

Storm King 231

Chapter 231: Response I

Leon's dreams were terrible. The hateful and betrayed looks Artorias, Elise, and Valeria had given him when he had been affected by Bran's demonic illusions stuck with him, refusing to let him go despite Bran's retreat.

Artorias stared accusingly at him with cloudy dead eyes as an ugly, gnarled, and withered tree burst out of his chest, his burial worthy of a god turned into a hellish nightmare.

Elise barely glanced at him, and when she did her eyes were filled with scorn and derision for the young boy that was so far beneath her in wealth and status.

Valeria glared at him like a hunter whose prey had evaded her for far too long. Every line and crease in her frown spoke volumes of her hatred, and her eyes communicated nothing but death.

Leon couldn't move, he couldn't explain himself or try to talk to any of them. All he could do was kneel in front of these three, his chest leaking copious amounts of blood from where Valeria had slashed him with her glaive, and wait for whatever they decided to do to him next.

—

"Has he stirred any?" Trajan asked Alix.

"No, Your Highness," Alix quickly answered, snapping off a quick bow to the Prince. They were on board the flagship heading back to Ariminium, the evacuation of Florentia having been completed.

The Legion soldiers had fought magnificently against the Talfar cataphracts, taking only a few hundred casualties—the vast majority of them were fairly simple injuries that could be healed in a matter of hours or days with skilled enough healers. The cataphracts, meanwhile, lost anywhere from fifteen-hundred to two thousand injured and dead. Nearly all of the citizens of the city had been brought to Ariminium where they would wait out the war in shelters put up in empty warehouses until they could return home.

The Talfar Kingdom would garrison and fortify Florentia over the next few days, Trajan knew. They wouldn't want the Bull Kingdom landing soldiers behind them when they moved into the vale that the Bull's Horns watched over. Or at least, they didn't want any secret landings, as they hardly had the ships to stop the Legion from doing so if they wanted.

Most of the knights that had resisted Bran had recovered from the illusions they had been subjected to in the vampire's final attack. They had been forced to relive their greatest failures or confronted with their greatest fears. A couple had simply been tortured in their minds. They were shaken, but they were strong and experienced mages, and they put the experience behind them as best as they could for the time being.

Leon was the sole exception, as he had yet to wake up.

Trajan had been among the first to regain consciousness, and he had found Lapis, the stone giant that had been sent by the Crater Tribe as a kind of ambassador, standing guard over Leon's inert form. When the squires and lower-tiered mages came out of their shelters after it became clear that Bran wasn't

coming back, Trajan put Alix in charge of watching over Leon and to come and get him when the younger knight finally awakened.

Lapis, meanwhile, walked along the shore, keeping pace with the flagship. The giant didn't want to let Leon out of its sight, but it was far too heavy to take on the ship along with the hundreds of soldiers that needed to be evacuated as well. Fortunately, the Talfar army wasn't going to attack with so many ships nearby, even if they weren't busy setting up their camp.

The ships pushed onward, leaving the empty husk of Florentia behind, and Leon never stirred. Alix kept a close eye on him, her face lined with worry, while Anzu had laid down right next to Leon, covering Leon's waist with one of his wings and laying his head down on Leon's chest. Occasionally, the griffin would whimper or nudge at Leon, but for the most part, he just stared at Leon, waiting for him to wake up.

That still hadn't happened by the time the flagship cruised back into the port of Ariminium. Trajan arranged for healers to tend to Leon, and Alix and Anzu departed with them. Trajan almost went with them, but his own duties as the man in charge of the Bull's Horns had to come first.

When he strode back into his office about twenty minutes later, he found a runner there waiting for him.

"Your Highness!" the runner said, dropping to his knees. He knew it was a little rude, but he didn't want to waste time with such an important issue, so he immediately delivered his message to the Prince without waiting for Trajan's response. "Prince-Regent August sent word requesting Your Highness to call him as soon as you returned!"

Trajan nodded in thanks, turned on his heel and instantly left his office. Five minutes later, surrounded by several Legates and about half of his company of secretaries and assistants, he found himself in another of the Southern Horn's towers, in a dimly lit room lined with black velvet curtains, and a communication stone in front of him. He waited for the stone on the black box to connect with a nearly identical one in the capital.

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Hours before the evacuation of Florentia, Trajan had sent out urgent messages to all nearby landed nobles and, more importantly, to the capital. The Legate in charge of overseeing the comm stones in the capital, upon receiving this message, wasted no time in taking it to his immediate superior, the Consul of the Central Territories, an ancient and wizened man nearly three centuries old.

The Consul looked up from his paperwork and glared at the Legate when the latter burst into his office unannounced. However, before the Consul could reprimand his subordinate, the Legate said, "Sir! Prince Trajan has sent word of a massive Talfar army gathering near Ariminium!"

The Consul sighed and leaned back into his chair. "Thank you," he replied in an obvious tone of dismissal.

Confused, the Legate asked, "Sir, is there any response that ought to b—"

“That’ll be enough,” the Consul growled. With his confusion only growing, the Legate left the office to return to his own. While the Consul’s response—or rather, the lack thereof—was strange, he didn’t think anything particularly malicious of it.

That being said, when he returned to his own office, he called in a runner.

“Sir?” the young Centurion said once he arrived.

“You’re to go to the Royal Palace with an urgent warning. A Talfar army is gathering near Ariminium.”

The Centurion paled at the sudden outbreak of war despite the lack of formal declarations. He furiously nodded his understanding.

“Good,” the Legate replied.

—

Roland had long been back in the capital and delivered the news of Leon’s supposed death to Prince August. Both men were disappointed, but in the end, it didn’t have that great of an effect on their ongoing strategy. August knew that he and his mother would still likely be killed if Octavius were to come to the throne, and his sister Cristina would be married off to someone insignificant if she didn’t join them in death.

Having a member of the believed-extinct House Raime in his corner would’ve been a great help in dealing with the landed nobles of the Northern Territories, but he never planned on having Leon anyway.

So, August, Roland, and a short but powerfully built man with bright red-orange hair had gathered in the former’s office to discuss their strategies for combatting Octavius’ growing support among the nobility.

“Has my cousin gotten any further information on Octavius’ movements?” asked the red-haired man as he stretched out in his armchair and folded his arms that were thick as trees across his chest. He had a wide and round face, but the reddish-brown stubble that covered his cheeks kept him from seeming too youthful, while his dark blue eyes hinted at a capacity for violence that few in the Bull Kingdom could hope to match.

He was the Brimstone Paladin, who had recently pledged his support for August after receiving a request to do so from his cousin, the Duchess of Vesontio.

“My brother hasn’t left Valentia for months,” August replied. “However, there have been a few troubling reports I’ve received lately. The Consuls of the West and Endless Ocean have found cause to visit Valentia, while there have been more than a few messages sent to the office of the Consul of the South from Valentia’s ducal palace.”

“Should we consider those regions to be in support of Octavius?” Roland asked. “Most of the notable nobles in those regions are Octavius’ creatures, anyway...”

“I’ll send a few letters in the coming weeks to try and strengthen my relationship with them, but I fear that they’re already lost to me...” August said as his forehead wrinkled in thought. “We can still make some headway with the Northern Territories, but they have the fewest Legions and the poorest nobles

in the entire Kingdom... I've even heard a few things about the Consul of the Central Territories receiving some recent 'donations' from my brother for better gear to equip his personal retinue with."

"At least we have support from the East," the Brimstone Paladin said, his voice quivering just a bit at how much of the Bull Kingdom seemed to be falling into Octavius' hands.

"Inde—" August tried replying, but at that moment, the Centurion who had been sent from the Legion Headquarters breathlessly burst into the office, despite the group of assistants and secretaries behind him insisting that August was in a meeting and couldn't be disturbed. The nearby guards didn't actually think the Centurion would do something like this, especially with two Paladins present in August's office, and so were a little slow to move to stop him.

But just as the guards were about to seize him and both Roland and the Brimstone Paladin were drawing their weapons, the Centurion dropped to his knees and said in a panic, "Please forgive me, Your Highness, but His Highness Prince Trajan has sent an urgent report from the Bull's Horns!"

The guards' hands were on the Centurion now and were dragging him out of the office, but August rose from his chair and said, "Wait!" The guards froze and dutifully waited for their Prince, who walked over to the Centurion and asked, "What message did my uncle send?"

—

Around four or five in the afternoon, the Consul of the Central Territories was getting ready to leave for the day. He had been somewhat preoccupied with the news that Trajan had sent to the capital, but he decided that it would be prudent to ask Octavius what to do. Normally, he'd ask this of the King, but with the King indisposed, he had to make do with one of the Regents. Of course, he never would've been so slow to react if he actually thought that what Trajan had sent word about was that credible a threat.

However, before he could depart from his office, the door burst open and August, Roland, and the Brimstone Paladin walked in like they were marching to war. None of them looked even remotely happy to be there.

"Your Highness!" the Consul said in surprise before bowing just low enough to not be considered disrespectful.

August didn't mince words, he skipped the pleasantries and directly asked, "Why did I receive word about an invasion from the Talfar Kingdom, and yet find you here not doing a damn thing about it?!"

The Consul grimly smiled, his already thin lips nearly vanishing. "Your Highness," he said with the dismissive air of a superior lecturing a junior, "I have served His Majesty King Julius and King Aurelius before him for over a century and a half, I know enough about these matters to be aware that we need more information before we act."

"Waiting for information is one thing," Roland said, his own voice taking on a similar dismissive tone, "but complete inaction is another! There has been no report from your office to the Regent's about this situation!"

"It wasn't *necessary*," the Consul said again, the pitch of his voice lowering in anger. "Perhaps you'd know that if you weren't such a—"

"It was necessary," the Brimstone Paladin interjected, preventing the old and old-fashioned Consul from saying anything in front of the Prince that would get him into trouble.

August stepped forward, placing himself between the Paladins and the Consul. He leaned in to look into the Consul's beady eyes and said, "My uncle has sent word back about an army on our borders!

"And he has plenty of options with regards to dealing with that rabble!" the Consul retorted. "Not the least of which are the *twelve* Legions assigned to the Eastern Territories!"

"With an enemy at the gates, you wish to do *nothing*?" August challenged.

"There is *nothing* that needs to be done," the Consul replied. "What's more, I *don't* answer to you, *boy*! I am a Consul! I answer to no one but the King!"

August glared at the Consul, but what the man said wasn't wrong in any practical sense; he would face immense pushback if he tried to censure the Consul, and it could destroy his ability to win over other military officers to his cause. August was already losing the recruitment game if what his contacts told him were true, making him reluctant to openly oppose the Consul.

Without another word, August turned and left the office, with a furious Roland and slightly more subdued but still angry Brimstone Paladin right behind him. The Consul of the Central Territories was left alone, his weasel-like face twisting into a smile of triumph. His confidence in choosing Octavius rose dramatically.

Once they left the Legion Headquarters and were safely inside the Prince's carriage that had been warded against eavesdroppers, among other things, Roland asked, "What are we going to do now, Your Highness? We can't let an invading force threaten this Kingdom!"

"Not to mention that dealing with them in any way will raise Your Highness' prestige by a great deal, and might even win over other supporters in the capital and elsewhere..." the Brimstone Paladin remarked.

August sat in silence for a long moment before saying, "I think it's time I visited my Royal Father..."

Chapter 232: Response II

"Hmm, Avidius always was over-cautious and indecisive," Trajan mused, "I have no idea why my brother made *him* into a Consul..."

Before him was a hovering light projection of August. The younger Prince had arranged for a call with his uncle to discuss the situation with Talfar, but it had been delayed both by August's difficulties with the Legions in the Central Territories and by Trajan's evacuation of Florentia.

"Is there nothing you can do to help, Uncle?" August asked. "I'm doing my best to wrangle some support to bring to the Horns, but I haven't gotten very far..."

"I can send a message to Avidius personally, but he's under no obligation to assist me without a royal decree. This would be a *very* different thing if I were in the capital, but I can't leave my post with an enemy army in the field."

"I understand," August said.

“By the way, how is my Royal Brother?” Trajan asked, doing an expert job at keeping the concern he felt from leaking into his voice while he was surrounded by many of his subordinates.

“His Majesty is...” August began before hesitating for a long moment as he chose the right words to say, knowing that others could hear their conversation. “His Majesty is doing about as well as can be expected...”

—

King Julius’ personal palace wasn’t nearly as grand as his station might imply. With only five rooms built around a small courtyard, it was barely even as large as the most modest of noble villas out in the city. But what the King loved most about this place was its isolation, as rather than being surrounded by luxurious gardens and other wings of the Royal Palace, it had been built within the small forest that had been cultivated for the pleasure of the royal family. The purpose of this was to fulfill the need for isolation and privacy that the Bull King might otherwise be denied in the main palace complex.

Despite this isolation, the small royal villa had a battalion of guards stationed around it at all times, though most of these were, admittedly, made to patrol around the perimeter of the forest.

August, Roland, and the Brimstone Paladin were stopped several times by the guards as they hurried toward the villa. The forest wasn’t that large, as they could easily walk there from the main palace complex, but it was more than enough space for them to run into no less than three guard patrols who weren’t pleased with their unannounced visit.

Still, a Prince-Regent accompanied by two Paladins wasn’t going to be stopped for long, and August arrived at the gates of the villa before the sun set.

The villa wasn’t nearly as ostentatious as the rest of the Royal Palace. It had the same white stone walls and red ceramic roof tiles as the rest of the palace and had a huge marble statue of the Sacred Bull outside of it, but it lacked the intricate murals and tapestries that covered the walls in the main palace. Much of the floor was covered either in smooth white marble tiles with long black streaks or thick red carpet, but otherwise, there wasn’t much in the way of decoration. Even the columns within the courtyard were fairly simple, lacking the paint that covered most of the other decorative columns in Bull Kingdom architecture.

The three visitors entered the villa after passing by one last guard detail on the main doors and made their way to the back of the villa, just off the courtyard. Standing guard outside of this room was a truly enormous man covered from head to toe in gleaming armor of interlocking bronze plates, large boxy pauldrons that emphasized his broad shoulders, and a full-face helmet that had been shaped to have a vague resemblance to a short bird’s beak tucked under his left arm. Along the joints and the seams between the bronze plates, August could see runes glowing a gentle gold.

