

## Storm King 251

### Chapter 251: Continued Assault III

As the siege towers drew closer to the outer-most wall, the Legion trebuchets redirected their fire from the hordes of Talfar soldiers to these siege engines. As one round from a trebuchet exploded over one of the siege towers, though, it became clear that the wood and iron they were made of had been enchanted to increase their chances of actually reaching the wall.

This had its limits, of course, as the siege tower closest to the river was bombarded by the fleet and disintegrated under the combined blasts of the navy's Flame Lances. The Legion kept firing, trying to bring down more of the towers as they slowly lumbered forward.

There wasn't much Leon or the soldiers on the walls could do in this case. They could only keep shooting arrows down at the Talfar soldiers closer to the wall and hope they weren't around when Talfar's trebuchets responded.

Leon kept his eyes open for any higher-tiered Talfar warriors he could find. Every time he saw one, the image of Bran appeared in his mind, along with his father, Elise, and Valeria. His already exceptionally strong killing intent soared to new heights, but it was lost in the titanic aura of thousands of mages killing each other. Still, his arrows rarely missed, and many third and fourth-tier Talfar mages disappeared in white-hot fire. He even managed to shoot four fifth-tier mages.

And yet, it was difficult to feel like he was making a difference when there were just so many Talfar soldiers assaulting the walls. No matter where he looked, there were no shortage of targets.

"DOWN!" the Tribune roared as another Talfar trebuchet hit the gatehouse with a wind spell that created a fiery cyclone on the roof, catching fourteen Legion soldiers within. The heat baked the rest of the soldiers, but the enchantments in the gatehouse quickly kicked in and suppressed the fire, leaving only the fourteen caught in the fire with any injuries.

But there wasn't any time for anyone, save for a few medics and healers, to pay attention to the injured, as the siege tower bound for the gatehouse had just closed to within two hundred feet.

"BRING THAT FUCKING THING DOWN!" the Tribune shouted, pointing at the siege tower.

All of the soldiers redirected their arrow fire toward the levies moving the tower, but it continued to creep inexorably closer, despite the trail of corpses left in its wake. Leon even fired a few of his white-fire arrows at the tower, but to no effect.

"Shit..." Leon heard the Tribune mutter. "That tower's too close for the trebuchets to do anything about! Prepare for melee-combat!"

Leon grimaced, fired one more arrow, then switched over to his sword. He then called upon his lightning magic and waited. Behind him, a shield wall began to form, while the Tribune took a position at his side. The two knights exchanged a nod of solidarity as the siege tower closed to within one hundred feet.

As they watched and waited for the siege tower to arrive, several dozen knights and their men-at-arms appeared from the gatehouse's lower floors and reinforced the shield wall. All down the wall, at every

point where a siege tower was about to arrive, similar scenes were playing out, with knights that were just waiting for the walls to be breached rushing in to aid their Legion comrades.

Finally, the siege tower came to a halt about fifteen feet from the gatehouse. It cleared the top of the gatehouse by about that much as well. The drawbridge attached to the top was made entirely of some kind of steel, though Leon wasn't able to tell what kind. Something specially enchanted to make it fire-resistant and probably to lighten it somewhat, he guessed.

The bridge suddenly fell, hitting the top of the battlements with a gigantic crash, and a dozen Talfar warriors moved to spill out onto the gatehouse roof.

This was the moment Leon and the Tribune were waiting for. Before these Talfar warriors could press too far forward, they were met with an exploding bolt of lightning and a powerful gust of wind that killed four, injured three, and hurled the remaining five off the bridge to fall to the ground sixty feet below.

And then a gout of flame burst from the tower and rocketed toward Leon and the Tribune, but Leon raised his hand and the incoming fire halted like it hit an invisible wall.

"Huh?" said a confused voice from the other side of the bridge. "Ahh, so you're a fire mage, as well! What a *fantastic* twist!"

A man then jumped out of the siege tower and landed in the center of the bridge. He was youthful in appearance, with jet-black hair, lake-blue eyes, and a soft and round face that looked like it had never known a time when it wasn't smiling. He wore armor made of interlocked silver plates, larger than the scales in more conventional scaled armor, but giving off a similar aesthetic. These plates were etched with intricate designs that flowed and curved around and through themselves, while his larger shoulder plates were covered in some kind of black fur. Finally, around his left bicep was a band with a dozen bright blue feathers attached that flared out in an ostentatious display.

"I have the honor of being Tuathalan, a Warrior-Captain in the s-" the man began, but he was interrupted when Leon ignored him, took a step forward, and stabbed forward with his sword, firing a bolt of golden lightning so bright it appeared almost white out of the blade toward Tuathalan.

The Warrior-Captain yelped and tried to side-step out of the way, but the bolt grazed his right side, ravaging his right arm and shoulder with arcs of lightning. Tuathalan's armor blocked much of the damage, but enough lightning got through the enchantments that the Warrior-Captain couldn't help but scream in pain as his flesh burned beneath the armor.

The bolt exploded in the back of the siege tower, killing three more Talfar soldiers, but Tuathalan didn't care about that, all that was on his mind was the superficial damage that Leon had just done. He glanced up to scream and rage at the young knight, but Leon hadn't just waited around for the Warrior-Chief to recover, he'd leaped into the air and hit the bridge with an enormous chunk of his available lightning magic coursing through his legs. The bridge lit up as innumerable arcs of lightning burst out of Leon's legs and surged through the siege tower.

There were a couple hundred Talfar soldiers within the tower at the time, and about a quarter of them were killed instantly as soon as the lightning rushed into them through the tower. None of the rest walked away without injury.

*"You honor-less bastard!"* Tuathalan roared as he lunged at Leon with his own sword.

Leon brought his own sword up to block and deflect the Warrior-Captain's weapon, then swiped at the man with his off-hand. Tuathalan didn't see what Leon did, and kept pressing forward, trying to use brute force to knock Leon off the bridge. However, Leon quickly fell back away from the Warrior-Captain, to Tuathalan's confusion. About two seconds later, he found out why when he felt a searing pain in his right side; Leon had planted a white-fire spell on the Warrior-Captain's armor while he had been distracted with his attack.

There was a brief moment of panic as the number of burns on his body increased, but Tuathalan was, after all, a fire mage, and he quickly doused the white-fire before it could truly erupt and turn him into a pillar of flame. But again, Leon didn't simply stand there and wait for the Warrior-Captain to respond, and he lunged forward and slid his sword in through a gap in Tuathalan's armor at his armpit, between the sides of his ribs, and straight through his heart.

Tuathalan could only stare at Leon in disbelief, at both his mortal wound and the fact that Leon had been fast enough and dishonorable enough to inflict it. Leon's lightning burst out of his sword, ravaging Tuathalan's body until even his eyes went red with blood and his soul realm shattered.

"Fuck honor..." Leon muttered as he pulled his sword from the dead man's body and kicked the corpse off the bridge to the ground below.

Leon then turned his attention to the soldiers that had just climbed past the bodies in the siege tower to reach the top. When he made eye contact with those in front, it didn't matter that his aura faded away into the torrent of roiling magic that filled the battlefield, his killing intent was felt and the few Talfar soldiers in front froze up in terror. They were only a trio of third-tier mages, men who couldn't hope to stand against Leon even if he lacked his armor and sword.

The young knight advanced down the bridge, further terrifying the soldiers within the tower. One of them unconsciously began to backpedal as fast he could, while the others tried to raise their guard, but their hands shook so much that they almost lost hold of their weapons.

Leon didn't even spare the sword strikes it would've taken, he simply reached out and stuck a small stack of white-fire spells on the first man, who couldn't even move to stop him, and then kicked him backward into his teammates.

The legs of these Talfar soldiers had turned to jelly, and the force of one of their own being thrust back into them was too much for them to bear. All three soldiers fell backward down the stairs of the siege tower and then exploded in stunning white fire. The inside of the siege tower was turned into a searing oven, cooking the rest of the soldiers within to a crisp.

The siege towers were specifically enchanted to resist fire-based attacks, but that was only the thin metal plates and wooden panels on the outside. The inside of the towers hadn't been given the same treatment, and as Leon's white fire burned, the unenchanted wooden support beams, floors, and stairs within the tower rapidly disintegrated. As the structure weakened and the mages inside died, the enchantments began to fail, until even the armor glowed red from the heat and the wood panels burst into flame.

Leon darted off the bridge and back onto the gatehouse roof and watched with a satisfied smile hidden by his helmet as the siege tower began to sag inward, and then completely imploded on itself, crumpling to the ground in a heap of cinders, slag, and the ash of incinerated Talfar infantrymen.

"Holy shit..." the Tribune muttered as he watched the siege tower collapse.

The rest of the soldiers in the shield wall stared at Leon in disbelief at what he had just done, making Leon himself relatively uncomfortable.

"Let's get back to shooting, guys," the Tribune quickly ordered, bringing the focus of his battalion back to the battle at hand. As the shield wall dissolved and the soldiers returned to shooting arrows, the Tribune quietly clapped Leon on the shoulder and said, "Good work. Damn good work."

"Thanks," Leon bashfully replied.

Unfortunately, while the destruction of the siege tower was a feat worthy of celebration, it also had an unintended side-effect: it opened the gatehouse back up for bombardment from Talfar trebuchets.

As soon as the Tribune heard the faint whistling in the air, the tell-tale sign that a trebuchet had launched something at them, he paled and shouted, "DOWN!!!"

Unlike the previous shots, this explosion spell hit its mark, detonating directly on the roof of the gatehouse. The enchantments in the fortified building kept it intact, but forty Legion soldiers were caught in the blast and died instantly. The heat and force of the explosion injured everyone else, throwing them back into the battlements or other soldiers. A couple soldiers were even thrown off the roof, though they at least landed on the wall just twenty feet below them.

"Ughh," the Tribune groaned as he picked himself up and surveyed the damage. The roof was intact, but it was strewn with blood, bodies, and ash. "Everyone get up! Get downstairs!" he shouted. Now that the Talfar trebuchets had them dialed in, they couldn't stay on the roof. They'd have to retreat down into the safety of the gatehouse and keep shooting from the arrow loops.

As those soldiers that could walk groggily picked themselves up and began to move, Leon rushed over to where Alix and Anzu had been. Three Legion soldiers had been thrown on top of them, crushing them between the bodies of the soldiers and the battlements. With no small amount of panic, Leon almost threw the bodies of the soldiers off his friend and his griffin.

"What... was that...?" Alix muttered.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?" Leon asked in a demanding tone.

"Umm... No..." Alix murmured, clearly a little dazed from the explosion.

Anzu, on the other hand, made it clear that he was in a great deal of pain. He shrieked and whimpered as he tried to stand, but his right wing was bent at an unnatural angle and it seemed to Leon that he couldn't put too much weight on his right front paw. The griffin also had a few charred feathers and patches of fur, but those at least seemed superficial.

Still, Leon only had to take a single look at the injured Anzu, and his vision went red. He felt his heart rate almost double in anger and his hands shook with the urge to smash his fists into the person responsible. He was lucid enough to briefly contemplate why he didn't feel this way about the Legion

soldiers, but he didn't know their names, their faces were partially obscured by their helmets, and he honestly didn't care that much about the Bull Kingdom. But as Anzu kept feebly trying to stand and falling when his broken leg gave out, Leon stopped thinking about why he cared about his fluffy griffin more than he did about the dozens of dead soldiers.

"Alix! Alix!" Leon shouted, bringing Alix back to her senses.

"Ah! Sir... what just... what was that?" Alix asked as she shook her head to try and clear her muddled thoughts.

"We got hit by a Talfar trebuchet!" Leon impatiently responded. By now, more than half of the soldiers had made it downstairs, most carrying the injured and dead. "Listen to me, you need to take Anzu downstairs! Stick with the Tribune, don't take any risks!"

As her head cleared, Alix blinked at Leon and asked, "You're not coming with us, Sir?"

Leon frowned, then quickly glared out at the smoke several miles in the distance, where he knew the Talfar trebuchets were firing from. "... I'm not," he quietly responded.

"Then... what are you going to do?" Alix asked as she pushed herself back to her feet.

Leon was silent for a long moment, before replying, "... Something stupid... Just get Anzu downstairs!"

And with that, the ring on Leon's finger flashed with magic power and the light began to bend around him, making his body fade from view.

"Leon!" Alix shouted in panic. She reached for Leon in an attempt to keep him from leaving again, but her fingers touched nothing but air. The images of Sam and everyone else she knew back at Fort 127 who were killed by Hakon's Valemens flashed through her mind. Leon had gotten her through that ordeal, and when he was gone, she couldn't truly feel safe. This wasn't much of a problem when she was in the Southern Horn and he was off doing something for Trajan, but when he was doing something dangerous, especially in the middle of a war, she couldn't help but start to panic.

Alix almost ran after Leon, but the continued whimpering of Anzu gave her pause. She glanced back at the griffin, who was just as terrified at seeing Leon disappear as she was, and she realized that she couldn't just leave him alone.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she scooped Anzu up in her arms—something which wasn't that easy to do, given how much he'd grown—and took one more look east. She desperately hoped her friend would return, that he wouldn't leave her and Anzu alone, but there wasn't anything she could do about it now. With an overwhelming feeling of helplessness, Alix followed the last few soldiers downstairs to relative safety.

## **Chapter 252: Something Stupid**

*'I shouldn't be doing this...'* Leon thought to himself as he leaped down to the ground from the roof of the gatehouse on the east side of the wall. He knew that what he was doing was reckless, stupid, and irresponsible, the exact kind of thing that Trajan had been trying to ensure he would never do after his exploration of the stone giants' Cradle.

But every time he thought about turning back, he thought about Anzu's broken leg and wing. To a lesser degree, he thought about the rest of the Legion soldiers, but if he were honest with himself he was going because those trebuchets had harmed his little griffin.

His anger quickly cooled as he ran eastward, passing by the slowly advancing battalions of Talfar infantry. He wasn't acting out of white-hot, uncontrollable rage, he was quite in control of himself. He was choosing to do this, despite knowing how dangerous and reckless it was.

Not once did his footsteps falter from indecision or hesitation. He still had more than three hundred of those spells sitting in his soul realm, along with more than a thousand arrows, and he planned to use them.

*'For Anzu,'* Leon thought. As his thoughts began to wander a little, he thought again of Bran. The vampire was dead, but Leon still desired catharsis. A wicked grin spread over his invisible face, and he added, *'And for me as well...'*

There were large gaps between the Talfar lines as they congregated around the remaining seven siege towers—one tower had been destroyed by the fleet, another was destroyed by Legion trebuchets, and the third met its destruction at his hands with white-fire spells. These gaps in the Talfar line made it almost trivially easy for the invisible Leon to pass them by.

