he watched Talfar's advance units across the plain hurriedly setting up their camp. There wasn't much he could do about that, but he was still rapidly going through his options in his head.

'We could sally out with a small force and disrupt their work... But then any soldiers we send out will be caught up in a battle with what is likely to be Talfar's strongest troops... I can't let them continue without challenge, but it will be at least another day before the Legions finish preparing for battle, and by then their camp will already be too fortified to take...'

The Prince hated not doing anything, but he couldn't see any proactive option open to him that wouldn't leave hundreds or thousands of his soldiers injured and dead, and he couldn't have that when he was so outnumbered.

"We have another problem," Constantine continued. "Before they assault the Horns, they're going to have to take Florentia..."

Trajan's frown grew deeper. Florentia was a small trade city built on the Tyrrhenian River over the past few decades, along the small section of the river that formed the border between the Samar Kingdom's northeastern frontier and the Talfar Kingdom's southwestern frontier. Despite this, the closest city to it was Ariminum, and as a result, most of Florentia's citizens were from the Bull Kingdom, and the city generally considered itself an unofficial protectorate of the Bull King.

Ariminum's static defenses were weakest along the Tyrrhenian River, and if this Talfar army wanted to take advantage of that weakness—as Trajan knew it would—then they would have to seize Florentia first. If they didn't, then any assault force attacking Ariminum from the river would be at risk of being sandwiched between Ariminum's local defense fleet and any ships Florentia might send to aid its

mother-state. Not to mention as a trade city, Florentia had a great many ships, and though they were almost all civilian galleys or smaller and no match for the warships in Ariminium's port, they were still better than the nothing that the land-locked Talfar Kingdom currently had, so it wasn't too much of a stretch for Trajan to guess that that army would want to conscript Florentia's ships.

The Talfar Kingdom simply couldn't leave a potentially hostile city to their south when they finally entered the vale in front of the Bull's Horns for fear of being flanked.

"How long would you guess they have?" Trajan asked Constantine.

"Less than a day. If I were leading that army, then I would send a few thousand soldiers as soon as possible to secure the city before they have a chance to evacuate," Constantine answered.

"As would I..." Trajan muttered as he thought about what to do. He could see Florentia off in the distance, only about twenty miles away. He could even hear the sound of alarm bells coming from the city's defense towers. "We can't abandon our own people," he finally stated after several long minutes of thought. "They are technically partially in the Talfar Kingdom's territory, but they are *our* citizens!"

Many of the knights around the Prince nodded their approval, including Leon. Alix even had an adoring look like she was staring at a god as Trajan spoke about protecting the citizens of the Kingdom.

"Does Your Highness have something in mind?" Constantine asked.

"I will lead an expedition to evacuate the town," Trajan replied, his tone light and simple, as if evacuating a town of ten thousand people was the easiest thing in the world.

"We're going to need ships if we're to pass by those Talfar guys setting up camp," Leon soberly observed. He greatly approved of rescuing as many innocent civilians as possible, but he also wasn't going to let such an idealistic goal distract him from what could realistically be accomplished.

Trajan nodded at the younger knight. "I know," he whispered with a dark look in his eye. The Legate in charge of the local fleet defending Ariminium was less than cooperative with him, and had both refused to aid his soldiers in retaking the guild district during the riot and declined to render assistance in dealing with the smugglers.

'He will not refuse me this time,' Trajan thought as he glared at the Talfar camp.

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The Legate in charge of the defensive fleet was a short and plain man. He was thin, with beady eyes and almost rodent-like facial features.

He also had blood running down his face from a gash on his forehead, and the only sounds coming out of his mouth were whimpers of pain.

Trajan had meant it when he vowed the Legate wouldn't refuse him. After leaving Constantine's fort, he, Leon, and the rest of his knights went down to the port to have words with the admiral. Of course, the Legate had tried to refuse at first, saying, "I will not leave my post without a direct order from the Consul of the Gulf! It doesn't matter what's going on, my ships don't move without authorization from the Endless Gate!"

Upon hearing this, Trajan picked up the smaller man and literally threw him across the room, in front of all his subordinates. As he sailed through the air, the Legate smashed his head into a table, leaving a bleeding gash just over his left eye. Of course, it was only a superficial injury and would be fixed with a single low-quality healing spell, but it bled a lot, making it appear much more serious than it was.

Trajan knew he made a mistake by throwing the Legate, but he wasn't going to back down with a Talfar army bearing down upon those that he felt he had a duty to protect. Besides, he was a Prince, and he wasn't going to lower himself to an obstructive bureaucrat during wartime.

A few of the Tribunes and administrative Legates looked like they wanted to intervene, but a few glares from Leon and Trajan's other knights quickly put an end to those thoughts.

"We have a city of *ten thousand* to reach and less than a day to do so!" Trajan suddenly roared. "That army from the Talfar Kingdom isn't going to leave Florentia alone, not when more than ninety percent of the city is made up of *our citizens*! If you do not agree to sail out with me and see to the defense and evacuation of Florentia, then I will have you all arrested and I will conscript enough sailors to move the damned ships myself!"

The Prince's demeanor was dour and serious, and none of the officers present doubted the words he was saying. Technically, though, he could only arrest all of them during wartime, and there had been no formal declaration of war from the King, either of the Prince-Regents, or the Assembly. And yet, he was still a Prince, and few Arbiters would argue with his decision if he decided to toss them all behind bars when a Talfar army was encamped only a few miles away.

"We'll see to the ships, Your Highness," one of the Legates said. Leon recognized him as the second-in-command of the fleet.

"I want everyone ready to head to Florentia by nightfall!" Trajan thundered, followed immediately by a chorus of 'Yes, Your Highness!' from all the fleet's knights.

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The messages had been sent, the Legions were mustering, the fleet was getting ready. Minerva was seeing to the medical and food supplies of the Northern Horn, while another of Trajan's Legates was doing likewise for the Southern Horn. There was nothing left for the Prince to do except sit and wait for a few more hours. Constantine was still watching the Talfar army like a hawk, so if anything happened, Trajan would know within minutes.

Additionally, he had the senior diplomat responsible for managing the Bull Kingdom's relations with the Talfar Kingdom sending emergency messages to his underlings in Pretani, the capital of the Talfar Kingdom. He also sent a few messengers to the Talfar camp to politely inquire as to what was happening.

When he sent word to the capital, he used the communication stones, so he expected to get word back soon. But that had been hours ago, and he had yet to hear back from either Prince August or the Consul of the Central Territories, which only brought more worry to his mind.

There was nothing left for Trajan to do except wait for his subordinates to report back to him and for responses to his messages. With nothing to do, he took to inviting Leon into one of his living rooms, as

the younger knight had little to do, himself. Trajan hadn't yet assigned Leon any subordinates, as he preferred to wait until Leon had spent more time learning from other more experienced knights before assigning him a formal command—he'd been introduced to Trajan after recklessly endangering a diplomatic mission, after all.

"You all right, Trajan?" Leon asked quietly as the Prince stared out of his window to the east. From the height of his tower in the keep, Trajan could just barely see the Talfar camp through the haze, dust, and evening shadows of the miles that separated them. He could also see thousands of soldiers scurrying through the streets of the Southern Horn preparing the fortress for a lengthy siege.