“Sir Praecilius!” August said in greeting. The Bronze Paladin barely lifted his gaze to the Prince, and August noticed his hands drifting toward the gigantic bronze battleax strapped prominently on his back.

“Your Highness,” Praecilius replied in a tone of both greeting and warning as if the Paladin wasn’t sure which to use, his bright brown eyes tracking every movement August made.

"I'm here to see my Royal Father," August said. He brokored no room for bargaining, as he walked right past the Paladin to push open the door.

Fortunately, he was both a Prince and was followed by a pair of Paladins himself, as otherwise, the Bronze Paladin would've cut August down before his hand had even touched the door. As it was, the Bronze Paladin warmly smiled to the Brimstone Paladin as he passed, while he gave Roland little more than a curt nod.

The King's bedchamber was exceptionally dimly lit. Even with his fifth-tier senses, August had to take a moment to adjust to the lack of light.

The bedroom was lavishly furnished, though the pieces of furniture themselves weren't particularly ornate. There were tables, comfortable armchairs, a warm fireplace, a door that lead to a magnificent bathroom, dressers and closets filled with clothes, and in the very back, a massive bed. The Bull King had been a large man, but his bed could've fit a dozen people or more—and given the size of his father's harem, August was certain it had fit even more than that in the past.

Unfortunately, the King had tried to force his soul realm to grow in a bid to reach the eighth-tier and wound up severely injuring himself. He'd been in a coma for more than six years as a result, and his formerly robust and heavily built body had wasted away to the point that August was barely able to still see his father in the dangerously thin and pale man that lay unmoving in the bed.

The King's short brown hair had grown while he had been unconscious, with much longer stretches of time between when a trusted servant was allowed to come in and cut it, and there were noticeable streaks of silver within his once rich brown locks. August felt his stomach sink at the sight of how weak his father appeared, just as it always had whenever he visited. It was difficult to reconcile the strong and energetic man he once was with the bag of skin and bones that his injury had reduced him to.

August walked right over to the side of the bed and quietly kneeled at his father's side, ignoring the other Paladin that stood guard in the bedchamber itself. This second Paladin was of average height and dressed in shapeless brown robes. He had no hair anywhere on his head, and his face was thin enough to show his unimpressive cheeks and jawline. His deep brown eyes watched August like a hawk while his hands unconsciously curled into fists.

"Mettius!" the Brimstone Paladin said, trying to be both as quiet and as good-natured as he could.

"Saturnius," the Penitent Paladin replied. He practically ignored Roland's presence, much to the last Paladin's chagrin—though it was better than the Bronze Paladin's almost open hostility.

"How is His Majesty?" Brimstone asked.

"He hasn't changed much since last you visited," Penitent replied as he watched August whisper into the King's ear.

"Has that doctor from the Sacred Golden Empire made any progress with that potion he was supposed to brew?" Roland curiously asked.

"He's gathered about half of the ingredients, including that Heartwood Amber you retrieved," Penitent responded.

Roland nodded, earnestly hoping that the King could be healed in time to prevent a civil war, but that was looking less and less likely as more time passed.

After about five minutes, August stood up from his father's side and looked at the three Paladins standing near the entrance.

"Get Sir Praecilius in here," he commanded.

Penitent frowned a little, but since there was no danger to the King with four Paladins present, he didn't say anything about Bronze moving from his post outside the door.

Once all four Paladins were in the bedroom, August calmly and bluntly stated, "My uncle, Prince Trajan, has sent word to me that there is a Talfar army on our borders, and that it seems so likely that they are going to try and seize Ariminium that it would be the height of absurdity to deny it."

Both Penitent and Bronze were shocked at this news, but their surprise was muted compared to their anger.

"Those traitorous dogs! Did they not learn their lesson the last time?!" Bronze angrily muttered, careful not to raise his voice too loudly when in the presence of the King, his level of consciousness notwithstanding.

"They will be turned back from the Horns," Penitent said. He kept his expression neutral, but it was clear from his clenched fists and the subtle way that the magic lanterns in the bedroom began to flicker that he was incensed.

"I have tried to mobilize several Legions and have them reinforce my uncle's fortress, but the Consul of the Central Territories has stymied my efforts," August continued, only slightly exaggerating the truth.

"It takes a decree from the King or the Assembly to declare war," Penitent observed, "and the Assembly is not in session. The Consul can't legally move without a direct order from the King or a unanimous order from his representatives."

"Nowhere in the laws does it say 'unanimous'," Brimstone growled. "His Highness has every right to command him to ride east, but Avidius is too chicken-shit to do so!"

Penitent flashed Brimstone a quick glare at the profanity but otherwise didn't respond.

"That doesn't matter right now," August said, moving the conversation along before anyone started getting offended. "What matters is who I *can* bring, as I am *not* going to leave my uncle out there on his own, with only the resources of the Eastern Territories to call upon!"

"Why are you telling *us* this?" asked Bronze.

"I want your assistance," August replied.

"We are sworn to the *King*, not to the Princes or Princesses," Penitent reminded August.

"I'm *aware* of that," August snapped back, "but without a direct order from the King, you're left to your own devices! 'Your own devices' right now means that you have taken it upon yourselves to guard His Majesty, but that doesn't have to be the case! There are enemies at the gates of the Kingdom, *literally*,

and I can't imagine that the two finest warriors in the entire Kingdom would ever want those gates breached!"

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"And what did they say?" Trajan asked, his tone dropping to freezing-cold anger at the implication behind August pausing at this point.

August took a deep breath and said, "They gave me no specific promises. I asked them for help in persuading the individual Legates to march with me, but again, they refused to commit to anything. They're more taken with guarding my father's... training chamber than they are with protecting the Kingdom!"

As most of the people in the room with Trajan weren't aware of King Julius' current condition, August had to be careful and step around that issue, but he was getting angry enough at his inability to get the Legions moving that he almost lost control.

"Uncle," August continued, "you're still highly respected among the Legion officers here in the capital, as well as in the entire Kingdom! If you were to contact individual Legates, or at least let me speak for you, then I'm sure I can assemble three or four Legions and bring them to you at the Horns! I also have the Brimstone Paladin and the Paladin Roland Magnus committed to the cause, and they can together bring another seven thousand knights and men-at-arms as well!"

Trajan sat in his armchair silently fuming. The bureaucracy of the capital and the arrogance of those who ran it was the main reason why he renounced his claim to the throne in favor of his little brother, to begin with. But, if it brought him the reinforcements needed to not just defend Ariminum and the Bull's Horns but to push the Talfar army back, then he'd certainly help his nephew in any way he could.

"You can speak for me. I'll back up whatever you say, within reason," Trajan said, finally relieving some of the obvious tension in August's strained expression. "Do as your father once did, and bring me Legions to push Talfar back!"

August sighed and said, "I will, Uncle, but there's not much we can do right now, is there?"

"Not while my brother is still locked away in training," Trajan said, his face darkening at the lie told for the sake of the knights and Legion officers around him.

"I'll do what I can," August said. "At the very least, you'll have the Paladins Roland and Saturnius, plus their combined seven thousand knights and men-at-arms. And me, for whatever that's worth."

"You know, most nobles would advise that you not humble yourself like that," Trajan said with a sly smile. "A Prince, a *King*, would never put himself down so quickly."

August chuckled and said, "I'll remember that, Uncle. Now, I have a lot of work to do to coordinate this, as I'm sure you have as well."

"I do, indeed."

"Then I'll let you get to it. Oh, and congratulations on the evacuation of... Florentia?"

“Thank you, it was not a pleasant experience and we’re still picking up the pieces, but it was an overall success.”

With that, the two Princes finished their goodbyes and the communication stones flickered off. Neither wasted any more time and immediately got to work. However, just as Trajan was about to sit down back at his desk and call a meeting with his immediate subordinates, a messenger knocked on his door.

“Your Highness,” the messenger said, “Sir Ursus has woken up!”

“He has?!” Trajan said, almost springing to his feet. “Is he all right?”

“He’s... fine...” the messenger replied, not quite looking Trajan in the eye.

The Prince’s face dropped, and he immediately left his office, shouting back at his assistants to collect reports from his Legates on how the defenses were being prepared while he made his way to the hospital.

—

“And so it seems that August is going to leave the capital to try and deal with this minor threat,” the Consul of the Central Territories reported to an ecstatic Prince Octavius in their own comm stone call.

“Are you sure?” the Prince delightedly asked from a room in the ducal palace in Valentia similar in aesthetic design to the one at the Bull’s Horns. “Your reports are accurate?”

“Both Paladins that follow him around like leashed pets have called up their knights,” the Consul replied.

“He’s going to abandon the capital for some petty border skirmishes in the East when he hasn’t left in more than six years...” Octavius whispered to himself. “Wonderful!” he almost shouted to the Consul. “In that case, I will be returning to the capital! It’s a little early for something like this, but I can’t let this opportunity to destroy whatever support that common bastard has raised in court slip by!”

Chapter 233: Waking Up

Darkness and pain. That was Leon’s entire world. Artorias, Elise, and Valeria had all disappeared, and his home dissolved away, leaving him curled up on the ground in an enormous black void.

By this point, he had become vaguely aware that what he was seeing wasn’t real, but his mind was so taken up with the regrets and insecurities that Bran’s demonic power had poked that he barely even cared.

He’d buried his father after mutilating his corpse. He’d gotten far closer to Valeria than he ever should have despite knowing that she was, in all likelihood, his enemy. He was nothing more than a fallen noble raised in the wild, yet he was in a romantic relationship with one of the most important young women in the entire Kingdom.

Leon’s powers of reason kept telling him that he wasn’t responsible for Artorias’ death and that he’d buried his father according to Artorias’ own wishes. His reason kept telling him that Valeria was the same age as he was and that made it incredibly unlikely that she was involved in the specific actions against his family. His reason kept telling him that Elise had made it quite clear that she was just as into him as he was into her.

But reason and emotion are typically regarded as complete opposites, and not without cause. His reason could tell him all these things, but in the end, he still *heard* Elise telling him that he was nothing, he still *felt* it when Valeria made the still-bleeding gash in his chest, and he *saw* the ugly and ignoble tree growing out of Artorias that defiled and corrupted his body.

These successive shocks to his system left Leon borderline catatonic. He couldn't wake up even if he realized he was still unconscious.

He could only lay there and-

"WHAT IS THIS?" boomed a thunderous voice that seemed to come from everywhere. **"ONE LITTLE UPSETTING VISION AND YOU SHUT DOWN? IS THIS THE EXTENT OF YOUR DRIVE AND AMBITION?! IS THIS THE REMAINS OF MY CLAN, THE FOUNDATIONS UPON WHICH IT IS TO BE REBUILT?!"**

This voice shook Leon to his core, and for the first time in hours, his eyes began to do more than erratically twitch. After a few moments of confusion, he lifted his head and started looking around him for the source of that voice, but all he saw was darkness.

And then, so suddenly it was as if it were there all along, the Thunderbird was towering over him. Its yellow avian eyes glared down at him, still curled up on the ground, and its brown and gold feathers sparked and flashed with bright golden lightning. The Thunderbird flapped its wings and the darkness was instantly illuminated with silver lightning, driving back the darkness and bringing some measure of clarity to Leon's mind. Its aura was majestic, yet overbearing, and Leon felt simultaneous awe and dread at the sight of such magnificent power.

"ON YOUR FEET, BOY," it demanded.

Leon was hardly in any shape to stand, but he was in even less shape to spurn the Thunderbird, so he began to struggle and thrash around, digging deep within himself to find the strength to at least push himself to his knees, if not his feet. The Thunderbird silently watched, the impatience both obvious and growing on its eagle-like face. But it didn't provide Leon any assistance, it just watched him as he slowly got his feet under him and, with an almost comically embarrassing amount of wobbling and unsteady rocking, manage to rise.

"YOU ARE OF MY BLOOD," the Thunderbird reminded Leon, **"AND I HAVE COME TO EXPECT THINGS OF YOU. STRIVE TO FINISH YOUR MAGIC BODY, COME AND MEET ME HERE IN YOUR SOUL REALM, AND LEARN WHAT IT MEANS TO BE THE KING OF THE HEAVENS!"**

For a moment, Leon's face flushed red at the memory of the creation of his mana glyph. He identified himself, then irrevocably declared that he was the future King of the Heavens. It was meant only as a statement of commitment to gaining strength, as a way to keep himself growing in power until he could take revenge, but it seemed that the Thunderbird took that declaration a hell of a lot more seriously. Leon tried to open his mouth to speak, to ask the Thunderbird questions, to say *anything* at all, but the words wouldn't come. It felt like his vocal cords were completely paralyzed.

"YOU MUST SEEK STRENGTH," the Thunderbird continued, **"YOU MUST SEEK ME! BUT FIRST, YOU MUST WAKE UP!"**

The reality of what had happened suddenly and painfully crashed back down into Leon's mind.

'The battle... Bran... the Prince... I was enveloped in a cloud of darkness...'

Seeing the young man's mind begin to finally turn and piece together his situation, the Thunderbird couldn't help feeling some small amount of satisfaction. The illusions inflicted by a darkness demon weren't easy to shake off. The other knights woke so early because they weren't the real intended targets of the attack, and so were only shown visions of fear and terror.

Leon, however, was made to confront old regrets while insecurities were forcibly driven into his mind, both far more powerful than something so simple and primal as fear. After all, fear is destroyed with familiarity, and the longer a vision of fear continues, the less power it has. Not to mention, the knights affected by Bran's demonic power were all combat soldiers, men and women who regularly train to kill and had great experience in dealing and surviving death. Fear could be a potent weapon, but it was blunted against people such as them.

'What... what do I do?' Leon wondered. *'How do I wake up? How do I get out of here?'*

"THERE IS NO FORCE THAT CAN AFFECT THE MIND OF ONE THAT BEARS MY BLOOD FOR LONG! YOU HAVE THE POWER TO LEAVE, YOU NEED ONLY TO USE IT!" the Thunderbird roared, and more silver lightning flashed throughout the abyss, but this time, there was a hint of blue at the edges of the bolts.

Instantly understanding, Leon called upon his power. Lightning began to surge through his body, and within the abyss, Leon began to glow with a radiant silver-blue aura, and the darkness around him began to melt and dissolve away.

Beneath his feet appeared floor tiles arranged in a checkerboard pattern, and as the darkness was pushed back even further, he saw an orange glow in the distance, which he quickly realized to be Xaphan the more the darkness receded.