A few times, Leon was tempted to strike at some of the vulnerable Talfar commanders he saw in chariots, who believed themselves safe behind thousands of Talfar warriors, but he knew that such an act would likely end with his death. He didn't just want to cause severe damage to these people, he wanted to live to see them defeated.

When he reached the back of the infantry lines, he saw both Owain and Arthwyn in front of the cavalry, watching the battle continue with an almost surreal calm. The Prince was quiet and stoic, projecting an air of confidence for the benefit of his warriors. Arthwyn, on the other hand, frequently turned to several of his adjutants and whispered a few words while gesturing at various points of the walls.

One of these adjutants stood out to Leon. He, after receiving some instructions from Arthwyn, took off running to the east.

Leon's smile grew predatory; he guessed that this man was on his way to at least of the Talfar trebuchets that were still lobbing enchanted projectiles at the wall. Leon followed this man's path through the cavalry, who were standing in a tight, unmoving formation. He had to slow down quite a bit as he passed through here, as even brushing up against any of the chariots or cataphracts would instantly reveal him in the middle of the Talfar formation. Fortunately, the path that the adjutant took went through several battalions, which had fairly sizeable gaps between their formations.

Still, there were a few close calls from restless horses almost bumping into him, and several careless cataphracts letting their lances rest in places that he almost tripped over. By the time he reached the back of the cavalry formations, he was about as tense as he'd ever been, but it wasn't time to relax. Behind the cavalry were several long columns of people ferrying water, delivering messages, and performing other support tasks.

Fortunately, there weren't many of them relative to the size of the army, and Leon found it fairly easy to slip past. However, getting past the cavalry and then the supporting servants slowed him down enough that he lost sight of the adjutant he'd been following.

Leon pressed on, regardless. The trebuchets were somewhere in the smoke behind the Talfar army, and he was determined to find them. He figured it shouldn't be that difficult, as trebuchets were hardly silent and needed plenty of people to operate and guard them, not to mention more support servants bringing them additional ammunition.

With this in mind, Leon ran into the smoke.

It didn't take long to find his first target, all he had to do was follow the faint sounds of shouting, creaking wood, and ropes snapping taut and he found a trebuchet right away. It was being operated by about a dozen people, from mages maintaining the enchantments that gave the weapon enough power to hit the wall from miles away, to lower-tiered servants that were actually manipulating the machinery. In addition, there were about half a dozen guards posted, but they were all weaker than Leon, their leader being the strongest at the fourth-tier.

Leon slowed to a halt and unlimbered his bow. It was time to cause some damage.

He summoned a handful of arrows from his soul realm, but he didn't rush into things, he took a few minutes to watch the people around the weapon and plan how he was going to do this. Once he chose his targets, he fired four arrows so quickly that the fourth target barely even had time to react to the first man dying before an arrow pierced his throat.

Leon had shot and killed four of the men operating the trebuchet, and there was a moment where everyone else froze in confusion. However, as soon as Leon's next handful of arrows began to kill the guards, everyone knew that they were being attacked, and they scrambled for cover. One guard attempted to blow a horn to signal their situation to the main army, but Leon quickly silenced him before the horn touched his lips.

In less than two minutes, Leon had killed half of the people around the trebuchet, but the other half had managed to take cover and he had to move in order to get a good shot on them. He had no qualms about doing so, and he started falling back into his hunting habits from back when he lived in the Northern Vales. He moved as silently as a man could, and with his ring of invisibility and expert archery skills, the remaining men around the trebuchet were killed in short order.

No signal had been given, Talfar had no idea that one of their most potent siege weapons had just fallen silent; the smoke concealed the trebuchets from them, as well.

Still, Leon knew that there would be spotters and runners who would eventually find out what he had done, but he didn't care. He didn't intend to leave anything behind for them to use, anyway. He slapped about half a dozen white-fire spells onto the trebuchet and activated them, causing the weapon to burst into a huge bonfire. Leon immediately turned to rush back into the smoke to find his next target, but before he'd even managed to do that the trebuchet had already been rendered into ash and charcoal.

It was fortunate for him that his spells didn't break his invisibility when he summoned them. This possibility had occurred to Leon several weeks after he mastered storing objects in his soul realm, so he'd rigorously tested it once he found the opportunity.

His invisibility would break upon the slightest contact with any other magical object that he hadn't been in contact with when the invisibility enchantment was activated. Those magical objects he was in direct contact with, however, would be made invisible along with him, and he was happy to learn through his experiments that this included objects in his soul realm. When he summoned his spells, his invisibility was thus maintained.

The next trebuchet he came across about five minutes later wasn't actually firing. A lucky shot from one of the Legion trebuchets had hit nearby and the Talfar trebuchet had been almost completely flipped over by one of the dozens of rock spikes that the Legion spell had created. The dozen and a half or so people assigned to the weapon were busy trying to pull it off the spike and making little progress, from what Leon could tell. They needed an earth mage to come and gently lower the spike—and thus, the trebuchet—back to the ground, but almost all of the mages capable of elemental magic were fighting near the wall, leaving it to the operators to try and right their siege weapon.

*'Perfect,'* Leon thought with a smile of gratification on his lips. Because of their work, most of the warriors and servants around the trebuchet were bunched up, making them perfect targets.

Leon summoned a pair of arrows with different attached spells. The first he handled with great care as he nocked it to the bowstring and drew it back. He aimed with even greater care, then loosed it into the center of the working Talfar warriors.

There was a brief delay when it hit the ground, causing some of the warriors and workers to glance over in curiosity. Before any of them could react, though, it detonated in a bright orange fireball, consuming nearly all of the Talfar warriors around it. It died down just as quickly, but only three servants around the trebuchet were left alive.

Leon's smile grew even wider. This had been the first time he'd used this spell, and it had worked perfectly. His second arrow was new as well, and potentially even more dangerous. He quickly fired it at the trebuchet and stood back to watch the result.

The arrow hit the frame near the base of the weapon. A moment later, an explosion of sparks and golden lightning shattered the trebuchet into dust and tiny splinters of wood, while the bodies of the dead and injured around it burst like overstuffed sacks of meat from the force of the blast.

An intense feeling of elation welled up within Leon at seeing the success of his spells, at the obvious symbol of his greater skill in enchanting than he possessed even just a few months ago. The fire spell, especially, as while the lightning spell was one he'd managed to reproduce from reading books he'd brought out of his family's archives in Teira—this one was called Heaven's Wrath, a bit too grandiose of a name for Leon's liking—the fire spell was one that he'd created himself. It wasn't especially unique in performance, there being no shortage of fire spells that create big fiery explosions, but this was still one that Leon had created after experimenting with some of the enchantments that Xaphan had taught him.

There was a brief moment where Leon wondered if the demon was watching. He didn't think so, Xaphan was even more obsessed with regaining his lost power than Leon was in gaining power, even after the illusions Bran subjected him to. He wondered if the demon would take any pride in Leon's progress.

But then, Leon wondered, *'Why in all the hells am I hoping for that guy's attention? Not like his acclaim or acceptance would change anything...'*



He quickly shook his head to rid himself of this obviously heretical notion of somehow impressing Xaphan and ran off back into the smoke. He had more trebuchets to attack and a limited amount of time to do so before the Talfar army realized what was happening and mobilized its cavalry to protect their siege weapons, which would prevent him from continuing his assault. There was no time to wonder if Xaphan was impressed or not.

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Arthwyn grimaced as he watched another siege tower fall. It seemed that the Bull's traps weren't exclusive to the vale, as once the tower had been rolled into position, it burst into flame from a fire enchantment beneath it. All down the wall, in fact, small enchantments were activating. None were particularly big or devastating in themselves, but...

*'... There are so damned many of them...'* Arthwyn thought.

He'd lost half of his siege towers, and his casualties were easily over ten thousand, perhaps as high as twenty or twenty-five. And yet, he didn't order his warriors to retreat. Casualties were high, but they were gaining ground in some places just as they were taking losses in others.

Case in point, one of the towers on the wall had been seized by his warriors, and three more were being bitterly contested. If he held out long enough, the army would be able to take the first wall in short order, and then they could move on to the second.

"Start bombarding the second and third walls," he calmly ordered. His order was relayed and the signals were given, and the Talfar trebuchets began to alter their targets to the walls further west. There were too many Talfar warriors close to the first wall for them to continue firing, anyway.

However, Arthwyn noticed that the trebuchet barrage seemed a bit light, there weren't as many explosions as there should've been. He waited a little bit longer, but when it became clear that there were some trebuchets that simply weren't firing, he quickly ordered for a report on their status.

Less than ten minutes later, his assistant that had been dispatched to make that report returned, breathless and pale.

"My... Lord," the man gasped as he fought to breathe and report the disaster at once.

"What is it?" Arthwyn asked, his voice measured and even, though he could tell that the news wasn't good from the look on his assistant's face.

"The tre...buchets... have been... attacked!" the man choked out.

"What?! By who?!" Arthwyn shouted.

"Don't know..." the assistant responded, finally settling his breathing down after his hurried ride across the vale. "But we've already lost five of our trebuchets!"

"What did you say?" Owain demanded, just picking up on the seriousness of the conversation.

Arthwyn ignored the Prince and immediately ordered, "Send out squads of cataphracts! Find who's been attacking our weapons and kill them! And send more out to protect those we have left!"

Talfar only had fourteen trebuchets and losing five at once was an enormous loss.

“Emrys!” Arthwyn shouted, calling for one of his most trusted Warrior-Chiefs.

“My Lord,” the man responded as he rode up in his chariot, stopping just a few feet away from Arthwyn.

Arthwyn quickly relayed what was happening, and added, “I’m giving you command of this. Protect our weapons!”

“I won’t fail you,” the sixth-tier Warrior-Chief responded, his expression grave. He knew the importance of this task, and he wasn’t going to take it lightly. He immediately had his chariot turned around and returned to his battalion. His one hundred chariots then slowly began their exploration of the vale.

Somewhere in there, shrouded in smoke, was an enemy strong or numerous enough to hit their vulnerable siege weapons, but not so much that they dared to attack the main army in the rear. But Emrys wasn’t going to underestimate his foe.

*‘I’ll find you, whoever you are, and when I do, it will mean your end,’* the Warrior-Chief thought with determination.

### **Chapter 253: Switching Targets**

The first indication that Leon had that Arthwyn had cottoned on to his actions was the sound of several chariots driving in his direction. He stopped and crouched low to the ground. He was still invisible, but he wanted to present the smallest possible target, nonetheless.

A few seconds later, three light chariots materialized out of the smoke. Each was pulled by a pair of horses and had a team of three warriors within—one driver, one archer, and the chariot leader, a swordsman.

All were clearly on high alert, but Leon was tempted to attack them anyway. With three well-placed white-fire arrows, he felt like he had a good shot at taking them down.

He thought better of it, though. A group of three chariots wasn’t an attractive enough target for him to risk exposing himself over, so he watched with some hesitation and regret as they drove past him and vanished again into the grey smoke.

But even though he didn’t take the opportunity, those chariots still told him all he needed to know about his current situation: even if they hadn’t detected him, specifically, Talfar had still noticed his actions and were taking measures to find him and probably to protect their remaining trebuchets.

Now the question he needed to answer was whether it was worth going after the rest of Talfar’s siege weapons. He still didn’t know how many there were or their locations, he was basically just wandering the vale and keeping his ears open for the tell-tale signs of a trebuchet firing at the walls. That being said, he was still only wandering the western portion of the vale, as even trebuchets reinforced with magic had restrictions on their range. About three miles east of the first wall was Leon’s guess, though he had no real evidence for it apart from where the other five trebuchets he’d already destroyed were.

He stayed still for a few more minutes debating with himself the virtues of continuing on his reckless venture. There were so many things he had yet to find out, so many enemies he had to uncover. He had

so much he had to do that he hadn't even started yet, and he was risking it all just to seek vengeance for what Bran did to him, and for what Talfar had done to Anzu.

Elise's face flashed through his mind, as it had so many times over the past week, except now, for the first time since Bran's illusion, it wasn't twisted with scorn and derision. Rather, he remembered her smile, the way her gorgeous red hair seemed to sparkle in the morning sun, and how, just like him, she struggled to wake up in the morning and always preferred lazing around in bed when she could get away with it. If he continued, he'd be caught sooner or later, and he'd never see her again.

But then his thoughts turned to Alix and Anzu. On one hand, he didn't want to leave them alone, but he also wanted to do everything he could to keep them alive. Charles, Henry, and Alain, too. He hadn't had much time since the Talfar army had appeared to spend time with his friends, but they were here as well, defending Ariminium and the Bull's Horns with everything they had.

A griffin that depended on him like a child depends on its parent, and four friends on the road to knighthood, fighting against a foreign invader. And he still had the ability to seriously bloody that invader.

Leon pressed on. He hadn't made his decision quite yet, but he was certainly leaning toward turning back. And yet, he had to see for himself how guarded the remaining trebuchets were. He was still invisible, after all, and with the magic he possessed, he could remain so for hours more, boosting his confidence in ways that only invisibility could.

After taking a few hesitant steps, Leon broke out into a slow jog, or about as fast as he could move while being both utterly silent and on alert for any patrolling chariots. And, soon enough, he heard the sounds of a large group of people and the snapping of rope, and he knew he had found another trebuchet.

He crept closer, keeping his eyes and ears open for any alerted Talfar warriors. As he approached the trebuchet, though, he found that it was much more heavily guarded than the previous ones he'd attacked; instead of only half a dozen guards that weren't paying attention, Leon found about two dozen cataphracts surrounding the trebuchet just waiting for anyone to come and make trouble. What was worse, he could sense at least two fifth-tier mages among the cataphracts, and if they let off even a single blast of elemental magic in his direction, his invisibility could be easily stripped away.

This was too much force for him to feel comfortable taking on. Of the bigger explosion spells that he'd used on previous trebuchets, he only had a single one left, which he wanted to save for a dire situation. The same with his lightning spell, he had but one remaining.

He reluctantly turned around to start making his way back toward the Bull's Horns.

And then he stopped. Something indisputably stupid and reckless had occurred to him, but it could also potentially put more of a dent in the Talfar army than whatever losses they would sustain today might.

All of Owain and Arthwyn's best warriors were participating in the assault on the walls, and the vast majority of their levied peasants were with them, leaving only as many people behind to garrison Florentia and their camp as they thought they needed. In the case of their camp, Leon doubted there was anything more than a token force left behind to deter people from trying to loot the camp while the army was out fighting.

But he wasn't a looter. He was a trained knight with fifth-tier strength, dozens of white-fire spells, and invisibility. He couldn't imagine that the kind of warriors left behind would not be the kind that could stop him from burning supplies. Of course, there might be a few here and there that could pose a threat to him, especially those who might be stationed around Arthwyn and Owain's tents, but with his bow, he wouldn't need to get close...