"Thousands of people are going to die in the coming days," Trajan said with a sober expression. "We don't even know *why*, yet..." As he trailed off, the Prince patted his breast pocket, where the onyx plate with Caecilius' ruby was. The Bluefire Guild's founder had been fairly quiet over the past few weeks, likely processing the forced disbandment of the guild he had worked so hard to build. Trajan hoped the man would recover soon as, with both Kyros and Julius gone, he was in need of good counsel from someone whose judgment he trusted.

"Then it's our duty to keep as many of them alive as possible, right?" Leon asked, even though he knew the answer to the question. He only asked it to keep Trajan talking.

"Indeed, it is."

Trajan left it at that, so Leon hesitantly asked something that had been on his mind, "I hope this isn't impertinent to ask, but what will my place be in all this?" Leon had no soldiers to organize and only a single squire to command. He was, officially at least, one of Trajan's personal knights, but he also held the formal rank of Tribune, so he could be placed in charge of up to one thousand soldiers if the need arose.

But Trajan didn't intend to put Leon in command of any forces. He couldn't envision a situation where placing an eighteen-year-old in charge of a battalion was a good idea, no matter how much trust he had in the individual in question.

"You're going to accompany me to Florentia," Trajan said. He knew Leon wanted to know what he would be doing throughout the coming war, but the Prince instead chose to answer in the short-term. "You'll assist me in evacuating our citizens from that city."

"And if we're attacked before we finish?" Leon asked, his eyes narrowing from recognizing Trajan's avoidance of his previous question.

Trajan was silent for a long moment. "You're too young to command," he said bluntly, "but you're not too young to fight."

Leon felt his stomach plummet from disappointment—he wasn't looking forward to having to interact with as many people as having a command would necessitate, but it would be a vital next step in his own ambitions to gain power. Still, he could understand Trajan's decision perfectly well, even if he wasn't thrilled by it.

“When we arrive in Florentia, I’m going to have the soldiers we bring spread throughout the city to garrison it and prepare for the Talfar attack. You’ll stick with me, and I’ll send you wherever you’re most needed if the need arises.”

Leon nodded in acknowledgment. It may be for the best, but he wished that what was for the best didn’t leave him stuck in the back when the attack came.

“No need to worry, though, kid. I don’t intend to stay in the back lines for the entire war...” Trajan said with a smile of anticipation.

At that moment, both heard a knock at the door.

“Enter,” Trajan growled.

A Tribune walked in, bowed, and said, “Your Highness, the ships are ready and the 23rd Legion stands ready to accompany you to Florentia.”

Chapter 227: Florentia

The entire 23rd Legion couldn’t accompany Trajan to Florentia, as there wasn’t enough room for them, the crews of the ships, and the thousands of people they needed to evacuate. Or at least, they couldn’t all go at once, but Trajan didn’t plan on being in Florentia long enough to ferry everyone upriver.

Five thousand soldiers would go in the first wave and fortify the city. The ships would then return to Ariminum with as many citizens of Florentia as could be packed into them, and then bring more soldiers to the city if there was a need for them. The ships should only need one or two more trips back to Florentia before the soldiers could board again and return to the Horns.

As Trajan, Leon, and the rest of the Prince’s group made their way to the fleet’s flagship, Leon kept a watchful eye out for Charles, Henry, and Alain. All three were in the 23rd Legion, but he didn’t know if they would be joining him and Trajan in Florentia.

He honestly couldn’t decide if it was fortunate or not that he didn’t see any of them.

Knowing who he was looking for, Alix worriedly whispered from behind him, “If they’re coming with us, they’ll be fine, I’m sure, Sir. They’ll be in a shield wall, right at the side of their knights.”

“That was never in doubt,” Leon responded, cheekily smiling at his squire. “The only thing that *is* in doubt is whether or not they’ll have anything to brag about when next we hang out.”

Alix chuckled at his flippant attitude and her own anxiety over the coming battle was somewhat relieved. She didn’t have to be a coward to be apprehensive about a few thousand Legion soldiers facing down a couple hundred thousand Talfar warriors, after all, and even the bravest, most powerful, and experienced knights among them were solemn and serious about the operation that was about to begin.

The flagship of the fleet was an enormous thing; at more than a thousand feet long, it was easily half again as large as the transport ships, which were the second largest ships in the fleet. It had at least five levels above water and no sails. It was propelled entirely with water enchantments that covered the wooden hull, and from what little Leon could sense, there were a host of other enchantments filling the ship with magic that he couldn’t identify.

At the center of this beast was a tall tower three more stories above the deck. Just in front of and behind this tower was a pair of long metal cylinders on rotating metal platforms that piqued Leon's curiosity, as he could sense a large amount of magic power flowing through them, but he held his questions for the time being.

Trajan made for the tower as soon as he led his group onto the ship, and Leon followed. The top level of the tower was the bridge of the ship, where the fleet Legate was waiting. He bowed to the Prince, but it was clear from his expression and the hesitation in his movements that he wasn't happy in the slightest to have Trajan aboard his ship. However, he neither said nor did anything to stop Trajan from ordering the operation to begin.

Twenty minutes later, five thousand soldiers of the 23rd Legion had boarded their transports, and the fleet departed the port of Ariminum.

Leon couldn't help but marvel at the sight. More than one hundred ships, a handful large enough to have a crew of thousands, while many were barely large enough to require a crew at all. Most were war galleys of varying size designed to ram into enemy ships and allow the accompanying contingent of marines to board and seize the vessel. Leon had no idea how most of the ships were to be used, though, as most of his martial education had been devoted to land tactics and strategies—the forty army Legions were given a great deal more respect in the Bull Kingdom than the fifteen navy Legions.

All of these ships slowly turned east with a wedge of nine galleys in the lead. Florentia wasn't far, and all the ships would likely arrive in less than half an hour. Most of them wouldn't dock at the Florentine docks, though, as there simply wasn't enough room. A couple dozen galleys would travel straight through the city and secure the other end of the Tyrrhenian River in the south while most of the rest of the fleet would protect the miles of river to the west as it approached Ariminum. Only the dozen transports and the flagship would stop at the docks.

Florentia was a long city, with every building less than a quarter mile from the Tyrrhenian River. Every inch of the city that lay on the river itself had accompanying docks and piers. Despite this, the river was more than wide and deep enough for the fleet to pass without trouble, even as the flagship and the transports behind it started pulling up to the docks.

The most eye-catching landmarks of the city were a pair of enormous bridges that had once been at either end of the city, but Florentia had grown past them since their construction, so they were fairly deep into the city. Each bridge was a massive stone arch that Leon guessed had to have been ruinously expensive to build, as even the enormous flagship was able to pass beneath the first bridge with room to spare.

The docks were illuminated by hundreds of magic lanterns and torches, and from the bridge of the flagship, Leon could see several thousand panicked-looking people gathering. Most of the docks already had smaller boats moored, though none were larger than even the lightest of galleys in the fleet. Still, it was obvious that a significant portion of the city's residents were already evacuating Florentia.

"Where should we dock, Your Highness?" the fleet Legate asked through clenched teeth.

"On the Talfar side wherever there's room," Trajan responded.