Leon knew exactly where he was now: his soul realm. The Thunderbird had essentially said as much before, but it was something else entirely to see it materialize out of the nightmarish shadows that Bran had afflicted him with.

The darkness continued to be forced backward, inch by inch, until finally, light returned to Leon's soul realm. It was just as he'd left it, a tiny island floating in a sea of mist, a mist that seemed to emit soft light. At the center of his island, in the center of the white and red floor tiles, was a slab of white marble and a black granite throne atop it. Seated upon that throne was Leon... sort of. What Leon could see of the body sitting in that chair was his head, most of his torso, and his right arm. The rest was missing.

This was his incomplete magic body.

Resisting the urge to immediately go and examine it, Leon turned again toward Xaphan and met the demon's blazing yellow eyes. The two stared at each other in silence for a short minute, until Xaphan broke it by simply saying, "It took you long enough to finally break yourself out of that."

Leon smiled bitterly and said, "Well, I'm back now. Time to get back to work."

And he opened his eyes.

—

There were many hospitals within Ariminium, as befitting a city of over a million citizens, with at least one major hospital per island in the Tyrrhenian River delta. There was also one more in each of the Horns, which were mostly reserved for injured Legion soldiers. After the evacuation of Florentia, most of the injured soldiers were taken to the hospital nearest to the docks for immediate care. In Leon's case, however, since he wasn't in any need for swift medical attention, Trajan had him taken to the hospital in the Southern Horn.

Like all hospitals in Ariminium, it was fairly lavishly appointed, with smooth floors of white stone, thick cream-colored carpets, and plenty of comfortable furniture, though the actual architecture of the place was bland and monolithic. That being said, it had an extremely skilled staff of healers and nurses and more than enough equipment to see to just about any injury a Legion soldier could sustain.

When Trajan and his small detail of assistants and guards arrived at the hospital, he vaguely registered that Lapis was standing outside, but he didn't stop to think about it. It wouldn't have mattered much if he had, as he was duly grateful to the stone giant for coming when it did; the giant saved not only Trajan but all of the knights with him as well, including Leon.

Trajan hurried into the atrium where the young nurses behind the counter almost jumped out of their skin.

"Y-Your Highness!" the one in charge said in shock before quickly bowing, followed quickly by her coworkers.

Trajan didn't want to waste time on pleasantries when his protégé had just woken up, but he was still a Prince and he took a moment to stop and let the three nurses behind the front desk straighten up before asking, "To what room was Sir Ursus taken?"

The head nurse said, "I think he was taken to room 212 in the western wing..."

"He was moved since then," one of the other nurses quickly added before Trajan bolted toward room 212.

"Where and why?" the head nurses asked, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at the subordinate for interrupting her.

"I'm not sure why, ma'am, but he was taken to 325 in the northern wing..." the subordinate nurse hurriedly replied after shuffling through papers in front of him to confirm the report.

"Then that's where I'm going," Trajan stated, walking down the hall behind the nurses toward the northern wing.

It was easy enough to find Leon's room, as Alix and Anzu were waiting outside of it. Alix had a look of concern on her face, but it was a far sight better than the worry that had been there only a few hours before on the ship cruising back into Ariminium's port.

Alix bowed as Trajan approached.

"He's awake?" Trajan asked.

"Yes, Your Highness," Alix replied. "But he's a little... I don't know, I was told that physically he's fine, but a healer has yet to give him a full check-up..."

Trajan frowned a little, but he nodded gratefully to Alix.

"If he's fine, then you should get some rest, it's been a long night. If Sir Ursus isn't back by this morning, then he'll still be here."

It was Alix's turn to frown, but she couldn't just tell the Prince no, so she asked, "What about Anzu?"

Trajan glanced down at the griffin. Anzu was staring at the door between him and Leon, and Trajan was under no illusions about whether or not the griffin was going to follow his orders.

"I suppose you can wait with him, then," the Prince said, seeing through Alix's subtle request to stay.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Alix respectfully responded.

Trajan was about to push open the door, but he stopped and turned back to Alix.

"Out of curiosity," he started, "why was Leon moved?"

Trajan immediately regretted asking, because as soon as he did, Alix's face drained of all color.

Before he could apologize or otherwise try and walk back his question, Alix answered, "Just before he woke up, his body started to spark. It was clear that he was somehow calling upon his lightning power, and this is what seemed to wake him up. It's just that the lightning he summoned nearly obliterated the room he was in; he had to be moved because all of the furniture in his old room had been destroyed..."

"... I see," Trajan whispered. It made a certain degree of sense that Leon needed to call upon his magic in order to wake up, and that doing so would put a lot of the healers in the hospital on edge, but it still didn't explain why everyone was being so damned cryptic about his current state.

But instead of continuing to ask Alix when Leon himself was mere feet away, Trajan sighed and, steeling himself for whatever was behind it, pushed the door open.

Chapter 234: New Found Determination

The pristine white walls were blackened and scorched by lightning, the furniture had been burned and shattered by Leon's power, and Leon himself was lying down on the pile of dust and splinters that had been, only a few moments before, his hospital bed. And yet, Leon opened his eyes with an almost paradoxical serenity. It took him a moment or two to truly begin to see his surroundings, and once he did, he barely even took notice of the scorch marks on the walls and ceiling, the flickering magic lanterns, or the alarms screaming in his room.

Rather, what caught his attention was a terrified-looking Alix and Anzu, both of whom were peeking around the door. Seeing that he was awake, Alix cautiously entered the room with a quiet and hesitant "Sir?" Or at least, as quiet as the ear-piercing alarms would allow.

Leon smiled in response and was about to assure her that he was all right and that he wasn't going to burst into lightning again, but a team of nurses rushed into the room, pushing Alix and Anzu outside.

What followed was a series of tests and checks to Leon's vitals while he was moved into another hospital bed and wheeled to another room. It was more than a little humiliating, as he felt just fine, but the trip at least gave him a few moments to think and put his thoughts in order. For the most part, this

meant thinking about what the Thunderbird had said and trying to push the illusion he had seen into the back of his mind.

By the time the nurses finished their job and left him alone in his new room, his smile had disappeared and his mind was dominated by a single thought: *'I have to get stronger! I have to reach the sixth-tier!'*

It seemed to him that the lightning he could call upon wasn't so simple as to be just a little more potent than regular lightning if it was able to so easily dispel the darkness in his mind. He wanted to know what that power was capable of, but more than that, he wanted to get strong enough to drive his sword into Bran's chest and fill the vampire with enough lightning as to render him into nothing more than ash on the wind.

Once the nurses had left Leon to fetch a healer, Alix and Anzu hesitantly walked in—or rather, Alix was hesitant, while Anzu was practically overjoyed to see Leon awake and almost jumped up onto his bed with him.

"Are you... good, Sir?" Alix asked, her apprehension at his state only growing the more she stared at his troublingly dark expression.

Leon's only response was to nod. Alix continued to awkwardly stand there for several more minutes while Anzu tried to get Leon out of bed by nuzzling the latter's hand, but eventually, Leon said, "Think you two could give me some time alone?"

Alix wanted to ask why, but the look in Leon's eye made it clear that he wasn't asking her as a friend to give him some space, he was telling her as her knight to leave.

With a bitter smile, she nodded and walked forward to grab Anzu. The griffin clearly didn't appreciate her wrapping her arms around him, and he appreciated it even less when she started pulling him out of the room, but with a single look from Leon, Anzu stopped fighting her and allowed himself to be dragged out, leaving Leon alone in his hospital room.

Leon quickly arranged himself in a comfortable position and began to channel his magic into his bones. However, instead of letting his magic flow freely through his skeleton as he did during the brief time he was training to ascend to the third-tier, he trapped his magic within his bones. This was the way his magic body would be created, by keeping his magic within an individual body part until it was essentially copied, at which point his magic body would grow. He was somewhere close to halfway at this point if the glimpse of his magic body in his soul realm was anything to go by.

He could see a long road of training ahead of him, and with the Talfar army assembling near the horns, he didn't think he'd get much time to devote to it in the near future. To that end, he wanted to get as much training in as he could while everyone was still leaving him alone in the hospital. Unknown to him, though, was that the hospital had already sent a runner to Trajan informing him that Leon had just woken up.

—

Trajan pushed open the door to Leon's hospital room with a look of great apprehension at what he was about to see. He half expected Leon to be strapped into his bed and raving like a lunatic given the way

that everyone had been dancing around the issue of his current state, but instead, he found Leon sitting up in bed with his legs crossed in a meditative pose. He appeared to be completely in control of himself.

His meditation clearly wasn't that profound, though, as Leon's eyes opened as soon as the door opened.

Trajan waved him down when it appeared that he was going to rise and bow, and said, "Please, Leon, stay where you are."

The two stared at each for a long moment, and Trajan came to understand what the others had seemingly failed to articulate, probably because their senses weren't quite sharp enough to consciously pick up on the clues. Leon's aura was heavy and carried with it a sense of deep killing intent that was subdued enough that even Trajan had a hard time identifying it.

Leon was obviously enraged, but that wasn't all that Trajan could see. If the younger knight were only angry at what he had been subjected to, then the Prince would've expected him to show restless energy, a powerful desire to find Bran and make him pay. Instead, Trajan found Leon diligently training.

The Prince slowly crossed the room and quietly sat down in one of the chairs next to the bed. "How are you doing?" he softly asked.

Leon didn't respond immediately. He turned his golden eyes from Trajan to the wall, though it seemed to the Prince that he was staring at something thousands of miles away.

Finally, after the silence had become excruciating, Leon answered with, "I'm doing well."

"You don't seem yourself," Trajan observed. In the year and change that they'd been acquainted, Trajan had never seen the young eighteen-year-old as anything but calm in temperament, diligent when assigned tasks, and not prone to any sort of outburst or attention-seeking stunt, in stark contrast to the picture of the reckless child that had fallen into a great deal of power that he'd initially feared Leon would be after receiving the report of what had happened at the Cradle.

Leon sighed and said with that same thousand-yard-stare, "I'm as well as I can be, right now."

"Feel free to elaborate on that," Trajan said, staring at his young subordinate.

Again, Leon was silent for a long time as he thought about what he should and shouldn't say.

"I... Did you see anything in that cloud?" he suddenly asked, his voice dropping so low that the old Prince had to strain a little bit to hear it.

Trajan slowly nodded. "I saw my father and brother dead, all of my brother's children dead, and Ariminium burning," he said. "It was a little over the top, really. What did you see, if you don't mind me asking?"

Leon frowned a little. The ease with which Trajan spoke made it clear that he wasn't nearly so affected by Bran's attack as Leon had been. But still, that illusion was only part of the reason for Leon's current behavior.

"Are there any lightning fields nearby?" Leon asked, changing the subject again. Trajan raised an eyebrow in mild displeasure, but he answered anyway.

"There're a few lightning rods in the Southern Horn, I wouldn't recommend them, though. Only your ancestors ever really knew how to make those things. Lightning mages in these parts don't have much equipment to use to train with..."

"That doesn't matter," Leon quickly said. "I just need to be able to use one or two..."

"It isn't good to rely on outside help for training, Leon," Trajan responded, trying to explain what he meant. "It's always best to do what you can without the use of equipment or potions or anything else of that sort. Your own body can regulate how fast you gain power, but if you push yourself too far, then you'll get hurt!"

Trajan's words clearly didn't have much of an effect on Leon, who simply said, "I need to reach the sixth-tier..."

"Is that all?" Trajan sarcastically asked, leaning back in his chair and running his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. Ascension to the sixth-tier marked that person as one of the strongest mages in the Bull Kingdom, and to hear Leon speak of it so casually was something that Trajan found both frustrating and amusing.

"No," Leon calmly replied. "I also want to make that vampire shorter by a head..."

"The way you're acting, you're not going anywhere near the frontlines," Trajan replied. "You need to get your head on straight! Whatever you saw is your own business, but I can't have you putting yourself and others in danger!"

Leon's face widened in a thin and bitter smile. "I'm not planning on doing anything reckless," he said, "I just... have reasons to ascend to the sixth-tier."

Trajan stared at Leon without saying a word for more than a minute. Leon even started to feel a bit of pressure coming from the Prince as he thought about what to do, and that tightness in his chest seemed to bring him back a little; he made eye contact with Trajan again and lost that thousand-yard-stare.

"You're fine, physically," Trajan observed, "so I'm sending you home for now. You're to *stay* there until you're summoned, got it?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Leon swiftly answered.

"Good. You take some time to get your head right. That Talfar army is going to still be trickling in over the next few days, anyway, so I doubt there's going to be much going on here other than preparations for a siege."

Trajan rose from his seat and left without another word. He had to make sure the defense of the Horns was being properly coordinated, and he couldn't do that and worry about Leon's current mental state at the same time. He could only hope that a little bit of time off would help Leon recover.

A few minutes after Trajan departed, Leon rose to his own feet and, with only a small amount of unsteadiness, grabbed the bag with his sword and armor that had been left in the corner and walked to the door where Alix and Anzu were waiting. The two were overjoyed to see Leon on his feet, and Anzu almost knocked Leon over by eagerly rubbing himself against Leon's legs. The griffin was still growing quickly, and his expression of affection for Leon was starting to become excessive.

"You good now?" Alix asked.

"Yeah," Leon said with as reassuring a smile as he could plaster onto his face. "Let's go home."

Alix smiled brightly and nodded, falling in beside Leon as he made his way toward the hospital entrance.

'Fortunately, I didn't see anything about her,' Leon thought. The looks of accusation, hatred, and derision on Artorias', Valeria's, and Elise's faces weren't something he believed he'd forget anytime soon. If he had seen her or Trajan in the illusion as well... He actively pushed that thought of his mind and kept walking.

—

When Leon emerged from the hospital, the morning sun was just starting to break over the horizon, but before Leon's eyes could adjust, a huge shadow covered it up. Leon's adrenaline briefly spiked and his hand went for where his sword was supposed to be, but when he glanced up, he relaxed. The shadow was only Lapis.

"It's good to see the Divine One on his feet," the giant rumbled, its blue streaks that covered its body sparkling in the morning light. Leon could almost feel the stone bricks beneath his feet shake in time with its voice.

"And I'm told I have you to thank for that," Leon replied. "Thank you."