*'It's worth the risk to check out,'* Leon thought to himself, and he turned around again and took off toward the Talfar camp, his old near-forgotten predatory instincts from his childhood awakening even further with the discovery of even more prey.

This wasn't the Forest of Black and White, but from the way Leon treated the dark, smoky vale, it might as well have been. He stayed low to the ground, moving between what little cover there was, and kept his head on a swivel. With the sounds of fighting in the distance, even those few chariot patrols that he passed never heard what little noise he made.

About twenty minutes later, Leon exited the smoke cloud on the eastern side, about a mile or so from the Talfar camp. The camp was surrounded by a large palisade—mostly built with wood from the forest just a few miles to the northeast, in Talfar territory—and from what little he could see into the camp from the entrance, additional palisades split the camp into smaller sections.

Leon had a couple options for infiltrating the camp. The first and most obvious was to simply jump over the palisade. It was only about twenty feet tall, an easy height for a fifth-tier mage to leap over. However, he could sense a fair degree of magic flowing through the spiked logs that made up the palisade, and he guessed that there had been some defensive wards placed to prevent such infiltration.

Sneaking past the guards at the entrance was risky, as they might notice his footprints in the dust, dirt, and grass, but they also looked incredibly bored and inattentive, being far more interested in trying to see what was happening with the battle behind the smoke than they were in actually guarding the camp.

He could also just attack the guards and hope to get into the camp in the confusion, but he quickly ruled that option out. The last thing he needed was to be trapped in an alerted camp before his work was completed.

Leon chose to try and sneak past the guards. Any thought of returning to the Horns had left his mind. He had an opportunity to seriously disrupt Talfar's operations, and he was going to take it. Besides, the strongest of the guards was only a single fourth-tier mage; if they did happen to notice him sneaking past, he was confident in dealing with them and making an escape.

As he drew closer, he could hear them speaking, but unfortunately, they were speaking Prethonic, the primary spoken language of the Talfar Kingdom. The language spoken by those in the upper classes, like Owain, Arthwyn, and Bran, was so closely related to the language spoken in the Bull Kingdom that there was little difficulty in communicating. The same, however, could not be said for the language of the common people in Talfar, whose words were completely unintelligible to Leon's ears.

This made a degree of sense to him, as the state built by the Storm King eighty thousand years ago would've had a unified language. The upper classes of Aeterna would still be speaking variants of this language as a sign of prestige, while the commoners might speak something completely different.

Things were a little different in the Bull Kingdom, though, as the relatively dominant position of House Raime over the past eighty thousand years ensured that the language of the Storm King endured among the population, even after the First Bull King conquered and unified the region.

Leon quickly shook his head, clearing it of thoughts about language and focused back on the task at hand.

*'I must be tired indeed if I'm getting so easily distracted,'* Leon thought. He hadn't had much rest since the ambush that killed Bran, and it was starting to catch up with him, despite the magic and adrenaline coursing through his veins.

Leon approached the entrance and began taking extremely careful steps. There was too much ambient noise for him to be worried about being heard, but he was careful, nonetheless. He kept watch on the dozen guards, with a focus on the fourth-tier mage who appeared to be leading them. If anything happened, Leon would kill that man first.

The guards were joking, staring west, or otherwise slacking off, so Leon slipped past them with surprising ease. There was a nerve-racking moment when it seemed like the fourth-tier guy had noticed him, as he turned his head in Leon's direction and appeared to take a breath, but before Leon could react by drawing his sword, the mage sneezed and turned his head back toward his comrades. With a silent sigh of relief, Leon stepped past them and into the main entrance corridor of the camp.

To enter the camp proper, he had to pass another palisade, this one with a physical gate. However, the gate was wide open and the guards were just as negligent as those before, so Leon was able to easily walk right past them and enter the main camp.

The camp was enormous, but Leon wasted no time with surprise. His goal was to find Talfar's supplies, and he greatly doubted that the main storage places for food wouldn't be near the edge of the camp. There was a nearby guard tower set up, though it was barely more than an open platform supported on a few wooden struts. Leon could climb up and get a good view of the camp, but doing so would likely alert the guards on the tower.

Again, Leon was faced with the choice of continuing on or simply killing the guards that were in his way, and as before, Leon decided to be prudent and spare the two guards on the tower platform.

There was only one place that he could think of where the majority of valuable supplies would be kept: the center of the camp, where the highest-ranked members of the army slept and strategized. Leon didn't want to go there. The guards would likely be leagues more professional than those at the entrance of the camp, making sneaking past them much more difficult.

*'Maybe I ought to explore more of this place before resorting to that,'* Leon thought. He guessed that he was in the area for the professional infantry, as the tents seemed too nice for the peasants. The road leading further into the camp was also the only place wide enough to allow for horses and chariots.

Leon began to walk around, sticking close to the main 'road' looking for anything that might indicate a storage point for food and other supplies. For about ten minutes, he had no luck in his search, until he stumbled on a small clearing a fair distance into the camp that appeared to be some kind of field hospital. The tent flaps were wide open, and he could see numerous injured warriors lying on cots within.

*'There must be medical supplies somewhere around here,'* Leon thought, and he began to poke around, though he had to be mindful of the few healers that were still tending to their patients that hadn't accompanied the main army in its assault.

He got lucky fairly quickly; a doorway in the back of the tent led to a storage area filled with boxes of thousands of healing spells. Leon sprouted a huge smile and almost dropped a white-fire spell right then, but he was able to stop himself. Such a spell would be obvious sabotage, and he didn't want to alert the camp just for a single small medical station.

Still, he also couldn't just leave this place intact, so instead of a white-fire spell that would reduce the entire stockpile of spells and other miscellaneous medical supplies to ash in seconds, he would have to use another fire spell that he learned from Xaphan. Leon quietly dropped this spell behind one of the boxes near the back and hoped that it would be enough. He then left the tent as quickly as he could.

The spell he left behind would burn orange after a delay of about twenty minutes. Leon hoped that it would look like an accidental fire, but he wasn't going to stick around to watch.

He pressed further into the camp, avoiding the occasional warriors that had been left behind. Since the army had left the camp to assault the walls, those left behind to guard the camp were generally those battalions that were considered too highly trained to be used as cannon fodder, like the civilians, yet too unskilled and unprofessional to be with the rest of the infantry. Whenever they were brought along on campaigns, these barely-more-than-militia battalions were always used to guard the camps, as most Talfar commanders couldn't think of anything else they were useful for.

Because of the lower quality of these warriors, Leon had no trouble moving through the camp. In fact, they actually had a tendency to neglect their duties, mostly by falling asleep, practically giving Leon the run of the camp. But this did little to help Leon find the supplies he was looking for.

But then, as he was exploring one of the larger roads that crisscrossed the camp, he found a small caravan of five wheel-less wagons being driven by some tired-looking people and guarded by about fifteen mages who appeared to Leon's eyes to be mercenaries.

Leon had been in the camp for about half an hour by this point, and his anxiety was growing almost by the second. There hadn't been an uproar from his earlier spell, so it didn't go off, the healers were able to contain the fire, there wasn't enough evidence of sabotage for the alarm to be raised, or some combination of the three.

But now, Leon couldn't believe his luck. Owain's army would, of course, need regular shipments of food from his home province, but Leon didn't actually think that he'd run into one of these shipments.

With an enormous smile on his face, Leon fell in behind the caravan and began following it toward its destination.

However, as they continued, Leon's smile faltered; they were heading toward the center of the camp. Leon knew that there would be much higher quality warriors left behind to watch over the possessions of the higher-ranked warriors, especially for Owain and Arthwyn's tents, which is why he wanted to avoid this area if possible. Unfortunately, it seemed that his initial guess of where the supplies were being kept was spot on.

He had to go to the center of the camp.

Stifling a sigh, Leon kept going. The caravan was stopped at the gate of the palisade that separated the center of the camp from the other sections, and Leon immediately knew that it wasn't going to be easy to get in and out once the guards began to poke around and search through the wagons.

To avoid being seen, Leon slowly walked around the caravan, keeping as much space between himself and the guards as he could. He didn't want to accidentally bump into one and be revealed.

After about fifteen anxious minutes, the guards let the caravan pass, though another group of guards was waiting for them on the other side of the gate to escort them to their destination. Leon slipped through the gate just as it began to close, only breathing somewhat normally again when it was clear that no one had seen him.

After another few minutes, the caravan arrived outside of another tent, this one as large as a decent-sized warehouse and too lacking in decoration to be a residential tent, leading Leon to believe that he'd finally arrived at what he had been seeking. His suspicions were confirmed when boxes began to be unloaded from the wagons and he snuck inside.

Thousands of boxes, barrels, and sacks had almost completely filled the tent. The labels on the nearby sacks read 'wheat', 'hay', and 'barley', while the nearby barrels were filled with beer, wine, and water.

Leon didn't need to fully explore the tent to know that this was exactly where he wanted to be. He glanced back at the people unloading the wagons to ensure that he was still undetected, and then got to work.

#### **Chapter 254: Discovery**

For almost an hour Leon had been moving unseen through the Talfar camp. He burned down a small storage center for medical supplies, but he hadn't realized that there had been a group of Talfar warriors behind the tent gathered around a small fire, and the loss of hundreds of healing spells and other medical supplies was initially blamed on them.

There was the possibility that the Talfar warriors that would have to investigate the incident might realize what happened, as the undisciplined and slovenly warriors left behind to guard the camp were suddenly and harshly made aware of Leon's presence when the main storage tent erupted with a deafening, thunderous blast of yellow-orange fire.

*'Fucking shit!'* Leon thought as he instinctively ducked. He'd left about fifty white-fire spells and his last big explosion spell scattered around the tent and then got as far away as he could in the five minutes he'd given himself. He wound up back at the gate that he'd snuck through to get into the inner camp, and he crouched behind a nearby tent to watch.

Before his spells had gone off, he prepared another few spell-arrows, just in case. However, as he saw the massive tower of smoke rising from further back into the inner camp and felt the heat wash over him even with the distance between himself and the storage tent, he knew that further action wouldn't be needed.

But he was not expecting such a massive explosion, and he was startled enough that he almost dropped his arrows.

Following the blast, bells and horns from around the camp began to sound off, though there was some delay as the indolent warriors scrambled to assemble into something that actually resembled a guard unit.

Meanwhile, most of the servants began to stream into the inner camp through its various gates, including the one Leon was hidden beside, and the young knight took the opportunity to creep back out into the outer camp while everyone was distracted with the fire.

There were undoubtedly other supply storage points scattered around the camp, but he guessed that the one he hit was the biggest and most important. He was also finally running low on fire spells, so any further actions taken to burn Talfar supplies might compromise his ability to fight, should the need arise. So, Leon began to make his way out of the camp, a euphoric feeling of accomplishment welling up in his chest.

—

Emrys, the Warrior-Chief that Arthwyn had sent to find whoever had destroyed five of their trebuchets, had to expand his search area after finding nothing in the western portion of the vale.

*'Whoever did this must be small in number, or they've already fled,'* the Warrior-Chief thought as he spread his sixth-tier magic senses out over as much of the vale as he could, yet finding nothing.

But then, a horseman entered his view, and Emrys shouted, "Halt!"

The horseman complied immediately. He wasn't armed and he was dressed like a Talfar warrior, but Emrys wasn't going to take any chances and had two of the other four chariots driving alongside his surround the man.

"Identify yourself!" Emrys demanded.

"I'm Gwerthefyr, I'm bringing news of an emergency back at the camp to the Marshal and His Highness!" the horseman replied.

"What emergency?" Emrys asked.

"An explosion has destroyed the supply tent in the inner camp!"

Emrys paled at this news. The inner camp was where nearly all of the spells that the trebuchets fired were stored, along with more than half of the food and potable water for the entire army.

"Proceed! And inform His Lordship that I am on my way to investigate personally!" Emrys shouted, and the messenger spurred his horse onward while Emrys had his chariots drive east.

—

Fire burned through the Talfar inner camp. The explosion was too big and appeared too suddenly for the resulting fires to be put out before they could spread to other tents, and now about a fifth of the entire inner camp had succumbed to the blaze. In the time it took for Leon to sneak all the way to the edges of the outer camp—a matter of minutes given how empty the camp was—the fires in the inner camp had grown to the point of almost being too big to put out.



But then, as servants hurriedly tried to move other tents out of the way of the raging flames, some of the stronger mages that had been guarding the outer camp reached the inner palisade. A few of these were elemental mages, and though there were only two fire mages and a single water mage in the group, the rest of them could still endure the heat enough to dive in and start trying to do what they could.

Unfortunately for them, the Tyrrhenian River was about four or five miles away, too far to be useful.

But that wasn't going to be a good enough excuse if the inner camp burned down before the rest of the higher-ranked warriors returned. They had to at least contain the fire, and it looked like they were beginning to do just that as more and more mages strong enough to endure the fire and smoke went in to help.

All of this was of no real concern to Leon, though. He'd accomplished his goal, and all of the ravaging the camp was enduring at the hands of his fire was nothing more than a happy bonus. Besides, he was far too busy getting out of the camp to be worrying about what was happening back in the inner camp.

He'd run into something of a problem. With his attack, the guards at the gate were far more alert, and their attention had been turned inward. If he tried to get past them, his footsteps in the dirt might be noticed, not to mention they had assumed a tighter formation in front of the gate, preventing him from easily slipping past.

He could try to creep through the gaps between the guards, there was enough room for that at least, but if any of them so much as shifted their feet or adjusted their position, he could be instantly revealed for all the world to see.

*'No, better to wait for a better opportunity,'* Leon thought. He waited for another five minutes, staring at the guards as if this alone would get them to move. When it became clear that the guards weren't going to give him a bigger window, Leon weighed his other options.

And he only had two that he could see: the first was to leave this gate and try another—*'All the gates can't be guarded so diligently, can they?'*—while his second was to jump over the palisade. But he couldn't guarantee that the guards at the other gates were being any less attentive after his act of sabotage than the guards at the western gate, and he felt like every second that passed was making it increasingly likely that he was going to be discovered.

There was little chance in his mind that the main Talfar army wouldn't send people back to reinforce their camp as soon as they heard about what had just happened, and the more people around, the likelier it was that he would be discovered. In other words, time was of the essence.

Leon clenched his teeth and decided to risk jumping the palisade. Even if his invisibility were dispelled, it would only take five minutes for his ring to recharge, so he felt like he could get away if he had enough of a head start. In order to give himself that head start, he began to follow the outer palisade away from the gate. He needed to be as far away from any other camp entrance as he could get so he wouldn't be run down by a cavalryman if his invisibility failed.

His destination was one of the platform towers just behind the palisade. He silently drew his sword, and after taking only a few seconds to steady his breathing, he jumped. He didn't want to leave enough time to talk himself out of this, as it might be too late when he thought of another plan.