The eastern and northern sides of the river—the sides of Florentia that were in Talfar territory—were much denser with people, Leon noticed. There were more homes, more warehouses, and more paved roads. Florentia mostly managed the flow of trade goods into and out of the Talfar Kingdom; as it was a landlocked Kingdom, the only other way to facilitate trade was by much more expensive land routes. The Samar Kingdom's side, on the other hand, had comparatively few people living on it, as most trade ships coming north from the center of Aeterna would choose to bypass Florentia and follow the river as it curved west toward the Gulf of Discord, as most cities of significant size in the Samar Kingdom were located near the Gulf coast.

As the flagship slid into the largest dock that could be seen, Leon could hear a few cheers and exclamations of joy from the evacuating citizens, but they were almost lost in the worried and panicked shouts and cries that filled the air.

"Let's go," Trajan said to Leon and the rest of his knights.

Trajan and his retinue made their way down to the deck of the flagship where the few hundred Legion soldiers that rode in the ship were gathering. A few sailors were busy coordinating with dockside workers to get the ship tied down and the gangplanks lowered, so everyone had to wait a few more minutes. This was more than enough time for a group of what looked to Leon like militiamen to appear next to the flagship with a very well-dressed man in the lead.

This man wore what was obviously prohibitively expensive clothing made of black and red velvet and trimmed with gold thread. His outer doublet was tight, but beneath that, he wore a fluffy white shirt that spilled out his sleeves, neck, and waist. His black velvet pants were also extremely tight, while the soles of his boots were so thick that they added almost half a foot to his height.

Most eye-catching, however, was the proudly displayed golden bull sewn onto the chest of the man's doublet.

Trajan was the first to descend the gangplank, and when he saw the Prince, the well-dressed man hurried over and bowed.

"Your Highness!" the man exclaimed. He was tall and well-built, even without his puffy shirt and boots making him seem bigger, and he had a robust fifth-tier aura emanating from his body, but he spoke in a strangely breathy and high-pitched voice that his brawny frame belied.

"You're the mayor of this city?" Trajan bluntly asked, his expression neutral and stony to maintain his royal dignity.

"I'm Marcus Augustulus, the captain of the militia, Your Highness," the man answered. "We don't have a mayor, we have a council of nine called the Consortium. I sit on this council, so I have the authority to aid your visit here in any way I can."

Trajan nodded at the information. He was a little embarrassed that he didn't know how Florentia was governed despite its proximity to his own city, but as with most members of the Bull Kingdom's government, his attention was focused inward. Apart from the largest and most broad issues, he left Ariminium and the Bull Kingdom's relationship with Florentia to the Diplomatic Corps.

"We're here to assist any citizens of your city that wish to evacuate," the Prince stated.

“Yes, Your Highness,” the guard captain replied with an expression of abject relief. He immediately barked a few orders at the militiamen, and they cleared the citizens waiting on boats away from the gangplanks to allow the soldiers to come streaming off the ships.

Tribunes and Centurions began to bellow orders of their own, and the soldiers dispersed into the dark streets of Florentia. The sun had gone down less than an hour before, but already the city had been plunged into darkness. Still, everyone knew exactly where they had to go, which was to say they had to get set up on all of the major streets leading out of the city. The main road leading into the Talfar Kingdom was the main priority, as it was the largest of all the points of entry into Florentia.

That being said, Florentia had no walls, so any attempts to prevent the Talfar Kingdom from entering were futile at best, especially with their cavalry advantage. Ideally, however, the soldiers wouldn’t be needed and the fleet would move fast enough for everyone to get out of the city before Talfar detached a force to seize Florentia. Of course, no one honestly thought that there wouldn’t be at least a few light skirmishes, as so many ships on the river were impossible to hide and the Talfar commanders would be fools to allow the evacuation to continue unchallenged.

Leaving the militia behind to coordinate the departure with the sailors, Trajan and Leon moved further into the city. Their destination was the closest thing that Florentia had to a central forum, and from there Trajan would command his soldiers as needed.

The forum had been built at the top of a wide, shallow hill. It didn’t offer commanding views of the countryside, but it was enough that Trajan could see the Talfar camp from certain angles that weren’t obstructed by Florentine villas. From there, he could see the long line of lanterns leading back into Talfar territory that showed that despite most of the day having passed, the entire Talfar army hadn’t even arrived at their camp, yet.

The soldiers on the main road had a much better view of the camp, despite being slightly lower in elevation. One thousand soldiers, the largest group of soldiers strewn about Florentia, were busy forming shield walls almost thirty men wide and making sure the surrounding buildings were devoid of people.

There were more than half a dozen other easily accessible roads leading into the city around them, and even though they weren’t as large as the main road, those had to be blocked by a shield wall as well. The Tribune in charge quickly split off about a quarter of his battalion to make sure they couldn’t be flanked by these routes.

The Centurions that led these companies were disciplined, and they had trained hard for just such situations like these; they moved quickly and in an orderly fashion, and in less than ten minutes, the entire battalion was formed up exactly where they needed to be. And none too soon, as the Tribune saw when he climbed onto the roof of the tallest building around, a nearby three-story house. He saw in the distance a great cloud of dust and the glittering of armor in the moonlight.

“They’re coming!” he shouted in alarm. The horn blower next to him did his job, and instantly all of Florentia knew that the armies of the Talfar Kingdom were about to crash down upon them.

Chapter 228: Battle for Florentia I

“Your Lordship sees them, don’t you?” a middle-aged Warrior-Chief asked Marshal Arthwyn.

Arthwyn smiled as he glanced at the sixth-tier officer. The man had been his subordinate for more than twenty years, and they trusted each other greatly; Arthwyn never would've tolerated such a patronizing question, otherwise.

"Of course I fucking see them," Arthwyn whispered. He didn't want any of his other subordinates or the lower-ranked warriors around them to hear him breaking the air of dignity he carefully surrounded himself with by swearing, and neither did he want to undermine his or his subordinate's authority by joking around so openly.

Unfortunately, someone he very much did not want listening in was standing close to the door flap of the command tent he and his subordinate were standing in front of and overheard his whisperings.

"What are you two talking about so sneakily?" asked a tall and inhumanly pale man as he pushed open the flap of the tent and sauntered outside.

Everything about this man rubbed Arthwyn the wrong way. His hungry pitch-black eyes lingered unblinkingly far too long on everyone he looked at, his skin was so pale as to be nearly translucent, and whenever he smiled, he never showed his teeth. Even when he spoke, he did so with the minimum of lip movements needed to clearly speak.

What was more concerning, however, was that he plainly refused to use the same blue warpaint as every other soldier in the Talfar Kingdom's army, symbolically separating himself from the hundreds of thousands of soldiers that now camped just beyond the vale that the Bull Kingdom had seized in the last war between their two Kingdoms.

This was Marshal Bran, and it was something of an open secret among the highest levels of the Talfar Kingdom's ruling class that he was a vampire. Normally, it would be Arthwyn's duty to destroy the creature before him—and the Marshal would be only too happy to do so if only to see the arrogant smirk omnipresent on Bran's gaunt face wiped away—but Bran was a seventh-tier mage, one of the strongest mages within all of Talfar. What's more, he had pledged himself both to Queen Andraste and to her father, the previous monarch, before her. So long as he moderated himself when it came to making the occasional peasant disappear and remained a loyal supporter of the crown, the Queen and the previous King seemed to be content to let him live.

Arthwyn didn't want to answer his fellow Marshal, but his subordinate didn't pick up on this, as the sixth-tier Warrior-Chief said, "The Bull's Legions are garrisoning Florentia."