Alix thanked Lapis as well, but since she didn't speak the language of the stone giants, that was about as much as she could participate in the conversation, much to her consternation.

"Please, no need for that," Lapis said in a tone that implied it was smiling, though it had no lips to do so. **"To protect the Divine One is my purpose here."**

"Dedicated to that, aren't you?" Leon said. The last time Lapis had said this, he had been annoyed, but now he didn't mind so much. "How did you find us, by the way?"

"I heard the sounds of war and confronted the Diplomat."

"Aquillius?" Leon asked.

"Yes, that one," Lapis confirmed. **"That one told me that there was a battle going on, and I assumed the Divine One would participate. The Divine One has been fighting much, recently, but I have not been able to perform my function and provide protection..."**

"Yeah..." Leon said with an awkward chuckle. "We, uh, we don't like to involve others in things that we consider our business... It would feel like we were imposing..."

Lapis was silent for a moment, then said, **"I think I understand... But please, to protect the Divine One is no imposition, it is my purpose. If there is ever any need for me, then I will be there!"**

"Thank you, again," Leon said, a genuine smile breaking out over his face.

"I mean it, if there is a need, don't hesitate!"

"I will! I'll call on you if the need arises!" Leon responded. And he actually meant it a little.

He couldn't help but smile the entire way back to his and Alix's barracks. He'd never forget that illusion, but it helped greatly that she, Trajan, and Lapis were there. There weren't many people that he trusted, but he felt comfortable placing his limited trust in them.

Once he got home, however, his smile disappeared. Alix washed up and went to bed, but for Leon, his day was only getting started. He needed to speak with the Thunderbird, and to do that, he needed his magic body. It was time to train.

Chapter 235: Weapons to Fight a Shadow

'First things first,' Leon thought as he stared at his sword and armor. When he'd been taken to the hospital, most of it had been taken off, and he'd had to carry all of it home. Now, Leon had to decide what to do with all of it, which is to say whether to pull it into his soul realm or not.

In the end, he decided on only pulling his sword into his soul realm, and to just wear his armor in case Trajan sent word that he was needed. He didn't actually think he would be needed, but it was always better to be prepared.

Leon quickly got to work cleaning his armor so that he could wear it without feeling utterly disgusting. Normally, this would be the job for a knight's squire, but Leon actually enjoyed doing it himself, as it gave his hands something to do while he sat and thought about something else.

And so, with a clear to-do list, Leon got to work. The Skyflax padding he tossed into an enchanted wash bin in the bathroom which would clean it, and he got to work on wiping down the Magmic Steel parts of his armor before the dirt and grime could get too solidified on it. As he did so, he let his mind wander, but not long after finally putting his focus on something, he felt Xaphan's attention.

[Need something, demon?] Leon asked, his tone neutral and dispassionate, giving off the feeling that he wasn't in the mood for much talking.

[I just felt like checking in on my partner,] Xaphan replied. [That attack from that dark mage was quite... *interesting*, wasn't it? It even invaded your soul realm and knocked me out of my meditations...]

Leon was about as in the mood for playing around as he was for conversation, so he bluntly asked, [Know something about it?]

[It had a familiar aura to it,] Xaphan answered. [That mage was a vampire, wasn't he?]

[Yes.]

[I believe I may have an idea of who he's contracted with,] Xaphan said mysteriously, clearly angling for Leon to perk up and eagerly ask about what he knew. Instead, Leon remained stoically silent as he waited for Xaphan to continue. Hurriedly covering up his disappointment in Leon's muted reaction, Xaphan explained, [I'm not overly familiar with darkness demons, but this one I think may have been held in *that place* where I had been imprisoned for so long...]

Leon's hand paused as he wiped down his cuirass, his helmet already cleaned and polished to a near mirror shine. [You think this guy stayed in Aeterna after the fall of my clan?] he asked.

[Hard to say, really,] Xaphan replied. [*That place* held five demons. I and two others refused the contracts offered by your clan. The last two, however, agreed to the proposed contracts, leaving *that*

place before I was summoned—though not before their auras had fully dissipated. I recognized that power, it was from one of the demons that had been subordinated to your clan!]

Leon frowned quite deeply. [That seems like an odd coincidence,] he said.

[Maybe, maybe not,] Xaphan replied. [He was summoned here once before, and like all powerful organizations, your clan had a strong and efficient bureaucracy, from what I could tell. I wouldn't be surprised if records from this darkness demon's summoning survived, and he has been summoned again— or at least contacted.] Xaphan's tone was confident and didactic, like the demon was explaining something obvious to an ignorant child.

[This sort of thing happen often?] Leon asked.

[There are two ways to summon a demon,] Xaphan gleefully explained, [The first and most common way is to try and contact the Void without direction, a feat which requires no small amount of blood, in the hopes that a demon is paying attention. The more blood used, the greater the chance of attracting a powerful demon.]

[Ugh,] Leon groaned. The depths some would sink to for a quick boost in power... was something he felt that he couldn't really judge, given his own demonic pact.

[The second method is a bit more *involved*. It requires knowledge of the demon's name, and not the name we give to outsiders, but the one that we pick for ourselves, much like the human Mana Glyph. A demon can always hear you when you invoke their name.]

[You were summoned because my clan knew your name, right?] Leon asked.

[Indeed,] Xaphan answered, his tone a curious mix of pride, shame, and anger. [To be a Lord always has its perks and drawbacks, and the fame it brings sits in both camps. A clan as powerful as yours eighty-thousand years ago would have had no trouble finding the names of Demonic Lords to try and tempt into slavery...]

[About this shadow demon,] Leon said with a look of absolute death on his face, [do you have any tips for how to deal with it?]

[Looking for vengeance, huh?] Xaphan observed, noting the killing intent that had been slowly seeping into Leon's aura since he had woken up and the look on Leon's face when he asked the question.

[That thing and the rotten leech that bears its power poked at things they shouldn't have,] Leon said. He only had to remember the illusion within the darkness and his heart rate would spike. He put so much strength into his hands that it was as if the rag he was using to wipe down his armor were Bran's throat and the pressure that created made his cuirass slide right out of his grip. Leon took a deep breath to calm himself, then said, [I would *very much* like to be the end of them, or the vampire, at least.]

[I suppose that depends,] said Xaphan, [how are you doing on finding that diamond and those sapphires?]

[I received a reply from Elise a week or so ago,] Leon explained. [She's going to arrange for the documents to be sent to me from Teira authorizing Ajax to enter my vault and retrieve the gems. He'll then send them to me.]

[And how long will that take?]

[A matter of weeks,] Leon informed.

[Not *too* bad,] Xaphan said before descending into a frustratingly long silence.

This silence was long enough for Leon to finish with his cuirass and move on to his gauntlets. [And the shadow demon?] he demanded, his tone sounding far more angry than he intended it to; his anger wasn't directed at Xaphan, after all.

[Ah, right. Well, to combat one Heavenly Element without power of comparable strength, then you'd need another Heavenly Element, don't you?] Xaphan said. [Of course, *my* fire would be all you need, but I suppose I can understand your reluctance to use it when amidst your comrades—wouldn't want them struck blind at the sight of the magnificent power I've bestowed upon you, after all.]

[Lightning is a Heavenly Element,] Leon said, picking up on Xaphan's obvious lead.

[Indeed it is,] Xaphan replied. [Sounds like you have all you need, then.]

[I was hoping for something a little more specific than, '*Just use your magic!*'] Leon said, putting on his best slow-witted dunce voice for his Xaphan impression.

[There isn't a hell of a lot else to it,] Xaphan insisted, [You have to use the power you possess to resist the power that is used against you! With the strength of the Thunderbird, there shouldn't be any power that can ensnare your mind for long!]

Leon sighed in exasperation. [No enchantments you can give me? Defensive wards? Not even the tiniest little spell that might help?]

Xaphan went silent for a long moment, and Leon could almost hear the demon's mouth turning down into a profound frown.

[I guess not,] Leon said provocatively. [I guess shadow demons are the be-all and end-all power, greater even than fire, if an exalted Lord of Flame can't even figure out a way to counter their magic...]

[Oh, don't even start with me, boy,] Xaphan said through gritted teeth. [I have left beings of such power that you would *worship* the ground they spat on lying dead at my feet! This shadow demon is *nothing* to me!]

[You sure about that, demon? From the way you've just been talking, it seems like you can't think of anything that could harm this thing...]

[Your damned clan tried for *years* to break me!] Xaphan furiously roared. [Through all the tortures, indignities, and other such *persuasions* they subjected me to, they *never* broke me! But that creature whose pawn you now face prostrated himself before the Storm King and swore himself to your clan! Such a petty and low creature isn't even worthy of comparison to me!]

Leon smiled and whispered, [Then prove it.]

There came a sound from his soul realm, a deep and guttural rumbling, almost as if Xaphan were growling at him like an animal. Leon could feel the demon's rage and knew that he'd at least succeeded in that goal.

Several seconds later, he felt a familiar pain between his eyes as knowledge of three different enchantments and one spell were forcibly implanted into his mind.

It took a few moments for the pain to recede, and once it did, Xaphan snarled, [These will break the dark power of that vampire, assuming, of course, that you don't fuck them up when copying them down...]

And with that, the demon fell back into silent meditation. But Leon wasn't concerned about that; he gleefully closed his eyes and began to examine the enormous glyphs that were now fixed into his mind, setting aside the few pieces of armor that he had yet to completely clean for the time being.

—

Alix woke up not long after noon, and when she left her room, she found Leon hunched over the table in the living area with hundreds of sheets of spell paper all around—some of which practically buried Anzu who was asleep next to Leon on the couch. So transfixed was he in his work that Leon didn't even notice Alix exit her room.

The squire walked over to her knight, not making any attempt to keep quiet in the process, and looked over Leon's shoulder to see what he was doing. Upon every sheet of spell paper, like the ramblings of a madman, were drawings of the same runic glyphs over and over again. Alix might have thought this odd had she not seen this sort of thing when Leon practiced his enchanting skills and worked on growing his supply of fire spells.

What she did find odd, however, was the look of utter concentration on Leon's face. Even when he studied other enchantments or when he was immersed in his training, he wouldn't be so taken with his work that he'd fail to realize that she'd approached.

So, looking to make sure Leon was all right, Alix bent over the couch, resting her hands on the back cushions to make a depression that she didn't think Leon would be capable of missing, and asked, "How's it going?"

Leon just about leaped out of his skin he was so startled. He didn't cry out, at least, but he did turn and glare at Alix and said, "Would it kill you to make some noise?"

Alix smiled cheekily back at him and said, "It might, best not to take the chance!"

Leon sat back into the couch to calm his racing heart and to comfort Anzu who had bolted upright when Leon jumped and thrown sheets of spell paper everywhere.

"So, everything good?" Alix asked again.

"Everything is fine," Leon said.

"Been doing this since we got back?" Alix curiously inquired. The sheets of enchantments and spells were dense with runes, and she couldn't make heads or tails of any of them.

"I have," Leon affirmed. "These are going to be my weapons, should that vampire come back..."

From his tone, Alix felt like Leon fully expected and even anticipated Bran attacking again.

"He's a seventh-tier mage," she said in a flat tone. "He almost took you, His Highness, and over a dozen other knights apart the last time you all fought!"

"Next time will be different," Leon said with a dark look. "Next time, I'll be ready."

Alix shivered when Leon said that, as a wave of killing intent washed over her. She knew that it wasn't directed at her, but it still felt like she had been dunked into a barrel of ice, and her hair stood on end.

"Do you think you could take your mind off of it for a while?" she asked, quickly composing herself.

"This is important," Leon said, turning back to the sheet of spell paper that was in front of him.

"So is food and rest," Alix shot back. "You need time for recuperation!"

"That vampire won't wait," Leon responded.

"And you'll be killed in an instant should you be dead on your feet when he comes back," Alix responded.

Leon sighed and sat back. He'd been training for more than six hours straight, and he'd been concurrently practicing the enchantments Xaphan had given him for about half of that time.

"Besides," Alix mentioned, "you should give your hand a bit of a rest, let your muscles relax, and come back ready to write more!"

Now that she mentioned it, Leon did notice now that his work-trance was broken that his writing hand was remarkably sore.

"You... may have a point," he conceded. He released as much magic power as he could to relieve the pain, but that didn't amount to much since he'd trapped the lion's share of his power in his bones. Even hours spent writing hundreds of magic glyphs wasn't going to stop him from attempting to ascend to the sixth-tier as soon as possible.

But that also didn't mean he didn't need some rest. In fact, this brief lull in his work was helping him to realize just how tired he truly was.

Leon glanced up at Alix, who was standing over him with her hands on her hips and staring at him like he was an obstinate little brother, not her direct superior. "I *suppose* I can catch a bit of rest," Leon reluctantly said, almost all of his killing intent vanishing under Alix's chastising gaze.

'But not for long...' he thought as a flash of that demonic illusion passed through his mind. *'I'll be ready for you, Bran, and next time you're not walking away, no matter what magical tier you may be...'*

Chapter 236: War Council

Two days after the evacuation of Florentia, Trajan called all of his command staff for a meeting to keep everyone coordinated. This amounted to the three senior diplomats of the Diplomatic Corps, the three Legates in charge of each of the combat Legions at the Horns, the thirteen other Legates in charge of logistics and administration, and the twelve sixth-tier knights in Trajan's personal retinue. Each of these

commanders brought their senior-most Tribunes, averaging out to about three or four apiece. The Legates sat in the chairs in the dark hall, while their Tribunes stood behind them.

Above them all, Trajan sat cross-legged on the floor of his raised dais, just out of the spotlight that illuminated the entire thing. To his side were a half dozen of his own senior Tribunes, along with Leon who had been in the midst of training when the order to assemble for this meeting was given.

In fact, the only high-ranking knights that were missing were those who represented the local fleet. The Legate in charge was still extremely upset at Trajan's handling of his refusal to leave without express permission from the Consul of the Gulf, and he declined to attend this meeting out of spite. Trajan needed those ships, though, and he intended to pay another visit to that particular Legate when this meeting was over.

"All of our trebuchets have been fully checked and stocked," one of the Legates reported. "The supply of spells and other munitions have also been inventoried, and we have enough to fire continuously for hours if need be."

"And the construction?" Trajan asked, turning his eyes to another Legate. The Bull's Horns were almost always in a state of maintenance and construction, and one of the biggest reasons it had taken more than two days to get the fortress prepared for the siege was taking down all of the scaffolding and setting up temporary fortifications where needed.