His jump was perfect, he cleared the platform by just enough space to land almost completely silently. Fortunately, both of the warriors that were stationed in the tower were too distracted by the fire in the inner camp for that 'almost' to be an issue. Taking advantage of their distraction, Leon swiftly dispatched both guards with two lightning-fast strikes to the neck.

The bodies of the guards would be discovered in a matter of minutes, he was sure, as the platform had no walls and any of the other tower guards could plainly see that their comrades weren't there anymore. By the time they were found, however, Leon planned to be long gone. Wasting no more time, Leon leaped as high as he could over the palisade. He passed over the air cushion that prevented anyone from jumping over from outside, clearing it by a wide margin, and sailed over the palisade and landing in the grass on the hill outside the camp.

Unfortunately, the air cushion wasn't the only enchantment in the palisade. There was something there that he hadn't perceived, so despite clearing the cushion, when he landed, he was completely visible.

*'Shit!'* Leon thought as he turned around and began to sprint away from the camp. He ran north-west, hoping that he wouldn't be seen before he made it back into the cover of the smoke in the vale.

Lady Luck, however, was not on his side. He had barely made it to the foot of the shallow hill the Talfar camp was built on before five chariots came barreling out of the smoke several miles ahead of him. It wasn't nearly dark enough for mages not to be able to see him, and there was nothing but grass and relatively flat plains between him and them. As Leon skid to a halt, he could see the looks of curiosity, then suspicion, and finally hostility as one of the charioteers shouted something that he couldn't hear.

Leon had been accompanying Trajan every time he left the Horns over the course of this short war, and so he wasn't too surprised that one of those charioteers recognized him. Of course, that didn't change his situation. He had four minutes until he could turn invisible again, and the chariots would be on him in less than half that time.

Making a snap decision, Leon turned around and began running back east. He was trapped between the charioteers and the camp, and in his rapidly escalating panic, he could think of nowhere to run to except the forest on the east side of the Border Mountains. There were quite a handful of miles between him and it, though, and he hadn't any doubts that he wouldn't make it before the chariots caught up with him.

"STOP WHERE YOU ARE!" bellowed the man who Leon assumed to be in charge, a sixth-tier mage in the center chariot.

Leon hadn't the intent to comply, and as he ran east, he released his magic senses to keep an eye on the chariots. Three of them, including the chariot with the sixth-tier mage, peeled off of their course to follow him, while the last two continued on toward the camp.

The drivers of the three chariots whipped their horses into a full gallop, hurtling after Leon at a speed that even he, with his fifth-tier power and lightning magic, couldn't match. Still, he had a long enough of a lead that he had the luxury to calm his panic and think. As he ran, he summoned a few of the last white-fire arrow-spells he had left and unlimbered his bow from over his shoulder. He then nocked one of these arrows, spun around, and fired at the leading chariot.

Talfar chariots could turn on a dime, but the speed with which Leon's arrow flew through the air made avoiding it impossible. The driver jerked the reins of the horses, but the arrow still hit the side of the sixth-tier mage's chariot and burst into white fire.

These were light chariots, built for speed and maneuverability, and as such lacked the armor of heavier chariots and only carried three warriors instead of the normal four. Leon's white-fire burned right through the chariot's frame, and the force of the horses continuing to pull on it split the vehicle in half.

All three of the warriors in the chariot leaped into the air, with the driver landing on the ground and the other two landing with practiced grace on the two horses, now free of pulling the vehicle. Losing chariots, especially the less armored variety, wasn't an uncommon occurrence, and as such the horses pulling chariots were also fitted with saddles so that if any of the chariot team survived, they could keep fighting on as more conventional cavalry.

Seeing how his arrow failed to stop his pursuers despite destroying a chariot, Leon swore under his breath and kept on running east, turning slightly north as he went. He could see the tree line of the forest in the distance with the brightening morning sky, and if he could just reach it, he was sure he could lose his pursuers within.

But those Talfar warriors behind him weren't going to make such a thing easy.

#### **Chapter 255: Talfar Blinks First**

Arthwyn stared at the walls with an ugly expression. Half of his siege towers were destroyed, but his forces had managed to seize about half of the towers on the first wall. Still, they were taking heavy casualties, and the Talfar army wasn't advancing as fast as he would've liked. But progress was progress, and his remaining trebuchets were hammering the Bull's Horns as fast as they could.

It was a bloody, grinding affair, but if things kept going at the rate they were, he'd be able to take all three walls by sunset.

Just as Arthwyn was making this optimistic estimate, however, the messenger from the Talfar camp arrived and swiftly reported, "Your Lordship, the main storage tent at the encampment has been destroyed!"

"What?!" Arthwyn almost shrieked. Most of their supplies were stored there, and if it was lost then continuing to press forward would be a fool's errand.

Having overheard this, Owain hurriedly drove over in his chariot and said, "Tell me everything!"

"Yes, Your Highness!" the messenger said, quickly relaying everything that he knew about Leon's attack on the camp.

"We must return!" Owain said, his handsome face twisting in panic. "If we've lost our supplies, then we need to retreat!"

"Your Highness won't be able to claim the throne if the army retreats when we're winning the battle," Arthwyn said through gritted teeth. "We can win this; we just need to hold on."

"Hold on? We're being bled dry out there," Owain growled, refraining from shouting at his Marshal to keep the watching charioteers and cataphracts from becoming concerned.

"The army will survive, and when we seize victory in this battle, Your Highness will have all the prestige you need to take your throne," the Marshal replied, to the dismay of his fellow high-ranked warriors in the nearby chariots. They all had significant amounts of property in the camp, and if it were being attacked, then their first choice would be to retreat to protect their belongings.

Owain glared at Arthwyn, and the Marshal glared right back. It was clear to the Prince that his Marshal had no intention of ending this fight. He was keeping himself calm, but there was a hint of madness in his deep blue eyes that finally gave Owain enough concerns to say to his hornsman, "Signal the retreat."

The Warrior-Chiefs were proud people, and none of them wanted to abandon the battle. Still, they had to protect their property first and foremost, so the Prince's words brought them comfort.

"Your Highness is nothing more than a—" Arthwyn began, but he quickly bit his tongue. If push came to shove, Bran's forces would likely side with Owain over him, as would most of the peasants. Arthwyn wasn't even confident enough in his own warriors to think that they would choose him over their Prince.

"What was that?" Owain asked with a dangerous glint in his cool green eyes.

Arthwyn took a deep breath, took one more look at the Bull's Horns, and said, "Nothing, Your Highness... Nothing..."

"I thought so," Owain said as he struggled not to split his face open with a wide and undignified smile of dominance.

The Prince's horn was blown and the signal to retreat was given. There was still a great deal of fighting left before Talfar's warriors would be out of the woods, but for the time being, they began to fall back.

Arthwyn, meanwhile, glared at the walls, his stoic mask lowered to reveal his hate for all to see.

*'This is only a temporary reprieve Trajan,' Arthwyn furiously thought. 'Your head is mine! Once you're dead, Aeronwen's soul can be put to rest...'*

—

The situation in the gatehouse of the first wall was without a doubt the best place to be, from the perspective of a Legion soldier. The siege tower that Leon had burned largely meant that the gatehouse was impervious to further direct attack, save for the occasional trebuchet shot or intrepid Talfar warrior with a ladder. Both towers on either side of the gatehouse kept those Talfar warriors that had managed to get onto the wall from approaching the gatehouse, as well.

From within, Alix felt like she had entered into something of a trance. The sheer amount of dead Legion soldiers around her had left her infuriated, and Leon abandoning her and the rest of the Legion to go off on a foolish suicide mission did nothing to improve her mood.

The only way she could vent her feelings was with her bow, and fortunately, she had many targets. She fired arrow after arrow through the arrow loops of the gatehouse, and every single time her arrows found their mark. Magic surged through her body as she automatically nocked and drew another arrow after every shot, filling her with energy, while her anger boiled her blood, filling her with killing intent.

Anzu was right next to her, a healing spell wrapped around his broken leg. He was whimpering in pain from both his broken wing and Leon's absence, huddled down at her feet as far away from everyone else as he could get.

*'If he keeps leaving, Anzu might just imprint on me instead of him!'* Alix thought with renewed anger as she reached for another bundle of arrows, her gaze passing over Anzu at the same time.

But as angry as she was at Leon right now, she was far more infuriated by the actions of the Talfar warriors. From her position near the top of the gatehouse, she could see the enemy warriors forcing terrified peasants in front of them so that they would take the arrows meant for the warriors. She could see Legion soldiers dying in droves, not to mention the dozens of dead Legion soldiers in the back of the room she was in—the Tribune in charge couldn't spare the soldiers to transport the bodies of those killed on the roof away, so they were simply placed along the back wall and in the corners where the remaining soldiers wouldn't trip over them.

Alix took aim again, another arrow nocked in her bow. When she fired, her anger was stoked again when the warrior she had aimed at grabbed a nearby peasant and used him to block. Alix's arrow pierced the man's throat, killing him almost instantly.

*'Fucking barbarians!'* she thought in disgust, finally beginning to understand the true depths of hatred that her former comrades at Fort 127 used to have for the Valemén. It wasn't a perfect comparison, as Alix didn't think the Valemén ever used human shields, but it was still something she was starting to relate to.

And then, from the front of the Talfar cavalry, a long and deep horn blast boomed over the battlefield, and the Talfar warriors began to slowly back away from the walls.

"HAHA!" the Tribune shouted in joy. "They fucking blinked! That's what you fucking get for coming here and fucking with the Legion!"

The other soldiers in the gatehouse joined the Tribune in shouting in joy as they continued shooting their arrows at the slowly retreating warriors. Alix made sure to get in a few last shots as well.

But she had something else she needed to take care of. She ignored the rest of the soldiers as they reveled in the enemy's retreat, and whispered to Anzu, "Ready to move, little guy?"

Anzu looked up at her with shiny eyes that could melt a stone heart. Alix had to fight not to burst into tears at the griffin's mournful expression.

"He'll be back, no need to worry about that," she whispered, reaching out and patting Anzu on the head. Surprising her, the griffin allowed this for a few seconds before staggering to his paws. "Let's get back to the Prince," Alix continued. "His Highness needs to know what's happened with Leon."

—

The Talfar chariots and horsemen were bearing down on Leon. There were barely five hundred feet between them, now, and Leon was still more than a mile from the edge of the forest.

His mind raced, his heart pounded against his chest, and his lightning magic coursed through his body. Leon didn't think he'd ever run so fast before in his life, but he still knew that he wasn't going to make it.

With a snap decision, Leon turned and fired two more white-fire arrows, destroying the last two chariots that were pursuing him. Unfortunately, the riders pulled the same maneuver that their leader had, and the two warriors in each jumped and landed on their horses, while the drivers stayed with the wrecks.

This reduced Leon's enemies by two, but it also drastically increased the maneuverability of the remaining six and cost him valuable time. He still ran as fast as he could for the tree line, but the Talfar warriors were rapidly catching up.

Pivoting again, Leon swiftly fired three more arrows, but these didn't have white-fire spells attached. Rather, they hit the ground in front of the horses and created excruciatingly bright flashes of light, startling the horses and almost throwing the riders from their saddles.

But this small advantage was quickly negated when Leon felt the ground beneath him shift, and he instinctively jumped just in time to avoid a rock spike bursting from the ground. Three of the warriors chasing him were strong enough to use elemental magic; Leon kept running, he couldn't fight that kind of force head-on.

Finally, less than half a mile from the tree line, the horsemen closed to within a hundred feet of Leon.

"Surrender now and you won't be killed!" the sixth-tier leader of the warriors shouted.

Leon ignored him and kept running.

"Typical Legion bastard!" shouted one of the fifth-tier warriors as he called upon his magic power. The air around his fist began to swirl, and he punched toward Leon's back, sending a spiraling cyclone of wind toward the young knight.

This wind hit Leon in the back, knocking him to the ground and allowing the warriors to catch up and surround him.

"Drop your fuckin' weapons," the other fifth-tier warrior snarled as all six of them pointed their swords at Leon.

"Brian, restrain him," the sixth-tier lead warrior ordered, glancing at the wind mage.

Brian dismounted his horse and approached Leon, taking a length of enchanted rope out of his soul realm as he did. However, before he could start, Leon rolled out of his way and slashed upward with his sword, cutting right across Brian's chest and stomach with a flash of lightning, scorching most of his organs.

Moving faster than the other warriors could react, Leon shot to his feet and threw another flare spell into the air. When the flare went off, blinding the warriors for a short time, Leon activated his ring and started fading from view. Unfortunately, the lead warrior wasn't going to lose Leon over a small thing like blindness, and he extended his hand and let off a gout of flame that reached Leon in an instant and washed over his armor.

Leon's invisibility was disrupted as soon as the first ember hit his armor before he'd even finished fading from view. The ring chimed like a loud bell, a sound that Leon had never heard it make before, but he didn't have the luxury of investigating what it meant. He had to keep moving, so he dug into his almost

depleted stash of spells once more and activated his last Thunderblast spell, the last copy of the spell he'd acquired from his family's enchantment records.

The spell detonated a moment later, hurling Leon toward the forest and doing what the flare spells hadn't: spook the horses. The sound of the blast ruptured the beasts' eardrums, and in a panic, the horses reared and threw the five remaining warriors down off their backs. They took off running back toward the camp, leaving the warriors alone on the ground.

Leon rolled to his feet as he hit the dirt, springing up and sprinting for the tree line. As he ran, he attempted to activate his ring again, but every ounce of magic he funneled into the golden band promptly dissipated, indicating a broken enchantment. Leon realized with horror that being violently disrupted halfway through turning invisible had broken his ring!

"After him!" the lead warrior bellowed as he struggled to his feet from the unexpected dismount and stunning blast of lightning. "No need to take him prisoner now! Kill him!"

Unfortunately for him, only the other fifth-tier mage rose with him, the other four warriors that had been a part of their team were dead—one by Leon's sword, and the other three from the lightning spell.

"Go get reinforcements from the camp! We're *not* letting him get away!" the lead warrior shouted as he took off after Leon, with the other warrior turning and sprinting back toward the camp.

#### **Chapter 256: Pursuing the Fleeing Rat**

Leon hit the tree line and kept on running as fast as his lightning-enhanced legs could carry him. With what he assumed was a sixth-tier mage hot on his heels and his invisibility ring not holding magic as it should, panic slithered into his mind and muddled his thoughts.

However, as the tall grass of the plain gave way to trees and the underbrush of the forest that was just a few miles north-west of the Talfar camp, his mind began to clear, and he felt himself relax a bit. The forest was his environment, and nothing could calm him like the sight of trees and enough leaves to block his view of the sky.

But he didn't let this small comfort distract him, the mage pursuing him wasn't slowing down just because the terrain became a little more rugged. Still, Leon knew exactly where to put his foot for every rapid step, and the Talfar warrior wasn't nearly so comfortable in forested terrain and neither did his magic give him the same speed that Leon's lightning gave to him, leading to Leon starting to pick up some distance despite the difference in raw magical strength.