"Well we're not just going to let them have that place, are we?" Bran said, his ashen face twisting in a provocative smirk as his gaze landed upon Arthwyn.

"Of course not," Arthwyn replied with a dismissive tone as if the question never needed asking. "If we let the Bull have Florentia, then we can't remove his Horns without being struck from behind by those in the city."

"And yet you aren't moving against them," observed Bran.

"Not yet," Arthwyn testily responded. "I'm waiting for my scouts to return with a more detailed report of what the Bull is doing!"

“And in doing so, you’re allowing them to dig in deeper,” Bran said, his smirk growing into a full-fledged closed-mouth smile.

“What are you getting at?” Arthwyn demanded.

Bran stared at Arthwyn with his smile on his face for several long moments before stating, “If you will not go and dislodge the Bull from Florentia, then I will.”

Arthwyn had to fight not to snort in disdain at Bran’s recklessness, but he didn’t say anything to stop the Marshal.

‘If that monster wants to throw himself upon the Bull, then let him be gored upon its horns,’ Arthwyn thought to himself with a smile.

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Florentia almost vibrated with the sound of the horn from the city’s main road. The horn itself wasn’t particularly deep or intimidating, but everyone knew what it meant: the warriors of the Talfar Kingdom were on the move.

From his spot at one of the highest points in the city, Trajan could see the dust kicked up by thousands of horsemen charging across the plain. He could even see quite a few of them, though they were still several miles away.

Trajan hadn’t deployed the sixth-tier knights that he’d brought with him. He only had a small handful and he wanted them where they could help the most. So, the Prince stared at the oncoming Talfar cavalry and quickly estimated their number to be around twenty or twenty-five thousand. Then, just as quickly, he made a few guesses as to what parts of Florentia they were going to attack based on how they were spreading out and deployed his Legates accordingly.

Of course, his force of five thousand soldiers wasn’t going to keep out so many Talfar warriors, but he didn’t need to. He wanted to draw the Talfar response force into the cramped streets of Florentia where their mobility was limited and their numbers meant much less than out in the open. It was a battlefield that greatly favored the heavy infantry that the Bull Kingdom focused so much on, giving his quarter-Legion a huge advantage.

More than that, however, was the need to give the civilians more time to board the ships and set sail for Ariminium. Talfar hadn’t the ability to damage the ships on the river, especially not since they had no experience at all with naval warfare, so all Trajan and his soldiers needed to do was to hold out for a few hours.

It was with this strategy in mind that Trajan sent out all but two of his sixth-tier knights. He still had Leon and a dozen or so fifth-tier knights, but the vast majority of his fighting potential was sent to the front lines.

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The Tribune commanding the battalion at the main road was grateful for the two Legates Trajan sent his way, especially since they specifically told him they weren’t there to usurp his authority over his

battalion upon their arrival. Instead, they were there to counter any high-tiered mages that would probably take part in the assault on the Legion's position.

They got to the Tribune's position just in time, as well, as not even five minutes later, the Talfar cavalry rode in close enough for even the first and second-tiered mages in the shield wall to lay eyes upon them.

Thousands of men and horses, glittering with brightly polished plate armor and gaudy blue trappings, screaming and roaring as they came closer and closer to the Legion lines. Many of the Legion soldiers couldn't help but tremble as the cacophonous horde advanced, but the presence of their comrades at their sides made desertion impossible.

"Raise shields!" the Tribune bellowed as the Talfar horde drew within fifteen hundred feet. In seconds, what few Legion soldiers in their formation that hadn't already done so raised their shields and prepared themselves. They had to put their trust in their friends and equipment if they were to live through this, but they knew that everyone else was relying upon them as well.

The ground began to shake as the masses of horses thundered toward them. The Talfar cavalry had spread out a great deal as they advanced toward Florentia, but since the Legion shield walls were spread out among the houses and the ground was soft and marshy so close to the Tyrrhenian River, the charge had to be slowed considerably and a new formation taken.

The Tribune saw most of the riders come to a halt about a thousand feet away. A few continued their advance, only in a thinner column that would smash into the biggest Legion force at the main entrance, while a few other smaller cavalry squads peeled off to attack the other nearby city entrances.

The main Talfar column was led by a water mage and two earth mages, from what the Tribune could tell, and they were making sure that the ground in front of the column was stable enough for the charging horses behind them. But, the Legion had had about an hour to prepare for the Talfar attack and had anticipated this slower pace the Talfar cavalry was forced to take.

There was a dull orange flash of light beneath the hooves of the twelve-horse-wide column, and a second later, a fiery explosion ripped through their front lines like a hot knife through butter, instantly blunting the charge.

"Now!" the Tribune shouted, and a company of archers he'd spread out over the rooftops of nearby buildings nocked and loosed their arrows at the Talfar cavalry. Eight hundred feet was just within the range of Legion bows, and the mine they had just run over signaled that the enemy cavalry had reached that distance, but Talfar cataphract armor was thick and nearly immune to arrows.

But that wasn't the Tribune's intent. As the arrows landed among the Talfar cataphracts, more explosions began to tear chunks out of their lines. Additional mines had been hidden out in the marshy plain to the east of Florentia, and yet more fire spells had been affixed to the first arrows of the Legion archers.

The Tribune watched in glee as many cataphracts pulled back in disorganized groups in fear of the fire, but there were just as many who charged instead, intending to get in too close for the Legion archers to use that attack again.

But they needn't have bothered, as all of the fire spells the Tribune's battalion had been given were used in that first salvo. From now on, his archers would have to use regular arrows. And they did with little hesitation, firing arrows as fast as they could, but to little effect against the heavy cavalry charging at them.

At one entrance that was only guarded by about fifty Legion soldiers, a mass of several hundred cataphracts almost smashed right into the Legion shield wall, but less than twenty feet away from the first line of Legion soldiers, a wall of stone spikes burst from the ground and skewered many of the charging cataphracts. All of the others were forced to stop, as even the most highly trained horse will still refuse to charge into a wall of spikes. Still, a handful of cataphracts were killed, the rest were stopped, and the entrance had been sealed until a Talfar mage could rip through it.

The Tribune watched a similar encounter happen at another road, only the Legate who had run over there used ice instead.

'The Prince is wise,' the Tribune thought to himself with a smile. *'He sent two mages who can block and barricade roads leading into the city with magic to the area of the city with the most roads leading in...'*

After blocking the cataphracts at those two places, the Legates moved to assist other Legion soldiers in neighboring areas. The Tribune thus felt secure turning his attention back to the main road, where the Talfar cavalry had managed to douse the flames and rally together for another charge, despite the Legion archers still pelting them with arrow fire.

This new charge quickly formed up again and charged at full tilt at the Legion shield wall blocking the main entrance of the city. From below, the Tribune could hear his Centurions urging the rest of their companies to stay calm and stay in formation. He didn't see even a single soldier try to break away and run out of fear, even though hundreds of cataphracts were barreling toward them with their lances extended.

Four hundred soldiers were in the main shield wall. No sane person would've ever thought they could withstand the full weight of thousands of heavily armored mounted Talfar soldiers crashing into them.

But they did. The Talfar cataphracts crashed into the front line of the shield wall lance first, and the wall held. There were a few ripples here and there, but the enchanted shields that the Legion took so much pride in did their jobs and turned the shield wall into an almost impregnable fortress.