"All civilian equipment has been dismantled and removed," the Legate quickly responded. "All three walls are intact and ready. The moat, on the other hand..."

"It wasn't completed?" Trajan inquired.

"No, Your Highness," the Legate replied. "In fact, we've barely gone deep enough to qualify as a ditch on the northern third."

"Unfortunate," Trajan whispered. "But no matter. The Horns have stood in various forms for centuries without a moat, it'll survive this war without one, too. How about deployments?" His eyes now fell upon Minerva, who was sitting closest to him.

"The 19th Legion has taken over watch duties on the walls," Minerva informed the Prince, while the Legate that led the 19th nodded in confirmation. In addition, each shift has been doubled, and the local garrisoned forces have moved to defend Ariminium."

"Good," Trajan all-but-whispered. There weren't many concerns that the land-locked Talfar army would come at them from the river, but there was always the possibility, so the thousands of less-skilled garrison soldiers that were normally stationed between the Horns were sent to bolster their comrades defending on the southern-side of Ariminium.

"The 21st Legion has assembled in the Northern Horn, while the 23rd is in the Southern," Minerva continued. "Should there be any attack, we can have the entire wall reinforced in minutes, while also assembling a force that can sally out if needed."

"How about food and water?" Trajan asked of yet another Legate.

“Not a problem, Your Highness,” the Legate said with a smile. Trajan wasn’t surprised; this wasn’t going to be a complete siege, so getting food and drinkable water wasn’t going to be an issue. Still, it would’ve been negligent of him not to confirm it. “We’ve already received confirmations that food and additional weapons from all over the Eastern Territories have been sent,” the Legate said, “but even without all of that, we have enough supplies in the city to last for more than a year, even with the population of the city.”

“There’re still thousands who have begun to flee,” Minerva mentioned. “The gates out of Ariminum are clogged with people, and nearly half of the civilian ships in the port have left.”

“That was always going to happen,” the Legate said. “No one wants to be in a city that’s under attack, even with the presence of such strong defenses as the Horns possess. Still, I don’t expect more than ten percent of the city’s population to leave, which means there will still be more than enough trade to augment our current supplies.”

“Our supplies will hold out, correct?” Trajan asked, cutting both of his subordinates off to get them back on track. It was the choice of the civilians whether or not they would stay, after all, and he wouldn’t force them to leave or stay unless the situation demanded it.

“Yes, Your Highness,” the Legate answered.

“Then, for now, that’s all that matters,” Trajan said. He was confident that the city would be fine.

Trajan then glanced over at Aquillius and the other two senior diplomats who managed relations with Talfar and Samar.

“We’ve yet to receive any official word back from Pretani explaining the actions of their Prince,” Aquillius stated.

“But we’re sure that it’s Prince Owain leading them?” Trajan asked, to which Aquillius nodded.

“This army came from Briga, the capital of the province Owain was assigned to govern,” said Fonteius, the senior diplomat assigned to Talfar. “There’s no question that it’s Owain that’s in charge. Or at least, *officially* in charge...”

“Explain,” Trajan said, his expression making it clear that he didn’t appreciate Fonteius pausing for effect in this situation.

“There are at least two Marshals within that army, Your Highness,” Fonteius stated. “Bran, with whom Your Highness has been ‘acquainted’, and a man named Arthwyn, a sixth-tier mage assigned to Briga a few decades ago. By all accounts, it seems that these men are the two who are actually giving out the orders within that army.”

Trajan nodded in acknowledgment, then back-tracked to an earlier point that had caught his attention. “You said there has been no *official* word from Pretani,” he said to Aquillius, “what about *unofficial* word?”

Instead of answering, Aquillius turned to Fonteius and silently indicated for him to speak.

“My contacts within Talfar’s Elder Council have expressed some shock that Owain has done this, Your Highness, it’s been made clear to me that this wasn’t a sanctioned invasion,” Fonteius explained.

“That *would* explain the lack of a formal declaration of war,” Trajan muttered to himself.

Hearing him, Aquillius added, “And why we have yet to receive any word from Queen Andraste herself that might explain her brother’s actions, formal or otherwise.”

“Any word from the Samar Kingdom about this whole mess?” Trajan asked of the final diplomat as he fought the urge to sigh.

“No, Your Highness,” the diplomat said, though Trajan hadn’t been seriously hoping for them to do anything.

‘Let’s see if that continues when trade along the Tyrrhenian River is cut off,’ Trajan thought to himself with a slight hint of schadenfreude. With Florentia occupied by the Talfar army and the main trade route to the center of Aeterna cut off, Trajan fully expected the Samar Kingdom’s economy to suffer, and for them to start putting diplomatic pressure on the Talfar Kingdom to at least pull back from Florentia.

Trajan then turned his attention to Constantine, the sixth-tier knight he placed in charge of the forts and barricades between the walls and the Talfar camp.

“Has their army finished amassing?” the Prince solemnly asked. If it had, then they would have little time left to prepare, but if the enemy army was still in the process of marching from Briga to their camp, then they still had options to be proactive in their defense.

“There are still large units trickling in,” Constantine said, “but for the most part, their barracks outside of Briga seem emptied.”

“Has your initial estimation of their size changed any?”

“No, Your Highness, it remains around two hundred thousand, though it appears that at least twenty or thirty percent of that is still slowly making its way toward their camp.”

“Then we still have time,” Trajan said with a smile.

“Are we going to attack them, Your Highness?” Minerva asked, a smile of anticipation briefly flashing across her lips.

“Not an all-out assault,” Trajan said, “I don’t want to attack a numerically superior enemy while they hold that hill they’re encamped on, especially not when they have a seventh-tier mage at the ready who can tear apart our infantry formations with abandon. No, before we even think of assaulting their camp, we need to deal with that blood-sucker first...”

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The meeting was over, and the Legates had departed to see to Trajan’s commands. He trusted them to be ready at sundown for his plan. While he was waiting for them to finish, he had invited Leon back into one of his living rooms to talk.

“How are you doing?” he asked seriously as he gazed out of the window at the Talfar army camp in the distance, as he had done countless times over the past few days.

"I'm fine," Leon said. "Looking forward to my part in the plan," he said, relishing the thought of facing Bran again.

"You're not worried about being paraded before a seventh-tier vampire?" Trajan asked, fighting back a smile.

"It's hardly like I'm going to be alone," Leon said, cocking his eyebrow knowingly. "Besides, I've been studying up on some things that should help in this regard..."

"What sort of things can a fifth-tier boy barely out of childhood do against a seventh-tier vampire?" Trajan asked with an amused tone.

"A few spells," Leon answered as he waved his hand and caused a sheet of spell paper to appear on the table in front of him.

Trajan walked over to examine it. He wasn't much of an enchanter, but even he had to admire Leon's work; the inscribed spell was incredibly intricate, with runes spiraling out from the central nexus of no less than fifteen runic circles—primarily made up of light and lightning runes—forming small glyphs that in turn formed even larger glyphs, that then formed the entire spell.

"Did you come up with this?" he asked in amazement, half thinking that the spell must've come from whatever Leon had been taught of his family's magical arts.

"I did not," Leon admitted, "but I did make some small tweaks here and there to make it last a bit longer, though it might've weakened the spell a tad."

"Well, it just so happens that I know a master enchanter that can give this a look and maybe provide a little constructive criticism," Trajan said with a smile as he pulled an onyx plate out of his chest pocket that Leon recognized. Set in the center of the plate was the radiant red ruby that housed the magic body of Caecilius, the founder of the Bluefire Guild.

"What do you want?" Caecilius disrespectfully asked. He'd been almost entirely silent in the weeks since his guild's disbandment and the ruining of his life's work. He was understandably—in Trajan's opinion, at least—bitter and resentful toward the Prince, as it was Trajan's order that destroyed his guild.

"I want you to examine this spell that Sir Ursus created," Trajan said, a hint of dangerous killing intent entering his voice.

Leon's heart began to subtly beat faster. To his understanding, the spells Xaphan gave him weren't specifically demonic, but he would still prefer if Caecilius didn't take too close a look at the only one he'd managed to inscribe so far.

"Why should I?" Caecilius sullenly asked.

Trajan smiled, and his killing intent grew more intense as he said, "Because if you don't, then I'm going to rip your magic body out of that ruby and sell it off, leaving the last remnant of your guild to the mercy of whatever intrepid merchant buys it from me."

If Caecilius could pale, he would've done so. As it was, Leon thought he saw the ruby dim just a little bit, but he couldn't be sure.

"V-very well," Caecilius sputtered, trying to save face. "I will lower myself to examining this amateur spell!"

Trajan was delighted, though more for getting one over on Caecilius, Leon guessed. The Prince was likely quietly furious that even after promising his advice and support, Caecilius had offered neither for weeks.

The ruby didn't need to be held over the spell or anything, as even when he existed merely as a magic body, Caecilius still had access to his magic senses. Leon felt his skin subtly crawl as a wave of magic washed over him, emanating from the ruby. Caecilius did as he said he would and took a look at Leon's work.

And yet, he was quiet for a long time. Trajan understood that the dead man would need some time to examine the spell, but he quickly ran out of patience.

"Well?" he demanded.

"This spell..." Caecilius quietly whispered, "where did you learn it, boy?"

"There a problem?" Leon asked. He kept his face stoic, but inside his heart rate skyrocketed.

There was a long and nerve-wracking pause as Caecilius again examined the spells, during which Leon struggled to maintain his stoic expression.

Finally, the dead mage said, "No... It's just... spectacular..."

"High praise, indeed," Trajan said, smiling at Leon.

"Thank you," Leon said as he allowed himself to relax just a little. "Will this spell block a dark mage's magic?"

"I can't see any reason why it wouldn't," Caecilius conceded.

"Good," Trajan said. "How many of these spells do you have?"

"About a dozen," Leon replied. "They'll last about five to ten minutes apiece."

"That'll be more than enough," the Prince said with a vicious smile. He didn't let on that much, but he was almost as eager to kill Bran as Leon was, and that was what the plan was designed to do.

'Tonight, that gutter leech dies,' Trajan thought to himself as he remembered the sixth-tier knight that Bran had killed in Florentia. *'No more of my people are going to die as sacrifices to whatever vile beast he worships!'*

Out loud, though, he said with a pleasant and almost fatherly smile, "Go home and get some rest. I have a feeling it's going to be a long night."

"Will do," Leon said, rising from his seat. He didn't intend to rest much. Rather, he was going to keep building his magic body. He wanted to take every possible opportunity to work on ascending to the sixth-tier, that he may finally speak to his ancestor face-to-face and learn exactly what it meant to inherit the Thunderbird's blood.

Chapter 237: Arthwyn's Nightmare

The acrid stench of smoke filled the air, and Arthwyn could hear the pleading of dying Talfar soldiers in the distance. Above that, though, he heard the sounds of clattering armor and the beat of battle formations.

Briga was on fire, and the Legions of the new Bull King were pressing further into the city. Block-by-block they had pushed, seizing the outlying residential districts and the college district in less than three days. The market district fell the following day, and half of Arthwyn's eight hundred man battalion had fallen with it.

He could still see the faces of the warriors under his command when he was given the orders to retreat by his Warrior-Chief, a woman named Aeronwen. His battalion had occupied a caravansary that had been converted into a field hospital, and there weren't enough litters, carts, or other carrying devices to bring the hundreds of wounded Talfar warriors with them. To retreat from the hospital would mean abandoning them to the Legions.

Arthwyn had given his orders. He tried to take every man and woman that he could as he retreated in an attempt to both protect his people and to follow his orders, but carrying the wounded slowed his battalion down, and the Legions caught up. In the end, the wounded had to be abandoned anyway, and half of Arthwyn's battalion was dead, dying, or captured trying to prevent it.

Now, the tattered remains of his battalion had linked up with the last few thousand warriors in the city that remained, following the King's orders to delay the advancing Legions by any means necessary. The last district that had yet to fall was the noble quarter, which had been walled off from the rest of the city and built upon a hill. The wall was mostly ceremonial, meant to segregate the nobles and the province's governor from their lessers, and not actually meant to defend against a determined and organized foe; it was only a matter of minutes, a few hours if they were lucky, before the Bull's Legions penetrated it and began their final push into Talfar's last stronghold in Briga.

"I'm sorry about your guys," Aeronwen whispered to him as they gazed out from the top of the stairs that led up to the governor's palace. As she turned her eyes toward him, he was struck with her beauty, as he had been so many times before. Her eyes were so dark as to be almost black, but when the light caught her in the right way Arthwyn could see within them a hint of green. Her long auburn hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail, and she had the single blue stripe along the side of her head that signified her descent from the Royal Family.

She was of the highest noble class; not a Princess, she was too far removed from the main royal line for that title, but she was still a distant cousin of the reigning King. And Arthwyn couldn't help but love her. She was captivating, able to speak with confidence about almost anything, and she was intelligent, with her tactical acumen being the only reason why it had taken the Bull's Legions so long to seize the city in the first place.

But right now, with all the death they'd seen and their enemy almost upon them, Arthwyn couldn't even bother to be as nervous around her as he usually was.

"It's my fault," he quietly replied. "You ordered us to go, and if I had followed that order from the beginning..."

"We're going to lose this city," she stated matter-of-factly, and Arthwyn felt his heart sink into his knees. "There's no way around this," she continued, "any army near enough to come to our aid has been obliterated, and we're down to six mauled battalions. The enemy is at the gates, and those gates are weak."

"We'll make them pay for every inch with their blood," Arthwyn vowed.

Aeronwen smiled at that. Arthwyn was only of the fourth-tier, and the enemies that were arrayed against them not only numbered in the hundreds of thousands, but they even possessed several seventh-tier mages. Even she was only of the sixth-tier, and she wasn't feeling so bold.

Still, she chuckled and said, "I think we can do that if all of the rest of our people are as determined as you are."

Again, she turned her beautiful eyes toward Arthwyn and her almost-perfectly heart-shaped face broke into an unabashed smile.

'Now or never,' Arthwyn thought to himself.

"M-my Lady," he said, the nervousness in his voice finally breaking through his anger, fear, and frustration, "is there... Is there any chance that we..."

She cut him off by placing her finger across his lips. "Shhh," she cooed, "Let's save that conversation for later. This isn't really the most... *idyllic* of circumstances for such talk, is it?"