The Talfar warrior clearly didn't appreciate this, and Leon was forced to dodge blasts of fire so searingly hot that he could feel them as they passed by him even through his Magmic Steel armor. But Leon managed to keep his balance even as the trees he passed fell behind him, scorched and blackened, and the foliage that he deftly avoided was ripped apart and incinerated, and the lead he had grew with every step.

The landscape grew more rugged as Leon turned north. The forest didn't extend that far into the Talfar plains to the east, but to the west and north it stretched out in a great green carpet over the eastern edge of the Border Mountains. Leon recognized the lack of experience in traveling through heavy forests in the warrior pursuing him, so he deliberately made the choice to run into the mountains. His

confidence grew with every missed burst of magic he endured and every broken hill he traversed; he'd almost lost sight of the warrior mere minutes after entering the forest.

But he could still see him with his magic senses, and he knew that that warrior could still see him, so he didn't slow down or grow complacent. He just kept putting one foot in front of the other. He was going to escape; he could feel it in his bones.

But then, he heard the faint sound of rushing water, which only grew louder the further he ran. The ground he was on had a steady incline, leading up into the mountains. A few miles later, the land became little more than a series of sharp hills and valleys that Leon skillfully navigated, sometimes leaping across small chasms or from tree to tree as needed. However, he never got out of range of the Talfar warrior's magic senses, despite continuing to gain ground.

—

*'I'm losing him!'* Emrys thought with desperation as the Legion soldier avoided every tree root and inconvenient bush that slowed him down.

The warrior could only curse his own foolishness; he'd lowered his guard when the rat had been knocked down, and he'd assumed that the Legion knight would surrender himself for ransom in the face of such overwhelming force against him. Instead, the black-armored rat had killed a fifth-tier mage and whipped out a lightning spell that killed the three lower-tiered warriors and scared off everyone's horses.

Now, Emrys found himself chasing the rat through a wild forest with serious lightning burns on his arms and chest, and probably fractured ribs if the pain he felt was any indication.

*'Aaron had better be getting those reinforcements...'* Emrys thought with rising anger as he pulled his long red hair out of a small tree branch that it had gotten caught on. If his last fifth-tier warrior managed to get a significant amount of reinforcements, then he could simply sweep through the forest if the rat managed to get away. If his reinforcements were deployed, though, then Emrys could see the real possibility that the rat would get away.

There was a strong chance that this was the man that had destroyed their supplies, and Emrys was determined to drag him back to the Marshal and the Prince for punishment—assuming he managed to catch him. Any thought of ransoming the knight back to the Legion, as was custom for higher-tiered mages, had long since left Emrys' mind, and the longer the chase continued, the more the warrior didn't even want to do that much. Simply killing this armored rat was sounding better and better with every step he took in the rough forest.

And then, he saw through his magic senses that the rat had stopped running. When Emrys saw what had stymied the other mage, a wide, predatory smile appeared on his chiseled face, and his dark green eyes narrowed in anticipation of catching his prey.

—

Leon stood before a massive chasm, carved out of the mountains and hills by the rapidly-flowing river almost a thousand feet below. The other side was more than eighty feet away, far enough that Leon didn't want to risk jumping if he could avoid it, as the chasm was high enough that it was dangerous



even for a fifth-tier mage to fall into, and the river was moving so fast that it was completely white from foam.

As he stood there, trying to quickly think of something to do—the nearby trees weren't tall enough to use as a bridge, he noticed—he could see the Talfar warrior getting closer. In fact, the warrior seemed to be slowing down, as if he was confident that Leon had nowhere to go.

To Leon's left were the Border Mountains—more specifically, there was a several-hundred-foot-tall sheer cliff about five hundred feet to his left made of smooth hexagonal trap rock that he wasn't going to be able to climb. To his right was the slope of a hill that would take him into more dense forest, but the Talfar warrior had reached the base of that hill behind him, and Leon would be easily cut off if he went that way based on how he'd have to run due to the south-ward curve of the chasm.

It seemed like there really was no way for him to get out of this, apart from facing the sixth-tier warrior in direct battle, and Leon didn't think he would be able to match the warrior, even with his enchanted armor.

"Hahhhh," the Talfar warrior sighed as he approached Leon. "You have nowhere to go, now, Legion Rat. If you surrender now, then I *might* be merciful, but if you don't-

Before the warrior could complete his threat, Leon took one look at him, then jumped over the edge of the cliff. There was no hesitation. It came down to whether or not Leon was willing to be captured by a sixth-tier mage he didn't think he could defeat in a straight fight or if he wanted to risk serious injury and possible death at the bottom of the chasm.

And he chose the latter.

—

Emrys could only watch in shock as the black-armored Legion soldier went over the edge. He rushed forward, his pale hands instinctively reaching for the man to catch him and haul him back up, but his fingers touched nothing but air. The soldier plummeted from the cliff with his arms wide-open, accepting what was about to come and throwing his choice back in Emrys' face.

The rat vanished into the mist and foam of the river far below and did not resurface. Emrys didn't hear any splashes over the roaring rapids, but he also didn't hear anything that might suggest the rat was smashed against the rocks that jutted up out of the river here and there.

Emrys stood there at the top of the cliff for several minutes, waiting for the Legion rat to show himself, and he eventually began to run down the length of the chasm looking for any sign of the young knight.

"IF YOU SURVIVED, BASTARD, THEN I'LL FIND YOU!!!" Emrys bellowed into the chasm. His voice was lost in the cacophony of swiftly flowing water, but if the rat was alive, Emrys wanted him to know of his impending capture. "THOUSANDS WILL STARVE BECAUSE OF YOU! YOU *WILL* PAY FOR THAT MUCH, AT LEAST!"

—

The sun beat down on Emrys like a judgmental parent-in-law, as if it were criticizing him for his failure to find the rat. The Talfar warrior had scoured the chasm, looking for any sign that the Legion knight had survived, or even just trying to find his body, but all to no avail.

It wasn't until the reinforcements from the Talfar camp finally entered the range of his magic senses, which he'd been using continuously for hours, leaving him exhausted, that he turned away from his search.

"Emrys!" the leader of the approaching team of Talfar warriors shouted out in greeting as he approached the Warrior-Chief.

"Lorcan!" Emrys responded, recognizing the fifth-tier warrior's curly brown hair, round baby face, and freckled cheeks.

The two men rushed forward and clasped each other's wrists.

"It's about damned time we found you!" Lorcan said, his joyous smile shining almost as bright as the sun. "We've been looking for you for almost four hours, now!"

"Has it been that long?" Emrys asked, glancing up at the sky and practically reeling in surprise at how high the sun had climbed.

"Indeed, it has, my friend," Lorcan replied. "Once Aaron reported that you were chasing a Legion knight, His Lordship sent out about two thousand warriors to aid you in your search."

Emrys smiled. This meant that Arthwyn was giving him the job of finding the Legion knight, which soothed Emrys' mind a little, as he hated it when he was forced to leave a job partially done. But he was still surprised at the force that Arthwyn sent.

When Emrys asked Lorcan about it, the other man explained, "The army pulled back from the walls by order of the Prince, so there's plenty of warriors to spare. His Highness wanted to make sure that our supply situation was figured out before seizing the Horns. This is now being prioritized, we can't have a strong Legion knight behind our lines who's already demonstrated a willingness and capability to disrupt our lines of supply, can we? Now, what's the situation out here?"

Emrys quickly filled Lorcan in on what had happened since he and Aaron had separated, and Lorcan sent out five of his twelve subordinates to relay that information to the other teams.

"We'll find the bastard," Lorcan promised Emrys. "We've too many people out here to miss him! He's not getting away!"

"Good," Emrys replied. "By the way, how bad is it back in the camp?"

"Eh, it could be worse," Lorcan said. "Not by much, but it could have been, *potentially*, worse, if this guy had been working with anyone of similar means. As it is, the peasants won't be eating anything more than a bit of porridge for the foreseeable future, and most of the warriors aren't better off. We've got little more than bread and water in our future for a while!" Lorcan chuckled loudly at their situation, but none of the other warriors looked particularly pleased.

"And the horses?" Emrys asked.

“Oh, they’ll be eating like kings compared to us,” Lorcan said, punctuating his sentence with thunderous guffaws. “Most of the feed was stored at the stables, not at the central storage point, so the horses got plenty of food!”

“Hey maybe keep it down a little,” Emrys chided. “This guy might still be alive, and I’d like to sneak up on him, if possible.”

“He fell from all the way up here,” Lorcan exclaimed. “Even for a fifth-tier mage, surviving a fall like that would be a tall order. Even more so finding his way back up!”

“He’s also an expert archer, he hit my chariot with an arrow from farther away than any Legion bow should’ve been able to,” Emrys dourly explained.

“Huh. Well, I’ll be careful, then,” Lorcan responded as he leaned out over the cliff edge to get a better look at the river below.

Emrys half-expected his friend to get hit by an arrow just for tempting fate like that, but a moment later, Lorcan stepped back from the edge and laughed again.

“No way that guy’s still alive!” the good-natured warrior loudly proclaimed. “But I guess we still have to find his corpse, then.”

Emrys sighed and glanced at the river. It wasn’t a particularly long river, ending in a fairly large lake about fifty miles away. However, the forest ended about six or seven miles to the east, where the ground leveled out and gave way to flat plains. Cavalry could keep an eye on that area and ensure that the rat couldn’t slip out that way—assuming he survived, which Emrys was.

“There you go making assumptions,” Emrys growled. “We’re doing this *right*. We’ll sweep through the forest, and if the rat lived, we’ll find him. If not, then we’ll rejoin the army back at camp. Keep your eyes open.”

“Got it,” Lorcan replied. “But for now, you should probably be back at the base camp we set up to coordinate the search.”

Emrys scowled, but he understood his duty was to command, not necessarily to lead.

“Be careful, my friend,” Emrys said to Lorcan, clasping the other man’s wrist again.

“I always am when it counts,” Lorcan responded, flashing for the first time a dangerous look and emitting a tremendous amount of killing intent as he glanced back at the chasm.

## **Chapter 257: Assessing Losses**

“Still no sign of Leon?” Trajan asked.

“No, Your Highness,” Minerva replied.

The two were in one of Trajan’s small sitting rooms that had a good view of the east. The Talfar army had pulled out and the Legion was tallying the dead and reinforcing their position. The Talfar warriors had managed to seize most of the first wall, but then suddenly abandoned their assault. In the process of retreating, they lost two more of their siege towers, leaving them with a paltry three left.

Alix had come to the Prince about half an hour after Talfar began to retreat and told him of Leon's decision to attack the Talfar trebuchets alone, along with Leon's possession of a ring of invisibility. Not long after, the Talfar trebuchets noticeably began to fire less, as if a number of them had been knocked out of commission, so it seemed that Leon was at least partially successful in that regard.

But the young knight hadn't returned, despite the Vale being largely clear of Talfar warriors at this point. Trajan frowned at the vale in both anger and worry—though there was, perhaps, more of the former than the latter.

After speaking with Alix, he dismissed her, allowing her to return to her room and rest and make sure Anzu was tended to. He didn't punish Alix for Leon leaving, though there were some unreasonable commanders who might punish a squire in the absence of their knight. He just wanted the young woman to get some rest, as she appeared like she needed it after hours spent firing arrows and using her magic.

He now had to decide what to do about Leon—whether or not anyone should be sent out to look for him. The risks were high for anyone who might go, and as much as Trajan wanted to send out entire battalions to ensure Leon made it back to the Horns alive and well, he wasn't going to send large numbers of good soldiers to their deaths for one man when his forces were still so outnumbered, no matter who might be lost.

"Reckless idiot," he whispered before turning back to Minerva and saying, "Well, let's get this thing done with, then."

They left their sitting room and made the short trek over to Trajan's main meeting room. All of the command staff were present, from the sixth-tier mages of the Diplomatic Corps to the Legates in charge of the Legions, and more than a hundred Tribunes there with their commanders. All of them stood when their Prince entered and stormed over to his usual position upon the raised dais. He paused only when he noticed that there was an empty seat, only to remember that one of his Legates had been killed in the fighting.

"Casualty report," Trajan growled once he took his seat. He tried to not look at the empty chair in order to preserve his composure, but it wasn't easy.

"Initial reports are as many as eight thousand dead or missing, though we do expect that number to go down as we finish identifying the wounded and sifting through the bodies," Saufeia responded.

"That might take a while, Talfar sent a great many warriors to their deaths when they took the wall, and we have to separate their dead from ours," Amatius responded.

"And their losses?" Trajan asked as he glared around the room.

"Perhaps as high as thirty thousand dead, but we're not sure," Saufeia responded. Since it was her Legion that was doing the counting, she was the one with the most accurate information.

"Any word from Pretani?" Minerva asked, though she felt like she could probably guess the answer.

"None, yet," Aquillius answered.

"I get the impression that they don't want to explain Owain's actions until this conflict has been decided," the sixth-tier diplomat Fonteius explained. "From what I understand, there has been bitter fighting in the east between Queen Andraste and the Han Kingdom, and the Elder Council has been using this as an excuse to not inform their Queen about recent events."

"So, they're using their errant Prince as an excuse to try and annex Ariminium?" Minerva mused.

"That would be my guess," Fonteius said with a bitter nod.

"When we push these invaders back, though, they'll probably immediately disavow his actions," Aquillius said with a cynical laugh. "I wouldn't expect a response from Pretani until we've fought a decisive battle."

"Would you not call this battle we just won 'decisive'?" Labienus asked.

"Not in the slightest," Aquillius instantly responded. "We're still outnumbered by a hundred thousand at least, with who knows how many more on their way. We can't face Arthwyn and Owain in open battle, even with their recent thrashing. We can only wait for them to regroup, rebuild their siege engines, and attack again."

"That's not all we can do," Minerva interjected. "We *could* launch some hit-and-run missions, Your Highness. Prevent the enemy from resting too deeply."

"That would also put many of our mages at risk in the open," Aquillius cautioned.

"Not everywhere," Saufeia quickly added. "Florentia isn't out in the open, we can launch an expedition to retake the city--"

"No," Trajan suddenly said, his deep voice bringing silence crashing down upon the meeting room. "We'd never hold Florentia, and we don't have any skirmisher units fast enough to outrun a Talfar cataphract. Sending anyone out there would be sending them to their deaths."

"Your Highness, should we just wait for the enemy to regroup, then?" Amatius asked. "If it comes to it, my 19th Legion will fight them on the walls, in the vale, or on the slopes of their fortified hill."

"Why don't we send out riders to harass their supply lines?" asked a Legate from Trajan's retinue.