The cataphracts crushed themselves against the shield wall, and those behind them couldn't stop in time to prevent themselves from running over their comrades and smashing into each other. They'd thought the shield wall would break, but it held firm.

In the confusion and disorder, the front rank of the shield wall shimmered as the soldiers pulled their shields back just enough to stab forward into the cataphracts as they fell or were thrown off their mounts by the crushing weight of so many behind them. In an instant, dozens of cataphracts were killed or severely injured, with the Legion soldiers rapidly stabbing into the gaps of the vulnerable cataphracts' armor. Before the Talfar cataphracts could exploit this momentary lowering of the shield wall, the front rank snapped back into formation with their shields up.

With nowhere else to go, the cataphracts in the back were forced to pull back to relieve the pressure on those in the front. The first charge was an abject failure, leaving around five hundred cataphracts dead.

But this was an insignificant number compared to the thousands of cavalymen that remained, and they didn't run away. Instead, they rallied again to prepare another charge, while other units spread out to surround the city.

Still, the Tribune couldn't help but smile. Casualties on his side were light, though not nonexistent, but such a victory created numerous more roadblocks that the cataphracts would have to find a way past if they wanted to penetrate into the city, from the mound of corpses that they had left behind in front of the shield wall to the spikes that both Legates had created to block the other roads leading in and out of the city.

What the Tribune didn't know was that the real assault had already slipped past him while he was distracted with the battle.

—

A reasonable distance behind the shield wall, the gray-skinned Bran literally stepped out of the shadows, with inky black darkness rising out of him like smoke. He glanced back at the shield wall blocking his cavalry from entering the city, but he didn't once entertain the thought of fighting them.

No, that wasn't where his interest lay. He'd leave the leading of his soldiers to his immediate subordinates; he never considered himself particularly skilled or talented at tactics, anyway.

Instead, his interest was the brief glimpse he got of a figure standing atop a hill hundreds of feet back from the front line.

'Trajan...' the vampire thought, his fanged mouth opening in a vicious smile that he never showed anyone. 'I'm coming for you, Prince...'

Chapter 229: Battle for Florentia II

Bran practically had the run of Florentia. The vast majority of citizens were down at the docks waiting to evacuate, while most of the Bull Kingdom's soldiers were defending the roads leading into the city.

The city had no walls, so the latter wasn't going to work forever, but for the moment the forces of the Talfar Kingdom were being stymied in their attempts to dislodge the Legion.

But Bran had little interest in any of that. He could easily use his powers to flank the battalion that he had just bypassed, but instead, he started calmly walking through the city as if it were just another average day. He knew that the Legion wasn't going anywhere in the next few hours and that he had plenty of time to reach his destination, the small hill that Trajan had taken for his command post.

—

"Your Highness, the ships are away with the first group of civilians," a Tribune informed Trajan.

The Prince nodded in acknowledgment. "How many did we get on our first trip?" he asked.

"About six thousand, Your Highness," the Tribune answered.

“Good,” Trajan almost whispered before turning his black eyes back toward the battle raging around the city—or at least, what little he could see past the buildings in the way. He had a good view of the main road leading in, at least.

‘We’re holding out well against the first attack,’ he thought to himself as he tried to plan out how the timeline would go now that he had a reasonable idea of how long it would take to load and unload the ships. Many of the civilian boats were being used as well, but it was still the Legion ships doing most of the heavy carrying.

He couldn’t help but regret that most of the foreign merchants in the city with boats of their own had apparently left as soon as the Talfar army appeared that afternoon. If their ships were still there, they probably could’ve helped to evacuate the city in one go, but the Prince also couldn’t fault them for their decision to save themselves and their livelihoods while they could.

But that still left the Legion with about one or two hours before the ships would return with reinforcements, and then another two hours or so before they could start to evacuate themselves.

Trajan sighed as he watched the Talfar cataphracts fall back to regroup for another assault after suffering hundreds of casualties at the main road. The Legion had chosen their positions well, and the Talfar cavalry had taken casualties at every point they attacked and had failed to break in anywhere. But that wouldn’t last forever; there were plenty of ways into the city that weren’t guarded but were too narrow and restrictive for a large number of people to get through. Talfar would eventually use these streets to flank the Legion, and the soldiers would have to fall back before that happened.

‘It’s only a matter of time. But when reinforcements arrive we can do a better job of locking this city down-’

Suddenly, interrupting Trajan’s thoughts, he felt the slightest hint of killing intent. He had no idea why, but it sent a chill running down his spine. He didn’t think, he just called upon his magic power as fast as he could and sent it into his skin, instantly hardening it into another layer of armor beneath his suit of steel plates and leather padding.

He wasn’t a moment too soon, as a black blade shot up from the ground behind him and struck him in the center of his back with enormous force, enough to knock him down.

But fortunately, though the long thin blade pierced through his conventional armor, it lost most of its force doing so and barely scratched his stoneskin.

“Damn, I thought I might get you with that, too...” said a smooth and slightly nasally voice as a figure began to emerge from the shadows between the stone bricks of the forum. The tall and ashen figure of Bran stepped out of this shadow without the slightest sign of duress or anxiety, as if where he was and what he had just done were the most natural things in the world.

Trajan launched himself to his feet while he drew his war hammer from his soul realm. All of the soldiers around him similarly went on alert, and Bran found himself immediately surrounded by the two remaining Legates, Leon, and the other dozen Tribunes that remained with the Prince. Their squires and the other lower-tiered mages present in the forum, meanwhile, took cover to give the higher-tiered mages room to use their power, as was standard practice.

Alix seemed exceptionally reluctant to leave Leon's side, but she knew that there was nothing she could do against this enemy that all of the knights already moving couldn't. She scooped up Anzu, who was so terrified of Bran's aura and towering killing intent that he could barely move let alone resist, and joined the rest of the squires at the edges of the forum.

And yet, Bran didn't seem even the slightest bit concerned about either his encirclement or the rapid escape of the lower-tiered Legion mages. He stood there in the center of the forum as if he owned the place.

"Identify yourself!" Trajan demanded.

Instead of speaking, Bran brought the tip of his rapier closer to his face and inspected it. He'd scratched Trajan's stonewood, which had been just enough to draw a few drops of blood. With an almost orgasmic expression, Bran brought the tip of his weapon to his lips and licked the blood off of it.

"Mmmm!" the Marshal exclaimed, his face lighting up in abject and unapologetic joy. "This *flavor*! Just what I expected of a Prince of the Bull Kingdom! Your blood is delicious!"

If it weren't otherwise obvious to the knights from Bran's gaunt and pale appearance, this demonstration of his vampirism made it abundantly so.

Trajan almost ordered his knights to attack, but he could tell that Bran was stronger than he was. He didn't want to send his soldiers to their deaths, so he asked again, "Who are you?!"

"Mm? Oh, pardon my rudeness, Your Highness," Bran said with a sarcastic tone. "I am Bran, Marshal of the Talfar Kingdom, and I have come for you..."

Trajan struggled not to grimace and to maintain a confident expression for the benefit of his knights, but in the face of a mage that was at least of the seventh-tier, that was more difficult than it sounds.

Without another word, Trajan channeled his magic power through his legs and into the ground, causing half a dozen stone spikes to burst out of the ground at Bran's feet. However, the vampire didn't seem at all fazed by the attack and easily side-stepped out of the way. He even shot Trajan a cheeky smile, as if to say, 'You missed.'