Her eyes locked onto Arthwyn's, and he hardly even realized that she had taken a step forward and was almost pressing herself against him, practically shouting at him with her body language that his feelings were reciprocated.

There were a few other Talfar officers around keeping an eye on the assembled warriors formed up around the noble estates, but there was so much going on that few were paying any attention at all to Aeronwen and Arthwyn's display.

Just before Arthwyn was going to respond, a tremendous crash resounded from the central gate and their moment was over.

Aeronwen instantly switched into commander mode, shouting orders to form up before the main gate several hundred feet in front of the governor's palace. The exhausted Talfar soldiers had been resting in formation, so all they had to do was to rise and raise their weapons. They had no cavalry to speak of and were relying almost entirely on a few thousand pikemen and a handful of archers. Still, Aeronwen hadn't the intention to surrender.

Arthwyn, as one of the last surviving commanders, ran forward to take his position at the front of the tattered remnants of the Talfar army. Just a few months before, they counted in the hundreds of thousands, and now, after the failed invasion of the Bull Kingdom, the last few battalions that could be spared were escorting the King back to Pretani while Arthwyn and his own were expected to die to buy time.

Aeronwen took a position next to Arthwyn. "We're going to survive this," she whispered.

Arthwyn was about to say that he hoped she was right, but he held himself back from saying something so cynical. Instead, he answered her with, "Yes, we are..."

The gate in front of them shook and trembled with repeated blows. The wall had no towers, no ramparts, and little else in the way of practical defense, leaving the iron gate the only real obstacle the Bull had to overcome. The gate only took a few more hits to finally rip free of its struggling hinges and collapse backward.

"Archers!" Aeronwen shouted, and the couple hundred archers they had left loosed their prepared arrows into the hole the gate had made.

However, what was on the other side was a wall of crimson shields, each emblazoned with the eponymous golden bull of the Bull Kingdom. The arrows bounced off these shields without leaving so much as a single scratch on any of them, and the Legions advanced. The ground shook beneath their footfalls, and the soldiers behind Arthwyn and Aeronwen began to shake with it.

"Steady! We can do this!" Aeronwen shouted, trying to strengthen their nerve.

"No, you can't," came a deep and rumbling voice from behind the first company of Legion soldiers. The Legion soldiers halted barely more than fifty feet from the front ranks of the Talfar army, and two men jumped from behind them to land right in front of their shield wall.

The first was a man that Aeronwen knew well. She'd accompanied the King west and fought against this man several times. He was tall, but not overly so, and had pitch-black hair, sharp and distinct facial features, and a long straight nose. His eyes were as black as his hair, and his broad-shouldered armor had been etched with a feather pattern. The tabard he wore over his chest had been adorned with the sigil of a silver and blue eagle with wings spread.

The second man had similarly black hair, but he was built like an enormous tree, with arms like the ancient branches of a mighty and venerable oak. He was taller than his comrade, standing at almost seven feet tall, he had a handsome face covered in black stubble, and in his right hand, he held a gigantic single-bladed ax that he balanced over his shoulder.

"This will be the last chance you have to surrender," the first man said in a much softer and smoother voice than his tall and broad frame implied. "If you don't take it, then you will be killed to a man."

"Why don't you try it, Kyros, see where that gets you?" Aeronwen shot back. From her soul realm, she drew a long halberd and pointed the spear-tip at the Archduke.

From his own soul realm, Kyros drew a plain-looking bastard sword that sparked and glittered with currents of silver-blue lightning magic. "I shall take you up on that challenge, then, my Lady," Kyros said with a smile.

And then he was upon her. In a flash of lightning and with thunder resounding in the ears of everyone present, Kyros closed the distance between himself and Aeronwen and got within range of her halberd. Aeronwen barely had time to react, but she still just barely managed to avoid instant death by twisting her body out of the way. As it was, Kyros' sword raked across the side of her ribs, slicing through her armor of enchanted blue scales and cutting through more than half of the layers of linen in her gambeson.

She pivoted and countered with a slash of her halberd, trying to catch Kyros in the back of the knees with her ax-head, but the Archduke only had to take a step back and raise his forward foot, and her weapon tasted nothing but air.

It took a few fractions of a second longer to get her halberd back into position than she would've liked, and the lightning mage wasn't going to waste those moments. Lightning coursed through his body and he slammed his shoulder into Aeronwen's body, knocking her to the ground. Kyros then brought his sword down upon her, but an ice spike burst from the ground which, while almost instantly destroyed by the Archduke's silver-blue lightning, afforded Aeronwen the time to get out from underneath Kyros and regain her footing.

'Time to do away with honor,' she thought. It was clear that Kyros wasn't playing around, and she didn't have any other mages to support her as she did at the Bull's Horns when last they'd fought. She shouted to the soldiers behind her, "Charge!!!"

Kyros lifted an eyebrow in surprise, but a quick bolt of lightning that exploded out of his front leg showered the handful of nearby pikemen in smaller arcs of lightning, killing them instantly and dissuading any others from attacking the Archduke. That didn't stop them from charging the Legion front lines, though, and in seconds the situation turned from a single one-on-one duel to two formations of soldiers, each with the weight of thousands, crashing into each other.

Aeronwen and Kyros re-engaged each other, but Arthwyn lost sight of them in the melee. Eager to do his own part and hoping that the death of a high-ranking soldier would give the Legions pause, he charged at Kyros' comrade, the massive ax-wielder. He trusted that the soldiers around him could give him enough support to not be immediately killed by this man, but the man quickly proved to Arthwyn how foolish and reckless he had been.

Arthwyn didn't even see the man move before he felt an indescribable pain in his left shoulder. It took a moment for his vision to catch up, and when it did Arthwyn saw the man's ax head buried almost to the haft in his shoulder, his metal and linen armor little more than paper before the strength of his opponent. With the last shred of rationality that he possessed, Arthwyn tried to slash at the other man with his sword, but his weak blows barely even made a sound against his opponents' armor.

"NO!" came a terrible screech, and the ax-wielder had to jump back to avoid a barrage of ice spikes, leaving his ax embedded in Arthwyn's shoulder.

Arthwyn fell to the ground, his vision growing dark. Every blink seemed to him to last a lifetime, and each time he opened his eyes, dozens more of his countrymen had fallen. The Talfar pikemen simply couldn't break the Legion shield wall and were being cut down in droves.

A few faces here and there Arthwyn recognized. Most of these faces belonged to members of his own battalion. Ewyas, who had only just gotten married several months before the war began, had been skewered upon a Legion sword. Meilyr, who had fought alongside Arthwyn since the latter had signed up for the Talfar army, had been nearly decapitated. Cadwaladr, who Arthwyn remembered as always one of the bravest of his soldiers, who always insisted on being the first to jump into battle, had finally paid the price for his bravery when a Legion shield bash knocked him off his feet and he was trampled to death by both formations as the battle-line shifted.

However, for all that the battle-line shifted as each formation kept pushing against the other, there was one area that was devoid of people, and that was where Aeronwen was furiously battling both Kyros and the man who had left his ax in Arthwyn's shoulder. Arthwyn vaguely remembered hearing her call him 'Trajan', but he couldn't focus well enough to accurately recall.

Arthwyn fought to stay conscious, to summon some kind of strength to go and aid his Lady, but his limbs refused to move. He saw Aeronwen fighting off both of her opponents with quickly-summoned ice spikes, but it was clear enough to everyone else that Trajan and Kyros were just wearing her down and waiting for her to make a mistake.

That mistake came a few moments later when the fatigue of fighting so intensely started catching up to her, and Aeronwen was unable to react to both Kyros and Trajan at the same time. With a blast of Kyros' silver lightning, Aeronwen fell to her knees, her body scorched and stunned. Trajan, after picking up a sword from a fallen Legion soldier, walked over to her and in one swift motion, removed her head.

The Talfar army broke at that moment. The battle shifted permanently in the Legion's favor, but Arthwyn didn't notice. He could only see the death of his Lady, of the woman he loved more than anything, and then everything went dark.

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Arthwyn awoke to one of his assistants hurriedly shaking him. Seeing the Marshal's eyes open, the assistant said in a voice shaking with panic, "My Lord, the Bull is preparing for an attack! It's soldiers have assembled at the foot of the hill!"

Arthwyn instantly sat up and gave the order for the soldiers to assemble, the cataphracts to mount up, and the chariots to be deployed. When the assistant scrambled out of the Marshal's tent to relay the message, Arthwyn's left shoulder began to throb.

It had been eighty years since Trajan had left that ax in his shoulder, taken the life of the only woman Arthwyn had ever loved, and slaughtered all of the people Arthwyn had come to know in his first real command. He'd been recognized as an officer when Briga had finally been taken, and a Legion medic had saved his life. He was later repatriated to the Talfar Kingdom several months later when the war was over.

And now he was back with a large army, ready to take his revenge. *'Are you out there, Trajan?'* Arthwyn wondered. *'I hope you are... I have the strength to kill you, now, and I intend to use it...'*

Chapter 238: Hunting a Vampire I

Coming off the heels of his nightmare, Arthwyn expected a gargantuan force of the Bull's Legions to be arrayed against him, an army to match that which had pushed back Talfar's previous invasion. Instead, he saw barely even a single Legion's worth of soldiers between the camp and the first several towers in the vale just east of the Horns.

"Is this it?" Arthwyn snorted derisively. "Twenty battalions? This is what you show me?"

The assistant that had woken him felt a brief surge of fear, but it quickly became apparent that Arthwyn wasn't speaking to him.

"I expected more from you, Trajan..." the Marshal whispered.

Arthwyn had fifty thousand professional soldiers and one hundred thousand peasant levies. The levies were still being roused, but most of his soldiers were already assembled, and those that weren't were less than five minutes away from taking their own positions. In addition, Bran's fifty-thousand-strong army—less the couple thousand casualties they had taken outside of Florentia—were holding the city to their south, preventing the Bull from landing soldiers on the banks of the river and flanking the army.

All Arthwyn had to do was point his larger army in the direction of the Horns and keep pushing. Twenty thousand soldiers simply couldn't stand against one hundred and fifty thousand, especially when the latter had the high ground. They could push forward with their weight alone.

Arthwyn almost gave the order to attack, but he paused for a moment as his sixth-tier eyes swept over the Legion positions, searching for Trajan's standard. The Legion had been split into its twenty battalions, each twenty-five soldiers deep and forty across, arranged into two lines and spaced out into a checkboard pattern. And in none of these battalions did Arthwyn see the Prince's banner.

The Marshal couldn't help but be disappointed, but he was sure Trajan was out there somewhere. Even if he wasn't, then he was watching from the walls, and Arthwyn felt that slaughtering one of the Prince's Legions in front of the Prince himself would be a good start to his revenge.

"What's going on here?" came a voice from behind Arthwyn. The Marshal turned and saw Owain driving up in a silver-trimmed blue heavy chariot pulled by a pair of magnificent white stallions, while dressed in silver battle armor encrusted with sapphires that glittered in the moonlight. The Prince was accompanied by four other warriors in his chariot, and half a dozen other heavy chariots similarly staffed.

After spending an almost titanic amount of effort to not roll his eyes, Arthwyn said, "Nothing too concerning, Your Highness. Just a few ants that have to be crushed before we move on to exterminating the rest of the hive."

"That doesn't look like 'a few ants' to me," Owain replied. "Where's Bran? Why isn't his army here to reinforce yours?"

"Marshal Bran is currently maintaining the garrison in Florentia," Arthwyn replied, forcing himself not to speak through gritted teeth. "He's there to keep our flanks secure. Besides, we have no need of his forces to deal with this."

Owain glared at Arthwyn, as the Prince clearly heard the derision in the Marshal's voice. He glanced back at the Legion soldiers standing in the gap between the river and the mountains. They were supported by several four-story towers that were nearby, and he was all but certain that there were mine spells laced throughout the tall grass that his army would have to walk through to challenge them. What's more, their cavalry wouldn't be able to carry out any flanking maneuvers in the narrow pass; their only choice was to attack head-on and break the Legion shield wall.

"We shouldn't attack," Owain said. "Wait until morning. Keep a strong watch going, but ensure that before we attack their position, we get a good amount of rest and a hearty meal."

Arthwyn smiled at Owain in the condescending way an adult would to a toddler and said, "That's not necessary, Your Highness. This situation is completely in hand." Under normal circumstances, Arthwyn might have agreed with Owain to wait and attack on his own terms, rather than taking Trajan's provocation—this one Legion was hardly a threat to the camp as a whole, and they couldn't slip past the Talfar army, either—but with twenty thousand Legion soldiers in front of him waiting to be smashed, he couldn't help himself.

For his part, Owain debated with himself whether or not it was worth it to argue with the Marshal. He was familiar enough with Arthwyn's military record to know that he had fought against the Legions before, though not enough to know the depths of the man's hatred and need for revenge. He had no way to know if Arthwyn's judgment was being clouded by his personal feelings.

'This is his job,' Owain thought to himself. 'This 'strategy' thing really isn't my forte, I should just trust that Arthwyn has this in hand... Besides, if he fucks this up, I can always take actions later...'

And so, with a prominent frown and a great deal of hesitation, Owain decided to let Arthwyn handle the situation while he drove up and down the lines of the army, letting the Talfar soldiers know that their Prince was with them.

—

Following his battle with Trajan and his knights, Bran was far more injured than he would ever admit to, so much so that he had to ambush and feed on several of his own cataphracts as they spread throughout the city in the wake of the evacuation. He had to gain the strength to heal enough so that his soldiers wouldn't see him so vulnerable and undermine his authority.

The Marshal didn't appreciate depleting his own forces in this way as it made him politically weaker, but the city had been almost completely deserted barring his cataphracts after the Bull's Legions pulled out, leaving him with little choice if he wanted to keep from lowering himself to ask for assistance.

He'd spent the next couple of days in a daze, the taste of Leon's blood lingering on his tongue. Every time he consciously thought about the sweet nectar running through Leon's veins, Bran would shiver in want and anticipation, taking an almost perverse glee in the thought of ripping Leon apart and gorging himself on the young man's blood.