"To get at their supply lines, we'd have to go past their fortified camp and enter the plains that are dominated by their chariots and cataphracts," Saufeia explained. "To do so would be to send our skirmishers on a suicide mission."

"Send out scouts," Trajan ordered. "Our fastest soldiers, I won't make a decision until I know the enemy's condition. Until we get reliable intelligence, I want everyone resting, restocking the towers and trebuchets, and repairing what damage has been done to the walls."

Once Trajan was finished, he was answered by a chorus of "Yes, Your Highness!" from everyone in the room.

With their immediate goals set, Trajan then turned his attention back to the situation with Leon. His young protégé was missing, and the Prince had no idea where he was or if he was even still alive.

Without any contact from Leon, Trajan could only hope his scouts could find something that pointed to his current status while spying on the Talfar camp.

—

After reporting to Trajan, Alix had to take Anzu to the griffin's beastmaster for a check-up. Unfortunately, without Leon present, the beastmaster had to sedate Anzu and keep him until he was completely healed, so Alix had to walk home alone.

*'Alone again...'* she thought as she walked through the streets of the Southern Horn.

She was hardly even angry, anymore. It was just a fact that she wasn't strong enough to be taken too seriously by the higher-ranked soldiers and it made perfect sense that even when Leon left to do something stupid that he would leave her behind.

Alix hated being weak. Had she been stronger, Sam and the others that she had become acquainted with at Fort 127 wouldn't be dead. If she were stronger, Leon would take her on his missions. If she were stronger, Trajan and Minerva wouldn't have dismissed her after reporting Leon's recklessness.

She was already essentially slated for a place in Trajan's retinue when she achieved the third-tier, something which she desperately wanted. All her life, she wanted nothing more than to be a knight, but she knew that this appointment was more of a courtesy to Leon than any endorsement of her own abilities. The Prince surrounded himself with skilled and talented people, like Minerva, Constantine, Aquillius, and Leon. She was under no illusion about how she stacked up against people like these.

She wanted to be a knight, to protect the weak and defeat the wicked like the brave and noble heroes in the stories she heard growing up. More than that, though, she wanted to earn her achievements, to not be given a prestigious appointment because the knight she was squiring for was close to the Prince.

As she walked through the streets, she heard a voice call out, "Hey! Miss Alix!"

She turned her dark brown eyes up from the stone pavement and saw Charles, Henry, and Alain sitting in a small corner café around a table eating breakfast. To her astonishment, she couldn't perceive either Henry or Alain's magical auras, meaning both had ascended to the third-tier! Even Charles' aura was strong and stable, far more so than when she had last seen him during Trajan's competition.

It was obvious they had benefitted greatly during their time in battle. Alix was still a rookie warrior compared to someone like Trajan, but she knew from personal experience that there was no better training environment than the middle of a battle with the auras of thousands of mages mixing together and creating a region dense with magic power. Additionally, few mages hold back with their power and strength when their lives are on the line, which makes for an extreme form of training that nothing can beat.

It made perfect sense to Alix why so many mages made great strides in their magic power after surviving a great battle.

And yet, Alix couldn't be happy. She was genuinely glad that Leon's friends were growing stronger, but right now, after she had been left behind again for being too weak, it felt like a slap in the face to see the progress of others and know that her own was far more modest.

Charles smiled at her and waved her over in a clear invitation to join them, but she couldn't, her legs wouldn't move. She smiled bitterly at the three young squires—they'd almost made it through their two-year minimum for their squireships, so they were soon-to-be knights—and shook her head.

"Need sleep," she explained, and Charles nodded and smiled again.

"Maybe next time," he responded, and Alix all-but ran back to the room she shared with Leon.

It seemed so quiet, so desolate when she was alone.

If she wanted to fix that, there was only one thing left to do: train.

*'When I get stronger,' she thought as she quickly changed into training attire, 'no one will leave me behind ever again!'*

—

Arthwyn glared at Owain, and the Prince felt himself unconsciously wilt before the bigger man's terrifying aura. Owain was only a fifth-tier mage, after all, while Arthwyn was a sixth-tier mage on the cusp of ascending to the seventh.

But Owain reached deep within himself, found his pride and dignity as a claimant to his Kingdom's throne, and straightened himself up to glare right back at his Marshal.

"Our supplies are in tatters," the Prince said in as menacing a voice as his smooth and boyish voice could muster, "to continue the battle would've been foolish."

Arthwyn continued to glare at Owain as he tried to organize his thoughts and figure out what he should do next.

"We'd all-but seized the first wall," Arthwyn growled as he emitted a copious amount of killing intent.

"That was our *best* opportunity to take Ariminium and *you* pissed it away."

"Taking the city would mean little if my army dissolved afterward!" Owain countered. "It's the throne I want, not this damned city!"

Suddenly, Arthwyn changed the subject, bluntly asking, "Where's Bran?"

This threw Owain off a little, but he didn't show it on his face. Instead, he admitted, "I sent him on a suicide mission, and it seems that's exactly what it was."

"You... sent him *into* Ariminium?" Arthwyn asked, seeking confirmation. "You *hoped* that he would die?"

Owain's smile was all the confirmation he needed. Arthwyn believed that Bran was a liability after witnessing the vampire killing his own subordinates and he certainly wasn't going to lose any sleep over the vampire's apparent death, but to lose him was a serious blow to their war potential. Now that he knew it was a deliberate act that got Bran killed, he began to feel his blood boil in wrath.

"You have..." Arthwyn began, but he stopped because he simply couldn't find the words for the situation. "I have... This is..."

"Spit it out," Owain demanded with a triumphant grin on his pretty face.

Arthwyn snapped. He flipped the table between him and Owain out of the way and grasped the Prince by the throat, lifting Owain into the air. The Prince was so surprised that he didn't even begin to resist until his feet had already left the ground.

"Put... me... down!" Owain sputtered, but Arthwyn barely heard him through the blood pumping through his ears.

"You have *ruined* this campaign!" Arthwyn almost shouted. He was grateful that the command tent was enchanted to prevent voices from leaking out, as the Prince's guards would've run in if they had heard the shouting. "This was supposed to be so *easy*, but you've gone and *fucked* us! Our supplies are nearly gone, most of our siege towers have been destroyed, and the rat that burned our supplies is still unaccounted for!"

There was a brief moment when Arthwyn seriously considered snapping Owain's neck and ordering another immediate assault on the walls, but in the end, his rationality won out. He dropped Owain, and the Prince barely managed to hold himself upright while he gasped for air.

"That... was treason..." the Prince rattled. "You... could be... executed... for this!"

"I'd like to see you try," Arthwyn challenged. "Kill me, and you lose this army. *I* was the one that built it, they're not here for you!"

Of course, Arthwyn was just speaking in anger, if push came to shove, he honestly didn't know if his own warriors would choose him over the Prince, let alone those from Bran's battalions or the peasants.

The two stood there silently staring death at each other, knowing that they couldn't actually do anything to the other without serious consequences for their future. Owain wouldn't take his throne without Arthwyn, and Arthwyn couldn't keep the army together without Owain.

Finally, Arthwyn broke the silence by stating, "There's work to be done," and leaving the command tent.

Owain felt like he won since Arthwyn broke eye contact first, but it was a hollow victory in the empty command tent. All the other warriors were taking counsel with Arthwyn, and the Prince wasn't going to follow the Marshal in his state of mind. So, he sat in the command tent, wondering what he should do next.

Outside, Arthwyn met up with several of his Warrior-Chiefs and their Captains, and the entourage followed Arthwyn back to his personal tent.

"What's the status of the army?" the Marshal asked once the flap was shut and no one could overhear.

"About twenty thousand dead, maybe twice that injured," a fifth-tier Warrior-Captain reported. "We'll have the vast majority of the injured healed in about five days, though."

"Good. Get started on more siege towers. Cut down that whole damned forest if you have to," Arthwyn ordered, and several Warrior-Captains left to see to that. "What about Marshal Gwen's army?"

"Still no word, my Lord," a Warrior-Chief responded.

'Odd,' Arthwyn thought to himself. '*She should only be about a week out from Briga by this point, we should be getting word of her movements by now...*'



Just another thing going wrong; Arthwyn pushed it out of his mind until he could calm himself down.

“And the Legion rat that snuck in?” he asked with a dangerous look in his eye.

“Emrys reported that he jumped into a canyon more than a thousand feet deep,” another Warrior-Chief said. “He’s supposedly dead, but Emrys and several thousand others are scouring the forest looking for him in case he survived. Emrys has also asked that cataphracts be deployed to patrol the plains between the forest and Briga, in case the rat tries to go around the forest and return to the Horns.”

“Get it done,” Arthwyn immediately responded. It was the peasants who would be building the siege towers, for the most part, and the cataphracts wouldn’t have much to do until it was time to attack again. To that end... “How long until we’ve replaced our siege towers and lost trebuchets?”

“A week, maybe,” Arthwyn’s supply officer reported. The Warrior-Chief withered a little as the Marshal turned his anger toward him.

“It only took a few days for the first ten,” Arthwyn stated, keeping his voice calm even if his aura weighed heavily on his subordinates.

“We lost too many enchanting supplies when the supply tent burned,” the supply officer explained. “To make our siege towers strong enough to resist the Bull’s magic, we’re going to need to wait on an emergency supply run from Briga.”

Arthwyn scowled, but there was little he could do. He knew the supply officer was doing his best, and he didn’t get to where he was by making unreasonable demands of his subordinates.

“Find that rat,” he growled to the entire room. He knew that Trajan wasn’t likely to attack a fortified position with inferior numbers, so he was confident that he had plenty of warriors to spare for the search. “Even if it’s just his corpse. Find that rat and bring him back to me. He’s nearly destroyed this campaign. Take as many warriors as needed. *Bring him to me.*”

## **Chapter 258: Hunting a Rat**

It was a chilly day, with an overcast sky and light rain, and the Talfar warriors who were sweeping through the forest that Leon had disappeared into were not happy. They had suffered a defeat when they assaulted the Bull’s Horns, and now they were stuck wandering through a mountain forest searching for Leon and failing; their morale was not the greatest, to say the least.

Emrys, Lorcan, and more than one hundred other Talfar warriors were waiting at the narrowest point of the chasm they could find, a section about sixty feet across. It was early, and their guard was down from their lack of success.

Lorcan tried to stifle a powerful yawn, eliciting a look of annoyance from the red-haired Emrys.

“What?” the fifth-tier warrior asked. “We’ve been out here for three damned days and haven’t found hide nor hair of your dead rat.”

“Don’t make assumptions,” Emrys growled, as he had done many times before since he’d lost Leon three days ago. “We can only call this search off once we find evidence that that rat is dead.”

“If it’s evidence we’re looking for, we’re going to be here a *long* time,” Lorcan grumbled.

Leaning in closer to whisper into his friend's ear, Emrys softly said, "You could be setting a better example for the others, you know."

Lorcan's tired slouch wasn't doing his already modest stature any favors, and the openness with which he questioned their purpose and clear boredom he displayed was engendering laziness and a lack of vigilance in the rest of the warriors, in Emrys' eyes.

Before Lorcan could respond, five fifth-tier mages sent by Arthwyn appeared in the trees walking toward Emrys' group.

"Finally!" Lorcan shouted as he shook himself awake. He wasn't a morning person, and if it were visible from behind the thick gray rain clouds, the sun would barely be over the horizon at this time of day.

The newcomers nodded to Emrys in greeting and got to work without any further ado. They weren't there to make friends, they had only one job: build a bridge. All five were earth mages, and once their job was finished, they would return to the camp, and they were more than eager to leave the damp forest and head back.

Working together, the engineer mages started by shaping the cliff they were standing on, curving it until it formed half an arch and extended about halfway to the other side. Then, they elongated the arch until it reached the other side, then shaped that side as well so it could support the weight of a hundred mages traversing it. By the time they were finished half an hour later, a smooth, elegant stone bridge had been formed over the chasm.

"Thanks," Emrys said to the lead engineer mage as they stepped to the side to evaluate their work. They wouldn't leave until they were certain the bridge was safe to cross.

"No problem," the mage replied as he put a few finishing touches on the bridge.

Turning back to his people, Emrys said, "As a reminder, you all have flare enchantments. If you catch sight of our rat, let the rest of us know."

"We remember," Lorcan responded with a wry smile.

"Don't underestimate this little bastard," Emrys said with an exasperated sigh. "He's already killed four of my people now, and he's already proven himself resourceful enough to infiltrate our camp and destroy our supply tent."

"Relax, buddy, if our dead rat isn't quite as dead as he should be, we'll do our duty," Lorcan said.

Emrys frowned, but he had said what he needed to. He knew that Lorcan's flippant attitude would disappear the moment anything unexpected happened, so he didn't bother chastising his lackadaisical attitude.

"You're all good," the lead engineer informed Emrys.

"Then let's get to work," Emrys said, and he led his hundred-man team across the bridge to the other side of the chasm while the last few warriors left over were left behind to guard the bridge.

The south side had already been exhaustively searched by the two thousand warriors Emrys had been given, and it was agreed that there was no way for their quarry to survive three days in the river below,

leaving only the north side to check. Emrys stationed most of the remaining warriors along the chasm to watch for the rat while his team went in to flush him out. This was a job for smaller, faster-moving teams; he didn't want the rat to hear them coming and vanish into the mountains.

Once on the other side of the bridge, the hundred warriors broke up into ten teams of ten and began spreading out into the forest. On the north side, the forest was dense enough that after walking a mere five hundred feet, none of the teams could see each other. After another two hundred feet, the teams might as well have been alone as the forest was too thick for them to have any hope of noticing if any of their comrades ran into trouble. Even launching an emergency flare wasn't guaranteed to get the attention of the other teams.

Lorcan's team wasn't particularly subtle as they hacked their way through the underbrush.

"Ugh, no way in the hells that someone made it through here," Lorcan mumbled as his team struggled to get through the thick, undisturbed flora. He couldn't conceive of the possibility that the rat he was hunting was anywhere close to him, the forest was just too dense for him to get away without leaving any tracks.

But then, his team almost stumbled into a small clearing that had been practically invisible until they were right beside it. What was more, there was a firepit in the center of the clearing with a bed of leaves right beside it.

"The fuck?" Lorcan wondered out loud before the possibility of what he had just discovered sank in. When it did, he wiped away the glib expression that he almost always wore and, with utter seriousness, said, "Spread out! Secure this campsite and pop off a flare!"

His order was followed by a chorus of "Yes, Captain!" from his teammates, and they quickly surged forward to secure the clearing. It wasn't that large of a space, perhaps only having a radius of thirty feet, so the ten warriors quickly finished. Apart from the make-shift bed and firepit, there didn't seem to be anything else in the clearing.