But Trajan's other knights didn't hesitate to do likewise, and the magical aura around the forum churned and roiled as magic of nearly all the elements was called upon. The center of their circle where Bran stood momentarily became the single most deadly place in all of Florentia, with wind blades, fireballs, rock and ice spikes, beams of light, and Leon's lightning bolts all converging upon the Marshal.

The paved ground fractured in this conflagration, sending stone splinters flying everywhere, but the knights kept up their barrage. After about thirty seconds, they stopped to let the dust and smoke settle so they could survey the results of their assault.

Their faces fell as Bran stepped out from the crater that had just been formed without a hair out of place, and his dull grey armor completely unblemished.

"You're going to need to do *much* better than that," Bran taunted.

"You bastard!" shouted one of the Legates as he coated his spear with golden light. The impatient and enraged Legate surged with all the speed of a light mage and stabbed at Bran's stomach, which the

Marshal wasn't even trying to protect. The spear stabbed clean through Bran's abdomen and exited his back, leaving the Marshal skewered upon the Legate's spear.

"Ha ha!" shouted the Legate in triumph. "How's that for 'better'?!"

As he watched the pain and disbelief spread across the vampire's face, Trajan felt the same subtle killing intent directed at him. It was almost completely lost in the raging magical auras of the surrounding knights, but he could sense it nonetheless. The Prince, trusting in his instincts, threw himself forward, just barely missing Bran's rapier again as it flew out of the ground toward his spine.

"Well this is surprising," came Bran's voice as the shadow holding the rapier grew out of the ground behind Trajan. "I honestly didn't think you'd be able to dodge a second attack..."

"What the..." muttered the impatient Legate. His spear was lodged in Bran's midsection, but another Bran had risen out of the ground behind Trajan!

To the shock and horror of all the other knights, the Bran impaled on the Legate's spear dissipated in a cloud of what appeared to be dark smoke, leaving the Legate standing there with his unstained and bloodless spear raised into the air.

Trajan twisted around and swung his hammer at Bran. He was just out of range of the Marshal, but that didn't matter as a handful of additional rock spikes burst from the ground with astounding speed and rocketed toward Bran with his swing. And again, the vampire didn't deign to even try and defend himself.

Or at least, there was no point in trying to dodge Trajan's rock spikes, as they passed harmlessly through Bran's body like it wasn't even there.

Bran, under the disbelieving gazes of the surrounding knights, began to maniacally laugh. In between the exaggerated gasps for air, the Marshal wheezed, "You all... should see... the looks... on your faces! HA HA HA HA!"

"How dare you mock us!" shouted the other Legate as he raised his sword and wiped it on his off-hand, coating it in bright orange fire.

He was about to charge at the Marshal, but Trajan shouted, "Wait!" bringing the Legate to a halt.

"Your Highness?" the Legate said in confusion.

"This guy has already vanished," Trajan explained, his voice dripping in hatred and fury at having been almost killed twice in a matter of minutes. Just in case, though, he took a few steps away from Bran, or rather, from what he considered to be an illusion conjured by shadow magic.

But, before Trajan could do anything more, Bran's rapier appeared from the ground just behind the Legate with light magic, rocketed upward through the Legate's armor, and pierced right through the man's body.

The Legate sputtered and coughed up a small amount of blood. His skin rapidly paled while his veins and arteries blackened. Bran mockingly grinned at Trajan and brought the dying Legate's body closer to his mouth. Before he could take a bite out him, however, Trajan, Leon, and three other mages made their moves.

Trajan slammed his hammer into the bricks beneath his feet, saturating the ground with his magic power in an attempt to keep Bran from disappearing back into the shadows again. Leon, meanwhile, conjured a bright golden lightning spear and hurled it with all the strength he could muster at the back of the vampire. The other three Tribunes who were quick to react moved to cut off Bran from trying to dodge by lunging forward to pin him between their spears.

Unfortunately, Bran was faster than all of them. He leaped into the air and threw the body of the Legate off his weapon, dodging Leon's lightning bolt by the skin of his teeth. Despite this, he could plainly feel the strength and power packed into that lightning bolt, and when he landed with feline grace, he glanced at Leon.

"That was an impressive attack, boy," he said with an intrigued smile. "Lightning is a rare element outside of the Sunlit Empire... Perhaps I'll indulge myself in *you* rather than that waste of meat over there..." He jerked his thumb toward the fallen Legate, who was completely paralyzed and rapidly bleeding to death.

Under the vampire's predatory gaze, Leon couldn't help but shiver, but he still stood firm against the vampire and didn't present him any openings.

Seeing Bran's attention turned toward Leon, Trajan became so infuriated that he charged straight at Bran without any thought to his own well-being. Bran was slightly surprised that Trajan would do this, but he still dodged the Prince's opening swing of his war hammer and moved back to try and gain some distance. However, the other knights charged in to aid their Prince, doing their best to cut off Bran no matter where he turned.

Bran dodged and weaved through knights, occasionally conjuring clouds of darkness that dissipated any magical attacks thrown his way. His rapier darted out all the while, biting into the gaps of the knights' armor, causing light but rapidly growing damage.

Leon called upon all the power he could muster and charged as well, bringing his sword down with tremendous strength on Bran. As with the others, Bran twisted out of the way, but only just barely—Leon's lightning magic made him almost as fast as the vampire's own darkness magic. Bran even suspected that if the two were of equal power, then Leon would be the faster.

Leon's sword bit into nothing but air, but Bran's follow-up strike stabbed into the young knight's arm in the gap between his armor's pauldron and rerebrace. It was a minor wound, but enough to draw blood, and Bran stood there unmoving in the center of the knights. Leon twisted his hips and tried to take advantage of the vampire's immobility, but his sword passed right through the vampire, and the illusion vanished.

"Missed again," Bran mocked as he reappeared outside of the circle of knights. Leon's blood—or rather, mana—glowed bright red on the tip of the rapier along with the blood of several of the other knights. With an immense grin, Bran licked the tip of the rapier in an obvious attempt to intimidate the knights, but as soon as Leon's blood touched his tongue, he was paralyzed by an explosion of flavor. So intense was the taste that Bran momentarily lost himself and didn't even realize or care that the knights quickly encircled him again.

But Bran was a seventh-tier mage, and he didn't stand there slack-jawed for more than a brief moment. When he collected himself, the vampire stared at Leon with a look of wonder.

"Who... *are you?*" he asked, his eyes glittering at the prospect of sinking his teeth into Leon's neck.

Chapter 230: Battle for Florentia III

"Who... *are you?*" Bran asked, his eyes filled with nothing but the black-armored Leon. The vampire didn't wait for a response and was upon Leon before the young man could react. Bran wrapped one hand around Leon's throat and easily lifted him into the air, while the other ripped off his helmet, exposing his face to the Marshal.

As the vampire memorized every detail of Leon's face, from his black hair and golden eyes to his long straight nose and strong jawline, Trajan and the rest of the knights charged once more at the vampire. They weren't about to let Bran have another of their number, and Trajan especially wasn't going to just give Leon to the vampire without an extreme amount of resistance.