Bran delegated most of his responsibilities to his immediate subordinates and withdrew into the largest villa in Florentia—not that he had ever played much of a role in the organization of his forces before this, though he'd never completely shut himself away before. Messages from Arthwyn asking for an update to the occupation of Florentia were ignored. Any questions his adjutants and unit leaders had regarding what they should be doing were paid no mind. He simply holed up in the luxurious villa of a local merchant to finish healing and to fantasize about Leon's blood.

'What makes it so delicious?' Bran wondered for the thousandth time. 'Even Trajan's blood wasn't so sweet. That boy must be descended from something, or have ingested something that changed him on a fundamental level... I should try and take him alive if possible and ask him about it... If it can be replicated in other people, to give them the delicious qualities...'

Unfortunately, Bran knew that if he got so much as a taste of Leon's blood, even just a drop of blood on his tongue, then he wouldn't be able to hold back. He'd drain Leon of everything as quickly as he could like the unabashed glutton that he was.

So taken was he by his fantasies that Bran didn't even notice the extremely loud and slightly panicked knocking at his door. He only noticed that he had visitors when one of his sixth-tier Warrior-Chiefs kicked in his door and stormed through the villa looking for the Marshal.

"My Lord!" the Warrior-Chief said with the intensity of someone trying with all of their might not to shout in anger and frustration.

"What?" Bran asked coolly, the killing intent he emitted at being so rudely interrupted dropping the temperature in the villa almost to freezing.

At the sight of a quietly enraged seventh-tier mage, the Warrior-Chief paled and forced himself to calm down. His frustration with his Marshal had been mounting over the past couple days, since as Bran's second-in-command, he'd had to step up even more than usual to see to fortifying Florentia and organizing Bran's battalions into something that resembled a professional and proficient fighting force, not to mention having to take care of the casualties they sustained in taking the city.

"A Legion has assembled on the plain before the army's camp!"

"Did you see Prince Trajan among their assembled soldiers?" Bran asked, his voice deepening almost into a growl.

"No, my Lord!" the Warrior-Chief replied.

"Then let Arthwyn handle it," Bran said disinterestedly as he lounged back into a couch.

"Then we are to do nothing when our enemy is before us?" the Warrior-Chief asked, his dark eyes narrowing in subdued anger. "Your Lordship should know that your recent behavior is hardly inspiring. More than two thousand of our cataphracts were killed or gravely injured taking this city, and Your Lordship holes up in a fucking villa like a damned vam..." The Warrior-Chief instantly knew that he was about to make a mistake and just barely managed to stop himself from completing the thought, not that Bran cared.

"Like a *what*?" the vampire asked, wrath entering his voice for the first time since the start of the conversation.

The Warrior-Chief was done with his Marshal's seeming laziness and preoccupation. The battalions needed leadership, they needed their Marshal.

"Like a fucking *vampire in its nest*," the Warrior-Chief finished, glaring at Bran in the eye as if daring the Marshal to do something about it.

Most who interacted with Bran on a regular basis would figure that he was a vampire, even if the man himself didn't advertise it. The Warrior-Chief knew what kind of creature his Marshal was, but so long as he had been serving the Talfar Kingdom faithfully, the Warrior-Chief hadn't cared. But his lack of care rapidly began to vanish when Bran locked himself away for days, neglecting his duties.

"You're quite bold, aren't you?" the pale vampire said with a quiet chuckle. As usual, he barely opened his mouth to do so, keeping most of his teeth hidden. That being said, the Warrior-Chief could still see the inhumanely long and sharp canines if he tried to.

The Marshal rose from his couch with a deadly look on his face while the Warrior-Chief summoned his battle-ax. The two advanced toward each other with so much killing intent radiating from them that even the Talfar soldiers waiting outside started to feel their legs turn to jelly. However, right before the two started to exchange blows, they heard the loud blast of a horn from the eastern-most reaches of Florentia.

The two stopped and glared at each other. They knew what that horn meant, that there were Legion ships on the river, and that there were more important things to do. Bran couldn't sit in the villa and lose himself in his fantasies with the Legions so close and Arthwyn not present to deal with it in his stead, and neither could the Warrior-Chief let the rest of the battalions stationed in the city go without proper leadership.

"We'll deal with this little bit of insubordination *later*," the vampire whispered as he smiled at the Warrior-Chief like a shark eyeing its prey.

"Yes, we shall," the Warrior-Chief responded, not backing down in the slightest. *'You've leeches off my homeland for too long, parasite! When we next speak, I'll have the rest of the battalion leaders with me. You won't live through the encounter...'*

The two burst out of the villa, much to the relief of the waiting soldiers. The villa Bran had chosen was at the highest point in Florentia, sitting at the top of a low hill that gave a decent view of the surroundings, and the Marshal and his handful of subordinates could see inching along the river several dozen transports and warships.

"How many ships did we seize?" Bran asked.

"A handful of fishing boats, three small cargo transports, one passenger transport," the Warrior-Chief replied. Left unsaid was the lack of familiarity of the Talfar soldiers with anything to do with operating boats. Everyone present already knew that any boats and ships taken with Florentia would be of extremely limited use to them.

"Then we'll deal with them when they land," Bran said as if it were the easiest thing in the world. "If they land outside the city, they'll be run down by our chariots and cataphracts. If they come close to the city, we can hit them with archers. If they come *into* the city, then we can board them with infantry."

"Your Lordship makes it sound so easy," the Warrior-Chief quipped.

"That's because it *is*," Bran venomously replied, his obvious displeasure at being questioned convincing the other assistants and secretaries around to keep their mouths shut.

"I'll get the cavalry and chariots ready to go," the Warrior-Chief stated. "The Bull would be foolish to try and take the city as it is now, especially with only the three or four thousand soldiers they can pack into those ships."

"You do that," Bran said, smiling at the Warrior-Chief like he was a child playing at war.

The Warrior-Chief left, grateful at the opportunity to get away from Bran's condescending gaze.

Bran deliberately waited until just before he was out of earshot before he remarked to the half-dozen other soldiers outside of the villa, "What a fool. When this war is over, I'm going to hang him from the—"

The vampire suddenly cut himself off. His eyes had drifted away from the Warrior-Chief and back to the ships, and he could see standing by the prow of the lead vessel both Prince Trajan and Leon. He and Trajan locked gazes, both powerful mages easily seeing the other even with more than a dozen miles between them. But after only a moment, Bran broke that little staring contest to glance at Leon; the small taste he'd gotten of Trajan's blood had been delicious, but it was nothing compared to Leon's.

After a minute or so of silent staring which none of the nearby administrative assistants wanted to break, Bran's reason quickly faded away. He saw nothing but Leon, and the vampire unconsciously licked his lips. His shadow elongated and darkened, and he sank down into it as if he were falling into the stone and earth. His injuries hadn't completely healed in only two days, but what was left was only superficial, and the few cuts and bruises he retained weren't going to stop him from trying to sink his fangs into Leon's neck.

Chapter 239: Hunting a Vampire II

There was a palpable feeling of dread that settled over the ship as it departed from Ariminium. Trajan almost had to threaten the fleet's Legate in order to get it to move, but remembering the last time he tried to refuse the Prince, the Legate wisely decided to 'loan' his fleet to Trajan for the duration of the siege. But this tension between the Legate and the Prince wasn't the reason for the dread that the knights aboard the ship felt.

Rather, it was because most of the knights that had fought Bran in Florentia were now about to parade themselves before the city hoping to bait the Marshal into starting round two. There were a few new knights along for the ride—two new Legates, specifically, bringing the force of sixth-tier mages aboard the ship to six—but any enthusiasm they might have felt at being chosen for such an illustrious mission was quickly quashed by the look of fear in the eyes of those who had faced the vampire before.

No one wanted to experience that demonic illusion again, and those that had yet to experience it for themselves weren't keen on their potential first experience.

The only paltry solace any of the knights could find were in the spells that Leon passed out as they boarded the ship. He'd given them some basic instructions for how to use them, but all he could tell anyone about what the spells would do was that they could help defend against and banish darkness magic.

'Delightfully non-specific,' Leon had thought, thinking it best not to explain too much about his spells for fear of revealing where he had gotten them. In that vein, he was gambling on none of the other knights being enchanting experts, but since skilled enchanters were, generally speaking, too valuable to be risked in a combat scenario, he thought it a safe bet.

Once the ship was underway with its other transports and escorts, Leon joined Trajan at the prow of the vessel. The Prince stared at the distant lights of Florentia, silently mulling over the specifics of their plan. The crux of it hinged on two things, that Bran would be in Florentia and would attack them, and that Arthwyn would be too busy dealing with the deployed Legion to render aid to the vampire.

The first was far from guaranteed. Legion scouts had confirmed that Bran's unit of fifty-thousand had occupied Florentia, but no sign of the Marshal himself had been seen since the evacuation. The second wasn't guaranteed, either, as twenty-thousand Legion soldiers wouldn't be able to hold out forever against the main Talfar army.

It was a risky plan, and Trajan couldn't help but second-guess it at every possible opportunity. They had to divert a great amount of their magical fighting potential toward dealing with Bran, compounding their manpower shortage against Arthwyn. With fifty thousand soldiers, most of which were cavalry and chariot units, and the relatively flat ground flanking the river, the four thousand Legion soldiers Trajan was bringing for the mission were in great danger, as well.

However, even if they lost the Legion in the field and all four battalions in the ships, if they could kill Bran, then it would be worth the price. Trajan hated to admit it, but it was true, though he would still do everything within his power to ensure every one of the soldiers he was responsible for made it home safe. He knew this was an unrealistic goal, but he was going to try nonetheless.

But first and foremost, they had to kill the vampire. A seventh-tier mage was strong enough to tear through their battle formations, and without another mage of comparable power to stop him, then the Bull's Horns could very well fall to Talfar's superior numbers, given enough time.

Leon and Trajan stood side-by-side, staring at Florentia as they grew closer. Both men were silent, with the tension in their eyes growing ever stronger the closer the city came.

And then, Trajan stiffened, then smiled. He had caught sight of Bran as the vampire left the villa at the highest point in the city. The vampire smiled, licked his lips, then vanished into his shadow.

"The enemy has seen us!" Trajan shouted back to the knights waiting on the flagship's Heartwood deck.

The knights readied themselves, and the fleet's flagship turned toward the riverbank, followed by the rest of the ships accompanying it. Trajan didn't know how long they had before Bran arrived, but he didn't want to fight on board a ship with its limited space to fight. Instead, the transports disgorged their contents all over the riverbank; four thousand soldiers set up portable spiked barricades they'd fashioned in the previous couple days that would blunt any cavalry charges, tossed out a few caltrops and mine spells, then formed up into a strong three-sided shield wall with the river at their backs.

This left a large open space in the center of their formation, and this is where Trajan, Leon, and the rest of the Prince's knights gathered.

"Come to us, monster," Trajan whispered. The soldiers had gotten set up in a mere handful of minutes, but that was still enough time for the vampire to traverse the few miles between Florentia's outskirts and their position. The Marshal would be on them at any moment.

—

Bran paused for a moment and almost gawked in amusement from the darkness he hid in at the defenses that Trajan had set up. The caltrops almost sparkled in the moonlight, and he could see the magic kicked up by the mine spells as plain as day. None of them would stop him.

But he also knew that they weren't there for him. Even the thousands of Legion soldiers behind the wooden spikes weren't there to stop him. His cavalry was mustering in Florentia and preparing to charge

this position and prevent these soldiers from flanking Arthwyn's troops when the other Marshal engaged the Legion closer to their camp, and these defenses that Trajan had set up were to keep his soldiers from being immediately overrun in the open ground outside of Florentia.

All of this was a clear invitation for Bran to attack. They wanted him to do something rash. They thought themselves ready, but...

Bran caught sight of Leon again with his magic senses, and any composure he had regained in the minutes since seeing him on the ship vanished. He charged through the formation, sliding undetected and unimpeded through the shadows cast by the shield wall.

The vampire's mouth began to water, and his eyes focused on Leon so completely that he barely noticed anything else. He took no notice of the subtle way that Trajan's knights spread out to keep their Prince in the center of their formation, and he barely saw, let alone questioned, why each of the fifth-tier knights had shields. He had eyes only for Leon.

Bran wasted no time. He had to get his teeth into Leon's neck, regardless of the price. As he moved, an illusory Bran appeared behind him, taking form out of the shadows. As expected, all of the knights turned to face their perceived threat, and the real hidden Bran sped forward, eager to taste Leon's blood again. With all eyes turned away, Bran burst out of the shadows, a dark silent specter barely visible in the moonlight, and he reached for Leon from behind...

... and instantly felt the darkness painfully melt off of his skin. The vampire didn't care, though, and he grabbed Leon's neck from behind, intending to seize the young knight and drag him back down into the shadows.

But nothing happened. The illusory Bran he'd conjured dissipated into black smoke and he was left standing in the center of the Legion formation with his hand around Leon's neck and all of the other knights slowly turning to face him.

For a quick second, Bran tried to summon his magic power and to sink back into the shadows on the ground, but every time his magic would dissolve away as soon as it left his body.

"Got you now," came a whisper from Bran's left.

With the vampire unable to run and his defenses lowered, Trajan loomed over him like the embodiment of death. The Prince had already raised his war hammer when Bran's illusion was conjured, and he now brought it down with all of his strength on the vampire.

Bran had a quick choice to make: release Leon, or try to tank one of Trajan's attacks. Darkness magic was not known for possessing strong defensive characteristics, so the vampire could only scowl as his fingers loosened and he threw himself backward, letting Leon go free.

The younger knight immediately spun around, golden lightning exploding out of his body and pursuing the retreating vampire. Bran raised his arms to block and felt his skin sizzle and burn under the heat of Leon's lightning.

But Trajan's hammer strike missed, and Bran only had a few superficial, if somewhat painful, burns.

Bran was given no time to collect his thoughts and analyze what was happening; Trajan followed through his first strike and spun that momentum into another savage blow, while Leon summoned a golden lightning bolt and prepared to hurl it at the vampire. All around Bran, the rest of the fifth-tier knights had raised their shields and were channeling their power into the spells Leon had given them that were attached to the inside face of their shields. The sixth-tier knights charged, hurrying to support their Prince in his assault on the seventh-tier vampire.

There were no more words spoken. They all knew exactly what they had to do, and there was no point in useless banter. Bran dodged strikes from Trajan's hammer and another Legate's spear thrusts, while blades of wind and water ripped at his clothes and Leon's lightning bolts exploded on his flesh.