As one of the warriors fished around in his satchel for the flare spell, Lorcan spotted a hint of white in the still-smoldering ashes of the campfire. He bent down to examine it, and when he took hold of it and pulled it out of the ashes, it was revealed to be a spell of tremendous complexity, with hundreds of runes arranged in angular geometric patterns, much different from the usual curves and flowing lines of the enchantments that Lorcan was familiar with.

But then, as the Talfar warrior was slowly turning the spell around in his hands, one of the runes in the center of the glyphs lit up with a brilliant glittering blue. Lorcan immediately dropped the spell, as to hold an unknown spell as it's being activated was the height of foolishness. More runes began to light up, and in less than five seconds, the entire sheet of spell paper was glowing a harsh white-blue.

And then it detonated in a spectacular blast of lightning and rocked the forest with its thunder.

Lorcan, who had only taken a few steps away from the spell, was almost completely disintegrated.

The lightning blasted out from the spell and raked over the other nine warriors, melting flesh and shattering bone. The force of the spell blasted five of the warriors apart after the lightning weakened their bodies, while the other four survived, but were knocked unconscious.

In one horrifically short and brutal lightning explosion, Lorcan's entire team was eliminated.

—

Leon jumped. He wasn't going to allow himself to be taken prisoner by Emrys, and he was more confident in surviving the fall to the river at the bottom of the chasm than he was in facing an experienced sixth-tier mage in direct combat.

He plummeted from the cliff and in mere moments, passed through the mist and foam of the rapidly-flowing river and slammed into the water.

Instantly, Leon felt both of his legs break in multiple places, extracting a terrible shriek of pain from the young knight that was blocked by the water. Leon didn't fight the current and was swept along at high speed down the river. He crashed into one of the boulders in the center of the river hard enough to fracture his left elbow and dislocate that shoulder, causing Leon to almost black out from the pain of his injuries.

But he held on. As a fifth-tier mage, he could stay underwater for an hour or so despite most of the air in his lungs having been forced out of him when he hit the water, so he channeled his magic to dull his pain and let the current carry him downriver. Yet, not even a minute later, Leon had to try and flail his one good arm to swim out of the way of another boulder, but he failed. Fortunately, though, his armor took most of the impact and he was only winded a little.

And then Leon came to a complete stop. The water continued to rush around him, but it was like he was being held by invisible arms in the center of the river. Leon looked around him, trying to find out what had happened, but he could barely see anything, even with his magic flowing through his eyes. He wasn't caught on any branches or rocks, he just seemed to be floating in the center of the river, not moving in the slightest bit.

He quickly realized what had happened when he felt something unsettlingly jaw-like clamp down hard on his right shoulder pauldron. He was in the clutches of some kind of river creature, and he couldn't even see it.

That pressure didn't let up, and he felt his armor begin to warp under the strain. Leon called upon his magic power and in an instant lit up with golden lightning. The water around him vaporized and he heard a pained yelp come from behind him, but he quickly lost the opportunity to look back when the river suddenly began to affect him again, carrying him downriver faster than he could react.

He was exhausted and severely injured, so when he halted in the river again, he could feel nothing but terror and dismay. He couldn't see what was attacking him, and they were clearly strong enough to manipulate the river into trapping him.

Leon floated there for what seemed like hours to him, his eyes darting around searching for his assailants, but he saw nothing. In the actual minutes that it was, though, he noticed a pair of yellow orbs begin to take shape above him. These orbs swiftly coalesced into a pair of reptilian eyes that glared into his own, and a face began to solidify out of the river water to accompany them.

This face was that of a gorgeous pale-skinned woman, with high cheekbones, a small chin, and full lips. After her rapidly-materialized head came long flowing black hair that splayed out behind her like the

river around her and Leon was completely still. Then came her slender arms and shoulders—one of her pale hands was wrapped quite securely around his right arm, while the other was tracing the silver griffin on his cuirass—her full chest, and her slender waist. This process stopped at the top of her hips, making her look like she'd been cut in half.

For a moment, Leon was entranced with this woman's stunning beauty, but as her yellow eyes narrowed and her lips were drawn back to reveal sharp shark-like teeth, he snapped out of it and recognized this woman for what she was: a river nymph. She may look mostly human, but she was anything but, and as her face drew closer to him, Leon knew that he was nothing more than food to her.

The nymph's jaw closed around his right forearm, but his gauntlets prevented any significant damage, though the steel was lightly scratched. Leon instinctively tried to shake her off of him, but the water around him locked him in place and prevented all movement.

So, Leon stopped trying to move and forced himself to calm down. His heart was racing in panic at being caught by a fifth-tier monster that was trying to eat him, he could feel his hands shake in fear and pain, and his instincts screamed at him to flail and fight back.

After a momentary pause, Leon summoned his lightning once again and held nothing back. His eyes sparked and flashed with silver-blue light, and then he seemed to explode in a large blast of silver lightning that hurled the nymph away from him and once again vaporized the water holding him captive.

But it wasn't over. He didn't kill the nymph, and he was still in her territory.

## **Chapter 259: Captured**

The nymph hadn't left, of that Leon was certain. He could still feel her killing intent letting him know that she was still there, probably just waiting for a chance to eat him.

Leon flooded his body with as much magic as he could pull from his soul realm and readied himself for a brutal fight. He was in her territory, surrounded by water that she could use as her weapon. He'd have drawn his sword as well, but he wouldn't be able to swing it with enough force in the river, so he left it sheathed.

But before Leon could make any moves, he felt a hand wrap around his left ankle like an iron vise, sending a jolt of pain up through his broken leg. He was then yanked downward with far more strength than he could possibly resist in his current state, slamming him into the sandy bottom of the river. Leon let loose with his lightning, but everything happened so quickly that most of his power was absorbed by the sand, quickly melting it into glass.

The hand had also let go as soon as her attack had finished, and so Leon's lightning missed its intended target. Leon flailed around, trying to rise out of the sand and swim away, but he felt the water around him lock him down again, preventing all movement. He was then hurled into the side of the rocky cliff with enough force to send thousands of cracks spiderwebbing throughout the basalt pillars.

Leon's armor remained intact, but the impact was more than enough to crack a few ribs and elicit an instinctive shout, forcing all of the remaining air out of his lungs. The nymph didn't let this opportunity go to waste, and in the instant that Leon's mouth was open, water rushed past his lips and filled his lungs.

Leon tried to cough it all up, but whenever his mouth opened, any water that came up his throat was immediately pushed back down by more. The edges of Leon's vision began to blur and darken, and in desperation, Leon called upon all of his magic. Lightning burst out of him with such intensity that the sand beneath him vitrified, the water around him vaporized, and the nymph retreated once again with a terrible high-pitched scream that hit Leon like a needle to the eardrum.

His legs and left arm were broken, his left shoulder was dislocated, and many of his ribs were fractured, but Leon tried with all of his might to reach the surface of the river. He had no time to regret his decisions; the only thing on his mind was to cough up the water in his lungs and take in a breath of air.

Unfortunately, the river was deep, dark, and flowed incredibly quickly. By the time Leon struggled halfway to the surface, he could barely see anymore, and he felt his consciousness slipping away. But still, he kept going. He knew that if he didn't make it, he'd drown and his body would be eaten by the nymph.

Despite his determination, Leon didn't make it to the surface.

—

Deep beneath the forest was a vast, vaguely circular underground lake more than five miles in diameter. The lake's surface was covered in thin white mist, while the cavern it was in was dark, lit only by a few glowing red mushrooms and blue crystals in the ceiling about a hundred feet above the water's surface. The ceiling was vaguely dome-shaped, but it was so rough and crude that it would be clear to any mage that saw it that a powerful earth enchantment powered by the huge glowing blue gemstones was the only thing keeping the dome from collapsing and burying the lake, though none of the requisite runes were visible.

In the center of the lake was an island covered in grass and trees thick with blooming pink flowers that emitted more light than the mushrooms on the walls and ceiling of the cavern. The grass and trees seemed healthy and were growing quite well despite the lack of sunlight. The island wasn't big, perhaps five hundred feet across at most, and its shores were warm and sandy.

The nymph that attacked Leon dragged his unconscious form up onto the beach, then returned to the water to watch and wait, with only her eyes and the top of her head above water, the rest vanishing into the lake. Not even a minute later, a figure came walking out of the grove of trees with almost ethereal grace and bent down next to Leon. The figure closely examined Leon, taking in every visible detail, from his black, slightly dented armor to his strong fifth-tier aura.

'Yes...' the figure thought to herself as she studied his aura even closer, her interest piqued at what she could sense, *'yes, he should do...'*

—

When Leon awoke, he found himself laying on his side next to a pond of crystal-clear water illuminated by a radiant blue gemstone at the bottom. He laid on grass and soft dirt and was so comfortable that he didn't want to move. It took a few seconds for his mind to clear and for him to remember his fight with the nymph and how he'd lost consciousness when water filled his lungs.

He lunged upward, drawing the sword that was still at his side. It wasn't until he was on his feet and the blade was in his hand that he began to wonder why he was still alive, where he was, why he was still armed and armored, and why his body was no longer wracked with pain.

The pond was surrounded by the trees with glowing pink flowers, and what he had at first thought was the night sky was just the roof of the cavern studded with more glowing crystals.

[Ah, you're awake,] a smooth and sultry voice whispered into Leon's mind.

It sounded to him like the voice came from the pond, so Leon whipped around ready for a fight, but the pond still appeared empty. At least, it did until he noticed a pair of gleaming dark blue eyes staring back at him from the water as if they were floating on their own. These eyes appeared completely human, save for the soft blue light that seemed to shine out of their depths.

These eyes were quickly joined by a beautiful, broad face with high cheekbones, a narrow jaw, and lips turned up in a provocative smile. This woman's face was quickly followed by her full head of long light brown hair and a tall, well-endowed, hourglass body, sans clothes. Her skin was also fairly dark, far more than Leon expected a cave-dwelling person's ought to be—in fact, her bronze features were fairly reminiscent of Asiya Samarid and the few other desert-dwellers that Leon had encountered.

However, despite her complete lack of clothes, what Leon found most striking about this woman was her aura; he couldn't make heads or tails of it and combined with the high pressure her aura exerted on him, it was clear that she was much stronger than he was. At a minimum, she was sixth-tier, but Leon guessed simply from how unconcerned she was at his brandished sword that she was stronger even than that.

He immediately assumed a defensive pose and magic poured out of his soul realm, but even this didn't perturb the nymph, which only made him more on edge and guarded.

But then, before Leon could do any more than simply raise his blade, the nymph vanished. She didn't fade away like Leon did when he used his invisibility ring, she was simply there one moment and gone the next. Leon contemplated blasting the area around the pond with lightning to try and draw the nymph out, but his instincts told him that this would be a terrible idea.

And then her arms wrapped around his shoulders from behind; Leon hadn't even heard or otherwise sensed her approach. He immediately tried to pull himself away, but he barely moved more than a few inches before his body locked in place.

[I'd appreciate it if you didn't treat me like an enemy,] the nymph whispered into his ear with a wide smile and a seductive tone, though her lips didn't move. [If I wanted you dead, you would never have awoken, my girls would've simply eaten you...]

Leon felt his fingers that grasped his sword start to relax. He tried to fight it, but no matter how hard he tried, he ultimately failed; his sword slipped from his grip and fell to the ground.

[There, that's a little better, isn't it?] the nymph murmured. [Things are always better when we don't resort to trying to kill each other, aren't they?]

"What... did you do... to me?" Leon managed to choke out.

[Oh?] the nymph exclaimed in mild surprise. [You can still speak, even with my magic... Well, aren't you just a delightful young man...]

Her grip seemed to slacken slightly, and Leon almost immediately used his lightning without thought. However, he suddenly remembered an old lesson Artorias was fond of: the two would occasionally find cause to cross a bridge back in the Forest of Black and White. This old bridge was home to a forest troll.

This beast didn't possess much in the way of power or strength, and while it had some measure of intelligence, it wasn't particularly bright. Still, it was self-aware, spoke a crude language of its own, and valued shiny metal—silver, especially.

Artorias used to pay this troll so that he and Leon could cross the bridge peacefully. He could've easily killed the troll to save himself the hassle, but the troll was a living being, capable of thought and reason. Leon was taught to always be ruthless and decisive with his enemies, but he was also taught to be civil and patient with those who were not, no matter who or what they were.

He had to admit that he never did internalize that lesson as deeply as Artorias would've liked and that the past few years had been stressful enough that he was only now remembering it. Leon thought about this troll and how Artorias handled it, and rather than blasting the nymph behind him with lightning, he quietly croaked, "What do you want with me?"

[What do I *want*?] the gorgeous nymph asked as if she considered the question rather quaint. [What I want, boy, is your strength!]

She then gently undid the straps of Leon's helmet and pulled it off, revealing his face. The nymph gasped, then circled around to his front to get a better view. Even after removing her arms from around him, Leon still found himself unable to move enough to do more than stand and talk, much to his fear and frustration.

The nymph was only an inch or two shorter than he was—though, to be fair, he was wearing boots while she was completely naked. She ran her finger along Leon's jawline and stared into his golden eyes.

[I knew it...] she whispered as if she were thinking out loud. [There's something within you, some kind of Inherited Bloodline...]

Recalling the Thunderbird's statement that no power could touch his mind when he used his lightning and suspecting that it was some kind of mental power that the nymph was using, Leon summoned his power one more time, giving everything he had without the restraint he had grown used to during the past year to break free of this nymph's control. His body began to spark and flash with arcs of silver lightning, and when one arc connected with the nymph's finger that was still on his face, she quickly pulled back with a sharp yelp of pain.

Unfortunately, she wasn't hurt that badly, she simply wasn't used to pain and was surprised.

[Something to do with lightning, then...] she said as Leon began to twitch and jerk; his efforts were paying off, her hold over him was failing.

But then, she slammed her palm into Leon's stomach, producing a ringing sound from his cuirass that echoed throughout the entire cavern and hurling Leon back into a nearby tree.



[I went to the trouble of healing you, boy, don't make me break you again,] she said with a dangerous look in her eye.

"What do you want with me?!" Leon angrily repeated as he lay motionless among the roots of the tree he was hurled into.

[I told you already, I want your strength,] the nymph said as her smile widened. [This is my fertile period, and you are the first man my girls have brought to me that is worthy of fathering my children!]

Leon was struck speechless at this admission. He expected that this nymph wanted to do something unsavory, but he wasn't expecting anything close to reproduction! Something more like eating him in some kind of magic ritual was closer to Leon's expectations.

The nymph slowly walked over to him with a rapacious look as Leon processed her statement. By the time he shouted, "No!" she was already standing over him, her body on full display.

And yet, Leon wasn't that enticed, despite her exceptional looks. Sex was one of the last things on his mind after recent events, and she was doing absolutely nothing to get him over that. Besides, Leon already had Elise, and he wasn't about to start doing anything romantic or sexual with anyone else behind her back, even if he had the inclination.