"No, this one is *mine!*" Bran shouted as a cloud of darkness exploded out from him, enshrouding almost the entire forum and momentarily blinding the knights. Bran began to run with his prize in hand, but Leon wasn't going to let things go that easily. He summoned all of the remaining power at his command, used his off-hand to grip the vampire's arm that he was being held up by, and raised his sword in the other.

After a brief moment, Leon's body almost exploded with lightning, driving back the dark cloud around him and partially illuminating the entire forum. The sudden brightness and painful shock of lightning coursing through him startled Bran, who was so captivated by the taste of Leon's blood that he'd taken leave of his senses, and he almost dropped Leon on instinct.

In Bran's moment of surprise, Trajan barreled into him, knocking the Marshal down and freeing Leon from his grasp.

Bran clicked his tongue in annoyance before an opaque black cloud began to cover him from behind. Whatever he was doing, Trajan wasn't going to let him do it and charged once again, putting all of his extreme weight and strength behind a swing of his war hammer. Bran took a step back to dodge, but the hammer still clipped his arm and sent him reeling, but when he lost his balance and fell to the ground, he vanished in a cloud of smoky darkness.

"You all right?" Trajan asked Leon. He wanted to help the younger man to his feet, but he couldn't let his guard down without knowing where Bran was. Fortunately, the rest of the knights quickly formed a defensive circle around both Leon and the Prince.

"I'm fine," Leon said as he pushed himself up to his feet. One Legate had already been killed by Bran, so he had no intention of saying anything about the pain in his neck.

Trajan, of course, could tell that Leon wasn't as fine as he proclaimed, but he didn't press the issue. Instead, he projected his magic senses to try and find Bran, as did most of the other knights around him.

It was in this moment of calm, when all of Trajan's senses were on high alert for anything that might indicate where Bran was lurking, that he heard something curious. He could hear a slow rumbling that, as an earth mage, he was quite familiar with: the sound of boulders grinding against each other. For the

moment, he couldn't think of anything that would be making that noise, and it was barely distinguishable from the sounds of battle coming from the other parts of the city, so he made the call not to pay it much mind.

But he found that he couldn't just dismiss that sound, as it seemed to be growing louder, and the ground started to ominously shake and tremble.

Bran felt this too. In fact, since he was hiding in the shadows on the ground in the dark forum, waiting for the knights to lower their guard so he could strike again, he could feel this vibration even more acutely than Trajan could. Bran didn't like that feeling, and his instincts screamed at him that it wouldn't be a good thing for him to stick around. However, that taste of Leon's blood had been intoxicating, and Bran wanted to try and seize the young knight one last time.

To accomplish this, he cast his attention inward, toward his soul realm where he felt a powerful connection to another being. Bran pulled upon this connection and within his mind, said, [My Lord, I request a taste of your power...]

The response was immediate and dramatic. A voice that slithered into his mind like a serpent through fallen leaves whispered back, [You have already had a taste, and yet you ask for more?] This voice, despite its seeming serenity, shook Bran's entire soul realm so hard that the vampire nearly lost control of his magic. He had to fight with all of his strength not to be ejected from the shadow he had taken refuge in.

After regaining control over himself, Bran shakily responded, [If you provide me with only one more wisp of strength, My Lord, a tiny fraction of your awesome power, then I will create for you a feast the likes of which have yet to be seen!]

[You speak in great words,] the voice replied with a hint of amusement—though this amusement didn't stop the discomfort and pain that wracked Bran's body simply by maintaining this connection, [I have feasted upon *entire planes* before, boy. What precisely do you offer in exchange?]

Bran was silent for a moment, but through his connection, he felt a rising impatience and irritation, so he hurriedly explained while dodging talk of price, [I have tasted something magnificent, and I *must* have more of it!]

[A truly *bestial* desire,] the voice observed, the smile on the face of whatever the voice belonged to evident from the tone alone. [Very well, I shall provide you with the strength for a single invocation. Use it wisely.]

[Yes, my Lord,] Bran replied, soon feeling a surge of magical power from his soul realm that filled his body with an almost uncomfortable amount of mana.

However, right before Bran was about to make his move, the voice spoke again.

[The price for this will be one thousand. Third-tier of the magic realm or higher.]

Bran couldn't help but shiver. He already had the power, so he had to accept the price, but that price was steep. Were he in the lands he controlled as Marshal, he could easily make a few people disappear every now and then as sacrifices to the demon he worshipped, but a thousand strong mages were something else entirely. Especially so with a war that now occupied his time.

But Bran knew that his Lord would not accept such excuses, and he had no choice but to say with some trepidation, [Yes, my Lord...]

[I will look forward to it...] muttered the voice, and its overwhelming presence in Bran's mind quickly vanished.

Bran clenched his teeth at the thought of finding one thousand relatively strong mages to sacrifice, but he hurriedly refocused his attention on Leon, and to a lesser extent, Trajan. He could worry about the promised sacrifices at a later date.

The Legion soldiers were still facing outward waiting for Bran to show himself with Leon and Trajan in the center of their formation. Under normal circumstances, it would take no small amount of extremely careful effort to bypass them, even when hidden in the shadows, but now that he was chock-full of demonic power, Bran wasn't worried in the slightest. With an eager smile of anticipation, he summoned the power granted to him by his Lord.

Trajan, meanwhile, kept sending his magic out through his legs and into the ground, hoping to get lucky and catch a hint of the enemy Marshal. So far, he had little success, and he began contemplating destroying the entire forum to flush Bran out of hiding. But just as he began to raise his war hammer, the surroundings rapidly darkened.

The soldiers around him instantly raised their guard, expecting an imminent attack. Instead, the buildings and even the sky began to fade into the thickening cloud of darkness. This cloud slowly closed in on the group and their anxiety grew. Leon, in particular, began to channel all of his remaining power in anticipation of fighting off this cloud.

The cloud didn't stop rolling in until even the closest of friendly soldiers disappeared from sight.

"Stick together!" Trajan roared. He was a little too late, as several seconds later, one of the fifth-tier Tribunes began to scream his lungs out. Before any of the others could start to frantically search for the location of their comrade, another Tribune on the opposite side of the circle added his voice to the first, as he started screaming as well.

"What's going on?!" Trajan demanded of his soldiers. "Can anyone see anything?!"

Feeling around him, he realized that Leon was still standing right next to him.

With some small relief, the Prince said, "Stick with me, Ursus."

"Yes, Your Highness," Leon said as he turned so that he and Trajan were facing outward back-to-back.

Leon tried channeling magic into his eyes, but this darkness that surrounded them was completely impenetrable. It even scattered his magic senses when he tried to project them.

Trajan did the same, achieving similar results. None of his knights had responded to his calls, but more and more of the knights began to scream themselves hoarse until the entire forum was filled with their cries.

And then they started to fall silent. Trajan listened with rapidly growing apprehension as each of the voices quit, and he himself stopped demanding for them to respond to him. He tapped the stone bricks

beneath him with his hammer, probing the area around him with his earth magic, but much like his magic senses, his power vanished into the dark barely a few feet away from him.

The Prince could do nothing but grit his teeth and wait for Bran's inevitable attack.

Leon's own unease grew more than it had even when Hakon's raiders had put his tower to siege at Fort 127. He waited with his sword outstretched and lightning magic coursing through it for the vampire to show himself. His eyes darted to and fro, but the darkness was completely opaque, and he couldn't even see Trajan standing directly behind him.