However, Bran managed to avoid serious damage, and the longer the fight continued, the more time he had to think and realize what was happening. And Trajan knew this, as his expression became more and more wild and desperate with every missed strike. No matter how he shifted the earth beneath Bran's feet, no matter where or when the ground ruptured or spikes erupted toward Bran's legs, the vampire always managed to dodge by the skin of his teeth.

And the more time Bran bought himself, the more the vampire realized that only his ability to vanish into darkness was being affected by whatever it was the Legion knights were doing; the rest of his magical powers weren't affected, though his favored tactic of replacing himself with an illusion while he disappeared was off the table.

The instant Bran realized his options weren't as limited as he first thought, his thin pale lips stretched into an enormous smile, exposing his fangs for all the world to see. As he ducked underneath another of Trajan's hammer strikes and pivoted away from a spike bursting from the ground beneath him, his shadow elongated and separated into five black smoky tendrils.

Three of these tendrils wrapped themselves around the spear-wielding Legate, immobilizing him. This gave Bran just enough of an opening to summon his rapier from his soul realm, dodge out of Trajan's way, and charge at the helpless knight. However, just before he was about to run his rapier through the knight's armored chest, a bolt of Leon's golden lightning ripped through the air and struck the knight. The knight screamed in pain, but Bran was forced back, and his dark tendrils evaporated off of the knight.

Bran glared at Leon, and his remaining two tendrils lashed out at him, rising from the ground like the tentacles of a kraken and striking Leon across the face of his helmet. Leon was sent reeling, while one of the tendrils grabbed his leg and raised him upside down into the air.

But Bran couldn't capitalize on this with Trajan and the other two Legates firing off their magical attacks at him.

And then, the ground began to vibrate and the air was filled with the sound of beating hooves. Bran's cavalry had finally arrived, and the mass of horses and chariots were charging the lines of Trajan's shield wall.

Chapter 240: Hunting a Vampire III

'They just keep coming...' Minerva thought as she stared down at the battle raging below her from a raised observation tower on the wall of the Northern Horn. The Legion lines rippled every five minutes

or so as those soldiers in the front line shuffled back, and those in the second line stepped up. Fighting like this, the 21st Legion down in the vale could fight for an entire day if they had to.

Unfortunately, Minerva could see that the Talfar forces were commanded by a skilled leader, as he alternated charges between heavy cataphracts and teams of chariots. The cataphracts were fairly straightforward, simply charging the lines with the occasional blast of magic from a fifth or sixth-tier Talfar mage thrown in as well. The shield wall held under this pressure, with support from the Legion's own high-tiered mages.

The chariots, however, were much trickier to deal with. Unlike the cataphracts, the chariots didn't coordinate their charge. Instead, they assaulted the lines with individual hit-and-run tactics. Each chariot was pulled by two fast horses and had a complement of one driver, two archers, and a swordsman that acted as the team leader. The chariots could turn on a silver coin, and with their skilled archers, they never directly hit the Legion lines.

Such exceptional mobility and intentional lack of unit cohesion meant that a tactic that might work for one chariot team didn't necessarily work for another, yet the chariots were incredibly hard to pin down and crush all at once, especially for the primarily infantry units of the Legion. A few companies of Legion cavalry had been deployed, but they were there to support the Legion flanks and harass the Talfar units when they pulled back to let another unit take their place.

Fortunately, with the Legion battalions deployed in their checkerboard formation, their line was flexible and bent and flexed as necessary under pressure from the Talfar army. With the Tyrrhenian river on one flank and the Border Mountains on the other, the Talfar cavalry was forced to come at the Legion head on, and since they were unable to decisively pierce the shield walls, their units were vulnerable to fire from Legion archers in nearby defense towers and the back ranks of each Legion battalion.

All of this meant that there was a slowly but steadily growing pile of dead warriors, horses, and destroyed chariots in front of the Legion battalions that helped to blunt the Talfar cavalry's repeated charges. Unfortunately, the Talfar cavalry wasn't completely ineffective, as Minerva could see the scrambling of Legion medics behind the battalions, as well as a worrying amount of Legion red mixed in with the piles of dead in Talfar blue.

And the Talfar infantry hadn't even entered the battle, yet, though Minerva honestly didn't think that they'd be deployed until the Legion had been forced back to the fortress walls. The strength of the Talfar army lay in its cavalry, not its infantry, whereas the opposite was true for the Bull's Legions.

'They sent their best to fight with our best,' noted Minerva. She trusted Dame Saufeia, the Legate in charge of the 21st Legion, to do her job well, and so far, she hadn't been disappointed. And so, confident that the Legion would hold for as long as it needed to, she turned her attention further south, toward the mass of people outside of Florentia illuminated by the occasional bright flash of lightning or gout of flame.

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The mine spells, caltrops, and barricades did their jobs perfectly; the cataphracts charging the shield wall around Trajan's team were almost stopped cold before they even landed a single hit on the Legion shields. However, after the majority of the first thousand or so cataphracts were thrown from their

horses and injured or killed, about a dozen fifth and sixth-tier mages on horseback or in chariots began to ride parallel to the Legion shield wall, using blasts of fire, wind, and ice to clear away the mine spells, while the Talfar earth mages sent tremors through the ground that buried most of the caltrops.

Within a matter of minutes, the way was clear, and Talfar lances struck Legion shields soon after.

But, while important, this development wasn't the immediate priority for those in the center of the formation. Bran could barely keep himself alive under pressure from Trajan, the Legates, and Leon. Every time he managed to grab someone with his dark tendrils, a bolt of lightning from Leon would free them. Every time he attacked Leon, more lightning would erupt from the young man's body, obliterating his tendrils and forcing the vampire to expend additional magic power creating more.

It was all the vampire could do to evade all of the attacks directed his way. He knew he was truly in bad shape when he began to run low on magic power. He was a newly ascended seventh-tier mage, with little more power than Trajan possessed at the height of the sixth-tier, and if he didn't realize before that he couldn't win an endurance fight with four sixth-tier mages—and Leon—then he certainly did now.

But, finally, after twenty minutes of fighting, Trajan growled his first words toward Bran.

"You've come a long way from your home, monster! It's a shame you had to travel so far just to fall here!"

This bit of speaking gave Bran a brief respite, as Trajan couldn't attack with nearly the same ferocity speaking as he could when he was silent and focused.

Despite the corner he'd been forced into, Bran laughed in Trajan's face and roared, "You aren't enough to defeat *me*! I will kill all of you! I will drink from your bloody corpses! Resist as you will, but in the end, you are nothing but my food! My fuel to ascend through the tiers of magic and achieve Apotheosis!"

With a sudden and unexpected burst of strength and power, Bran forced back both Trajan and the spear-wielding Legate, conjured five more shadow tendrils, and thrust all five of them into the body of the Legate attacking him with water blades. There was some resistance as the Legate's magic defended his body, but then Bran lunged forward with startling speed and stabbed the Legate with his rapier.

Fortunately, the Legate managed to dodge out of the way of the killing blow, but Bran's weapon bit into his left shoulder. His concentration was disrupted, and darkness seeped into his body.

An instant later, Bran had to dodge out of the way of one of Leon's lightning bolts, but the damage was done. The Marshal waited several more seconds, and then with a single thought, he formed the darkness that infected the water Legate's body into spikes which burst out of the man with the sickening sound of tearing meat.

The Legate was nearly ripped in half, his torso hanging onto his abdomen by only a few remaining strands of skin.

Despite their experience in fighting and killing, even the hardest of knights that saw this faltered for a moment. This lapse in focus didn't even last a second, but it was enough for Bran.

The vampire was dead-tired. The magic within his blood felt thin, and he guessed he only had enough mana left for two or maybe three big moves. He immediately used one of these chances when the ring of Tribunes that were using Leon's spells to anchor him outside of the shadows was disrupted with his brutal killing of the water Legate. Bran called upon his power and, with as much force as he could, whipped his dark tendrils across the shields of the Tribunes, knocking many out of position and even throwing several Tribunes to the ground. The vampire then followed up with another sweep, his shadows slicing through the throats of four Tribunes, instantly removing them from play.

Trajan howled in rage. Seeing so many of his stronger, more promising knights fall to Bran wasn't something he was going to take with calm serenity. No, the Bull Prince only saw red, and he charged at Bran, wildly swinging his hammer like a man possessed.

Bran felt Trajan's almost overwhelming killing intent and managed to throw himself to the side just in time to dodge the first strike, and he only evaded the next handful by virtue of being a darkness mage with speed far superior to what little speed Trajan's earth magic could bestow. But he could see Trajan's muscles swell up beyond what was human, making the already hulking giant of a man seem like a furious and vengeful god of war, and Bran knew that there was enough strength packed into each of Trajan's hammer swings that if even one of them connected with him, he would be finished.

But with the circle of Tribunes now permanently broken, he could utilize his darkness magic to its fullest extent. The vampire called his shadows together, and he began to sink into the ground. He was almost out of magic power, and his frenzy at seeing Leon had worn off. He knew that he'd get another shot at the young knight and that it would be wiser and more prudent to retreat for the time being.

And then Leon shouted, "Your Highness!"

The sound of the young man's voice caused Bran's entire body to shake and his thoughts to momentarily be filled with nothing but the taste of Leon's blood. Fortunately for the vampire, Leon's shout also grabbed Trajan's attention, causing him to not slam his hammer down into Bran's head the moment the vampire hesitated.

But Leon wasn't just shouting for his health, rather the plan's last contingency was now in place. Each of the five largest warships in most of the fifteen fleets in the Bull Kingdom had two tremendously powerful weapons, a pair of metal cylinders about fifteen feet long with a hollow rune-inscribed cylinder mounted on a rotating steel platform.

These were the Flame Lances, a new prohibitively expensive weapon developed by the Bull Kingdom's navy. They melted boulders and fired the resulting glob of molten stone at whatever was unfortunate enough to raise the ire of their ship's captain. Trajan didn't like these weapons as, despite their power, they also had a limited effective range of seven hundred feet to two miles. Anything closer than that range, and the lances were terribly inaccurate—which given the number of Legion soldiers around, made Trajan hesitant to authorize their use—while at ranges farther than about two miles the molten rock would lose most of its punch, falling apart into a rain of rapidly cooling pebbles moving too slowly to do much damage.

Despite his personal dislike of the weapons, Trajan had been attempting to get a few installed on the walls of Ariminium for years, but the navy wasn't so keen on sharing its toys, especially since not every fleet had Flame Lances installed into their capital ships. Both fleet Consuls had stalled as much as they

could in delivering the Lances to the Legions, leaving the only Flame Lances Trajan had any access to on ships in a fleet that didn't technically answer to him.

But the Flame Lances weren't all the Legion brought; Lapis erupted out of the deep river where it had been lying in wait for Bran to be drawn in and exhausted, and the earth beneath everyone's feet shook with every one of its steps like it was the end of days. It roared something in its harsh, grinding language, and charged forward to support Leon. The fighting area was still small enough to limit Lapis' fighting options, but Bran wouldn't be able to do much against the stone giant.

Bran's eyes widened in shock and fear at the arrival of the giant and the glowing Lances on the ships. He accelerated his attempts to escape, but he knew that even if he made it into his shadow, he wouldn't be impervious to magical attacks. He braced for the strike from the Flame Lances.

Trajan, after leaping backward, bellowed, "FIRE!"

And three ships answered with titanic, thunderous blasts, and six molten boulders the size of five full-grown men crossed the hundreds of feet between the Lances and Bran in an instant and exploded on the ground all around him. Lapis then surged forward and launched itself into the swiftly solidifying rock and hit the ground, causing it to quake and rend, opening large fissures in the earth.

The last two warships, a bit late with the preparation of their Flame Lances, decided not to waste the magic power they had already committed, and fired their payload of four more molten boulders into the mass of Talfar cavalry that had the Legion soldiers encircled, killing a couple hundred Talfar cataphracts and charioteers.

With the use of these deadly weapons, the Talfar cavalry hurriedly began to retreat from Trajan's battalions and the ships behind them, while the Legion shield wall reinforced the weak areas that had taken the most casualties and the team of knights in the center of the formation pulled themselves back together and advanced on the spot where they had last seen Bran.

"Anyone see that leech get hit?" asked the wind Legate. Silence was his reply.

Leon frantically searched through the small crater illuminated with dull red lava that was quickly dimming, projecting his magic senses into every nook and cranny that he could see. He wanted to see Bran's dead body, to see the vampire that had invaded his mind and used the images of those he cared about against him dead at his feet.

Trajan and Lapis did likewise, though the giant, being hardier than the others, got more into the search, sifting through the molten stone with its fingers as if it were cold sand.

"Did we get him? Is he dead?" asked the spear-wielding Legate, and everyone else waited for an answer. Their tension rose with every passing moment, but no one could see Bran's corpse.

"He couldn't have gotten away..." muttered one of the Tribunes. "That much firepower coul-" Before he could finish, a massive pillar of smoky pitch black darkness shot up from the ground and impaled him through his midsection, raising him into the air like he was some kind of morbid decoration.

The Tribune screamed in pain, but his screams were quickly and cruelly cut off when the pillar of darkness retracted as fast as it had appeared, dropping the Tribune to the ground with a sickening crunch.

“You’ll have to try harder than that if you want *me* dead!” came the sounds of Bran’s fading voice.

Trajan had to almost bite his tongue to hold back his howl of rage, and the rest of the knights expanded their search, looking for the vampire. Leon even conjured a golden lightning spear and readied himself to hurl it if the vampire showed himself.

But he didn’t. They waited for five more minutes for the vampire to strike again, but their vigilance wasn’t rewarded. The vampire had run away, possibly injured but definitely alive.

Their mission had failed.

Trajan’s face twisted in anger and frustration, but there was nothing he could do. The Talfar cavalry were regrouping, but with the nearby ships, they didn’t dare to attack again. Trajan could see miles in the distance that the 21st Legion wasn’t holding as strongly as he would’ve liked, either. It was time to call it a day. They had done what they could, but they still failed.

With a great deal of hesitation, Trajan shouted, “... Back to the ships! Back to the Horns! Back to the ships!”

His order was relayed all down the shield wall, and the Legion soldiers began to orderly file back toward their transports.

“We’ll get you next time,” Leon quietly vowed, his look of hatred easily matching Trajan’s. “You won’t escape us *again!*”