But as the thought of Elise drifted through his mind, the words 'You are *nothing* to me...' accompanied it.

'*That wasn't her,*' Leon thought to himself as he pushed the image of Elise from Bran's illusion out of his head.

The nymph leaned down, placed her hand upon Leon's cuirass, and whispered with a chilling look in her lake-blue eyes, [This has to happen, I can't give you a choice... I *will* not!]

## **Chapter 260: Naiad**

From his Magmic Steel cuirass down to his Skyflax padding, all of Leon's armor was carefully removed by the nymph, and she took her time, obviously savoring the removal of every piece.

For his part, Leon desperately tried to think of a way out of this, but he couldn't even move, let alone fight. He was powerless to stop the nymph from taking off his shirt and running her hands over all of him in her reach.

[It's true what my mother told me about human males,] she whispered, and for the first time, Leon truly looked at her. Her right index finger traced a line down the center of his chest and abdomen, but there was some slight trembling that Leon picked up on.

"You don't have to do this, we don't know each other, I don't even know your name!" Leon babbled, hoping that if he got her talking then he would have more time.

[I *do* have to do this, though,] the nymph replied, returning Leon's gaze and giving him another predatory look like he was just a bunny caught in her trap.

"No one *has* to do anything!" Leon shouted.

[Then you don't *have* to resist,] she countered as her fingers hooked around Leon's pants while his shirt was tossed onto the same pile as his armor.

"Don't do this," Leon muttered, his complete helplessness causing his voice to shake, and his eyes grow watery for the first time in longer than he could remember. He wasn't the fifth-tier knight anymore, he was now just a helpless teenager in the jaws of a snake.

Finally, the nymph's hands stopped before Leon was completely exposed, but she did not remove them from his pants. Her look of glee faded while her subtle anxiety grew more obvious.

*'This isn't at all like what Mother said would happen...'* she thought to herself. She only had a few opportunities to see her servants taking human men for sex, and Leon wasn't acting like any of them. Usually, the men were more than eager to participate, at least until the nymphs had taken their fill and the men were eaten.

[You... are male, correct?] the nymph asked. She'd seen so few humans that she wasn't even sure what a female human looked like; she had no way to compare. Besides, most of the humans caught by her lesser nymphs were Talfar fishermen, who were more often than not thickly bearded and sported much longer hair. Leon's clean-shaven face and short hair weren't something that the nymph had seen before.

Leon glared at her; his eyes dry after having taken the few moments she was lost in thought to compose himself. The nymph could tell by his aura that he was preparing for another blast of lightning, but she wasn't concerned. He wasn't nearly strong enough to harm her in any significant way, and she had to do this.

The nymph tightened her grip on Leon's pants and was just about to pull them down when she stopped again.

[Out of curiosity,] she began, [why is knowing the name of your partner important?]

The question caught Leon completely off-guard. The lightning raging through his body calmed for a moment as he began to hope that maybe, just maybe, she was still open to reason.

"It's important to be relaxed, to feel safe when connected with someone like that," Leon explained as Elise flashed through his mind. He quickly clamped down on thoughts of her, though. He loved her, but if this nymph wanted to take him by force, he wasn't going to make it easier by thinking about his lover. "It leaves a person vulnerable, and they have to trust their partner to not cause them pain... unless they want it... which I don't..."

The nymph sat back, finally letting go of Leon's pants as she contemplated his words. Leon kept on rambling in an attempt to buy time, but she stopped paying attention. There was something about his words that were striking a chord with her, but her mother also taught her to choose her partners carefully and to take what she wanted when she had the opportunity, leaving no option for them to refuse.

[Mmmmm, you humans have strange customs, reproduction should just be done! No point in dancing around it, I'm strong and you're weak, but your blood is strong! My daughters will have that blood!] the nymph eventually said as she turned back to him. [But, if it makes it any easier, you can call me Naiad.]

She reached for Leon again, but lightning exploded out of him and she instinctively pulled her hands back. A few arcs of lightning zapped her a few times, but she wasn't that injured by any of them. If anything, Leon's silver lightning was little more than a nuisance, but it also ruined her mood.

Naiad's aura exploded out of her, completely suppressing Leon's own and his lightning withered away as his breath was forcibly expelled from his compressed chest.

[You're making this far more difficult than it needs to be,] she said with more than a hint of anger.

"You're assaulting me!" Leon unexpectedly roared, causing Naiad to imperceptibly flinch. "I will resist you with everything I have!"

Naiad and Leon stared at each other. Both were motionless, but Leon was still being held down while Naiad was paralyzed by indecision.

And then, Naiad's aura fell back down to more normal levels and the pressure on Leon abated. Even the magic that was preventing his movement relaxed, though not enough for him to do more than gingerly adjust his position on the ground.

[Why do you resist?] Naiad asked, looking down on Leon with a mix of anger, frustration, and genuine curiosity. [All those captured by the lesser nymphs for mating were *quite* willing, but you refuse me. *Why?*]

"I don't want to have sex with you," Leon said simply. "The more you push, the less I want it."

Again, the two fell into a long silence as they stared at each other, Leon lying in the dirt at the foot of a tree and Naiad standing over him.

[Why...] Naiad hesitantly began before seeming to think twice. [What would make you willing?] she eventually asked.

Leon looked back at her and whispered, "I'm not sure that's possible."

Naiad sighed, then snapped her fingers and Leon was almost blinded by a bright flash of green light. When his vision returned, he found that he could move again.

[Don't go far,] Naiad ordered. [If you try to run, I will bind you again.]

Leon slowly sat up and, when it was clear that Naiad wasn't going to try and stop him, reached for his shirt. He contemplated putting the rest of his armor back on, but he decided that it was best for the time being to leave all of it and his sword where they were.

When he finished getting dressed again—Naiad watching him the entire time—the two awkwardly stood there for what seemed like hours.

[I... can't let you go,] Naiad whispered.

"Can you tell me where we are?" Leon asked.

[Seven long-counts from Saron,] she replied.

Leon blinked in confusion, then murmured, "I have no idea what that means..."

[Saron is where I was born, and a long-count is... three of your miles? Maybe four...] Naiad helpfully answered while narrowing her eyes in thought.

"How about... how far are we from where I was caught?" Leon inquired hoping for something a little more useful to him. Without knowing where Saron was, knowing where he was in relation to it wasn't that helpful.

[Hmm, maybe only one or two long-counts,] Naiad said. [Not that it matters, you won't leave here without giving me your seed!]

"There's a war going on, I have to get back!" Leon almost shouted.

[Not my problem,] Naiad dismissively replied. [Humans kill each other in droves, it doesn't affect me and mine.]

"Why are you so insistent on having me?" Leon demanded in frustration. "You could go anywhere and have anyone you like, easily someone stronger than me, someone with another Inherited Bloodline if you so choose!"

[These other people are not here right now, and that's what counts,] Naiad responded with a reproachful look. She then sighed and said, [Since it distresses you so much, I would rather not force this to happen. But it *must* happen.]

"Why?" Leon asked.

Naiad watched Leon's stoic, yet subtly angry face for a long moment as if deciding what she should and shouldn't tell him. Eventually, she came to a decision and, with a look of sorrow and a hint of fear, asked, [Do you know what a Gorgon is?]

"A creature that's half woman and half snake, strong enough in earth magic to petrify people" Leon replied. "I almost ran into one once, a few years ago..." As he thought about it, it occurred to him that the Gorgon he and Artorias encountered during his hunt to find a creature strong enough to awaken his bloodline also ruled over the river nymphs of the Forest of Black and White, just as Naiad seemed to be in charge of the local nymphs.

[If a Naiad gets too old without reproducing, we turn into Gorgons,] the nymph explained. [It's not a pleasant experience, from what I've been led to believe. It twists the Naiad's mind, leading her to kill all other Naiads she encounters. And if there are no Naiads, then our lesser nymphs will all die.]

[I'm already one hundred and seventy years old. I *must* mate with you, not only to give my children strong blood but to protect myself and my girls!]

Leon stared at Naiad for a long time, trying to detect any deceit in her pleading and desperate gaze. She was a far cry from the domineering person she had been only minutes before, and he couldn't help but feel some small amount of sympathy for her, despite what she had almost done to him. And at the very least, he couldn't sense any hostility from her, and he was inclined to believe her when she had said that she was the one who healed him.

But, still...

"... I can't. I'm sorry, but I can't," Leon said.

[Why not?] Naiad demanded to know, and her eyes drifted downward at herself, thinking that reason was her.

And she wasn't entirely wrong, but it wasn't her body that Leon had a problem with. If anything, he was trying very hard not to stare.

"Generally speaking," Leon said a tone of uncharacteristic frustration, "people don't like being forced. Maybe if you want something, try asking first."

[Then will you give me your seed?] Naiad asked.

"Can't do that," Leon replied, to the nymph's consternation.

[If you're going to say no, then what was the point of my asking?]

Leon almost snapped at her, but for the sake of his own life, he barely managed to refrain. Still, his anger shone through his stoic face for a moment and Naiad unconsciously took a step back.

"So... 'Naiad' isn't your name, then?" Leon asked, changing the subject to stop himself from doing something stupid.

[I am a Naiad,] the nymph replied. [Naiad's are the Queens of the nymphs.]

"So you have a civilization? Or at least a society?" Leon curiously asked.

[Hmm, not like what you humans have, there aren't enough of us,] Naiad explained with her blue eyes closed in thought and her hand on her chin. If she hadn't just almost raped Leon, he might've even found the expression cute. [We prefer to stay on our own, only gathering if the need arises. And the need *rarely* arises.]

"Hmm," Leon hummed. He let his golden eyes wander around the island, taking in everything from the trees covered in pink flowers to the pond filled with crystal-clear water. He hadn't noticed it before, but this air in this place was extremely thick with magic power. If it weren't in the middle of a nymph-infested lake, it would make an ideal place to train for those with an affinity for water magic.

With that thought, Leon was suddenly reminded that Artorias had once told him that his Bloodline gave him some small affinity for water and wind magic, but that struck Leon as a bit odd, as from what he had been able to study from his family's books, none of his family's magical arts involved water or wind.

*'Something to ask the Thunderbird about,'* Leon thought, filing that thought away for later.

[I've just thought of something,] Naiad suddenly said, fixing Leon in her icy-cold gaze and pulling him out of his thoughts. [Humans like to barter, to trade, right?]

"... Some find great pleasure in it," Leon admitted hesitantly; he had a feeling he knew where this was going, and it put him on edge.

[I have a need for your seed, and you have a need to return to your people. Perhaps we can trade?] Naiad suggested.

"I've already told you, I can't."

[You've told me you can't, but you didn't explain yourself,] Naiad shot back, her beautiful face twisting in suppressed anger.

"I already have a lady that I'm involved with," Leon said.

[So? I've heard that humans take many mates.]

Leon cringed a little. It was true that his was a polyamorous society, to an extent, but that also carried with it the implication that everyone was informed and gave their consent. Elise had no idea what was happening here, and Leon hadn't the intention to father children without her knowledge and agreement; sleeping with someone without Elise's knowledge would still be considered cheating.

When Leon explained this to Naiad, she frowned and went back to silently thinking for a while. The thought of trying to get away while she was distracted never once entered Leon's mind; he knew he wouldn't get away even if he didn't have to carry all of his armor and weapons.

But then Naiad seemed to think of something; her eyes snapped open and she took a few steps toward Leon with an odd smile on her face.

[There is something we can do...] she said, her smile only growing stranger to Leon. It was a worrying mix of hope, anticipation, and elation, none of which engendered much of any of those feelings in Leon. [I have thought about it, and maybe I have been a bit too hasty. I have a decade or two before things start becoming dire for me, while you have somewhere you need to be right now. So let's make a pact!]

"What do you mean by 'pact'?" Leon asked as he took a step back and his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

[I mean you declare that you will father my children at a time of my choosing, and I will lead you out of here!]

As soon as the words were spoken, Leon's face twitched in distaste.

[Don't give me that look,] Naiad said with almost as much anger and frustration as Leon felt. [This is a good compromise. You go about your business, and I will come to you at a later date for my due. This is the best the deal is going to get, if you refuse it then I'm pushing you back down!]

From the way she both glared and leered at him, Leon knew she wasn't kidding about pushing him down. She may have stopped when she realized that he wasn't as into it as she had thought he would be, but he could also feel her desperation and desire to not turn into a Gorgon.

This was the best deal he was going to get, but he still felt dirty.

"... Very well," he reluctantly mumbled, feeling as unworthy of Elise's trust and love as he had during the worst parts of Bran's illusion.

[Wonderful!] Naiad joyfully exclaimed, in stark contrast to Leon's dour expression. [Hold out your hand!]

Leon complied, his resistance to her crumbling the instant he agreed. As soon as he held out his hand, Naiad seized it and twined her fingers around Leon's own.

[Now, push your magic into me,] Naiad whispered. [I will do likewise, and we will speak our terms.]

Again, Leon did as she directed, channeling his magic down his arm and into his hand. His magic was then transferred out of him and immediately replaced with Naiad's power, a soft, gentle stream of power that wound its way through his body to find Leon's heart.

[You go first,] Naiad demanded.

Leon hesitated, he averted his eyes, he did everything he could to delay, but in the end, he only bought himself a handful of seconds. "I... I will..." he sputtered.

[Say. It,] Naiad repeated, her expression hardening and the power that flowed into Leon taking on an icy sharpness. [At a time of my choosing, you will father my children!]

"At a time... of your choosing," Leon said through gritted teeth, barely able to say the words, "I will... father your children..."

Once the words were out, Leon almost choked, and it was all he could do to maintain his composure and not attack Naiad.

[In exchange, I will lead you from this lake and back to the surface,] Naiad happily replied, her power warming again.

Leon felt that power form a pattern, but he couldn't distinguish what that pattern was; before he could use his magic senses to try and examine it, it vanished into his soul realm.

Seeing the look on his face, Naiad smiled and said, [We are now connected, we can't back out of this deal. Now, gather your things, I will fulfill my end right now!]

Leon immediately let go of her hand and went back to his pile of armor. He put it all back on as quickly as he could, grabbed his sword and slid it into his sheath, and started making his way back to the beaming Naiad.

[Your bow,] Naiad said, pointing over to where Leon had first woken up. His bow was sitting in the grass there, but he hadn't noticed it before her appearance took his attention.

"Thanks," Leon said quietly as he slung his bow over his shoulder. Like the rest of his gear, the water he'd been submerged in wasn't that great for it, but it was too heavily enchanted to have any damage worth Leon's time to repair.

He was finally ready. He returned to Naiad, who extended her hand with a smile of such warmth and happiness that even Leon found it just a little bit harder to be angry. But only a little bit, he was still furious and frustrated in ways he couldn't properly express.

[Now, come with me,] Naiad said, taking his hand and leading him back to the lake.