He leaned back a little, just to see if the Prince was still there. Leon hadn't heard anything that would lead him to believe he was alone, but when he felt nothing behind him, that fear began to grow within him.

"Your Highness?" Leon asked uncertainly.

There was no response.

Leon tried to ignite a flame in his off-hand, hoping to use it to see his surroundings, but he couldn't even push his magic out of his body enough to create a candle-sized flame in this black cloud.

"Come on, then," Leon muttered, his unease growing to the point that he just wanted Bran to attack and bring an end to this darkness. "Come on... Come on!"

"What's the rush?" came a chilling voice in his right ear. "We have all the time we need to savor these circumstances, no need to go too fast, is there?"

Leon twisted and slashed in the direction the voice had come from. He had felt breath on his ear as if those words had been whispered directly into it, but his blade tasted neither flesh nor bone.

"Ha ha ha ha!" the vampire mockingly laughed, this time from Leon's left side.

Leon pivoted to face his enemy, but in the darkness, he still couldn't see hide nor hair of the vampire.

But then, he saw a tiny pinprick of light in the distance. Leon quickly focused on it, ready for a fight. The light grew and expanded until it completely encompassed everything he could see, and it stopped being an indistinct light; Leon could see trees within it, some with blue leaves and pale white bark, and others with black bark and leaves like glittering emeralds.

Recognizing these surroundings, Leon glanced down and saw that he was standing in a field of purple grass, and to his right was a short palisade. A pit had been dug in front of the palisade and lined with grey stone bricks where an enchanted door blocked the tunnel leading into the compound that the palisade protected.

Leon's eyes widened as he recognized his and Artorias' home in the Northern Vales.

Something was in there that he had to see. He didn't know how he knew this, but he knew that he had to go inside. Without any thought, he took a few hesitant steps toward the door, slowly making his way back toward the pavilion where he had grown up.

A feeling of dread began to fill his chest, and his face became coated in sweat. The light at the end of the tunnel that outlined the inner door was all he could see. He didn't even notice as the sword in his hand disappeared and the door behind him slammed shut.

When he reached the door at the opposite end of the tunnel, he found it unlocked. Leon pushed it open and stepped out into the courtyard of the only real home he had ever known, and immediately froze.

Both houses and all three storehouses were intact, untouched by the fire that Leon started as he left and without any sign of the battle that had raged there. The obelisk that warded away the ice wraiths and their pet banshees was standing proudly in the center of the pavilion. What truly grabbed his attention, however, was the sight of Artorias standing over a dead stag as he expertly butchered it on the stone slab outside of his house.

Hearing the door open, Artorias turned around and smiled at Leon.

"Well don't just stand there, little lion, come help out!" he said with a light laugh, waving Leon over.

Leon's mind had clouded making it hard to think, so he followed Artorias' directions without thought. However, as he drew closer, the vision before him changed. The houses burst into flame, the obelisk fractured and collapsed, and the palisade around him crumbled and splintered apart as ice wraiths forced their way inside.

Leon immediately tried to summon his power, but when he glanced back at his father, he froze once more. Artorias' skin was pale and his black veins visible. There was a hole in his chest where a gnarled black tree had sprouted, and Artorias whispered, "You... did this to me..."

When he tried to respond, Leon found that his mouth had been sealed. Try as he might, he couldn't get out even a single word.

He frantically looked around him, searching for anything that could help in this situation, but then he saw a small group of mages follow him out of the tunnel. He recognized all five of the men wearing black as the assassins that had killed his father, but accompanying them were two female figures.

As their faces came into focus, Leon's heart sank. The first was someone he had sparred with many times at the Knight Academy, a young woman that he felt was his martial equal in every way, Valeria Isynos. The other was a woman he knew even better, with her radiant flame-colored hair, sparkling green eyes, and sensual body that she proudly showed off with a skin-tight black dress.

"That's him," Elise said with scorn dripping from her voice, "that's Leon Raime."

"I see," muttered Valeria as she raised her glaive and lunged toward Leon, an expression of such utter hatred on her face that, had Leon's voice not already been taken from him, would've shocked him speechless.

Leon could do nothing as the glaive slashed across his chest and he fell to his knees in pain. When he looked up at Elise, she lowered herself to whisper into his ear, "You're a weak little boy, with nothing to his name except the cold glories of a long-dead clan. I am the daughter of the exalted Tower Lord that runs every Heaven's Eye operation in the Bull Kingdom! You are *nothing* to me..."

Bran stepped out of his shadow with the utmost care. To use magic so far beyond him had taken its toll, and blood poured out his eyes, mouth, ears, and who knows where else. He could feel his organs within him break and dissolve when he summoned his Lord's power, which only stopped once he ended his attack and what little magic he had left was drained away into his soul realm and absorbed by his demonic connection.

But as he staggered to his feet, Bran proudly saw that all fifteen of the knights that had been arrayed against him were indisposed. Those least affected by his dark cloud were simply unconscious, while those more profoundly affected were either curled up and sobbing to themselves or kneeling with their mouths slack and their eyes staring unfocused at things Bran couldn't see.

Bran didn't pay any attention to the knights that had been scattered around the forum; he only had eyes for Leon, who had crumpled to the ground where he had stood, just as Trajan had done beside him.

The vampire licked his lips and hurried as fast as his extraordinarily injured body could manage toward the collapsed Leon. He had shed a lot of blood, expended a great deal of magical power, and incurred a massive debt with his Lord...

'... but it will all be worth it when I sink my fangs into his flesh...'

Bran kneeled over the fallen Leon and gently took the younger man's head in his hands. Leon's helmet had already been ripped off earlier in the fight, so the vampire ripped at the Skyflax padding that covered the young knight's neck until Leon's left carotid artery had been exposed.

However, just as Bran bent down to feed upon Leon, his reverie was harshly shattered with the thunderous sound of boulders shattering against each other, and he looked up just in time to see an enormous stone giant across the forum from him.

It saw Bran above Leon, and it roared in anger. It barreled across the forum with terrifying speed, and Bran barely had the time to throw himself back when the giant swung its titanic stone fist toward his head. Despite the giant missing, the vampire had no time to recover as stone spikes burst out of the ground and impaled his legs, eliciting a blood-curdling cry of pain from the Marshal.

Lapis, for indeed that was the identity of the giant that now towered over Bran, raised its massive rocky arms into the air and brought them down with as much force as it could onto the vampire. The force of Lapis' strike fractured the remnants of the forum as, once more, cracks spread out across the entirety of the stone bricks it had been paved with.

The giant expected to feel the crunch of bones and the squishy sensation of crushed flesh, but it felt neither. When it raised its arms to get a look at Bran, the Lapis found nothing more than a few small splashes of blood from the Marshal's legs. Lapis roared again in its harsh avalanche-like voice, its rage echoing throughout all of Florentia.

Bran, when faced with death, managed to make the split-second decision to cut his losses and escape, fading away into the darkness of the night just before Lapis' arms fell upon him. He, too, howled in rage at being denied the prize he was now obligated to sacrifice so much for, though none could hear him within the shadows.

Lapis stood watch over Leon for a little while longer, waiting for the young man to wake up and watching for the vampire's return. Bran could tell that he wasn't getting past the watchful giant—at least, not in his severely injured condition—and after one last baleful look at Lapis, he sped away to lick his wounds.