

Storm King 261

Chapter 261: The Bull's Ghost I

Leon gasped for air as he surfaced in a small pond in the middle of a forest on the north side of the chasm. Naiad giggled beside him as he pulled himself out of the water and onto dry ground. There had been no places for him to breathe between the lake and the exit pond, a distance that took Leon almost fifteen minutes to swim, so he was more than a little out of breath.

When Leon's breathing steadied, he turned around and locked eyes with Naiad, who was still watching him. Once she'd entered the lake, the lower half of her body had disappeared into the water, putting on the same eerie display that all the other nymphs did.

Still, Leon had to admit that even after what she had done to him, she was extremely beautiful. Her bronze skin glistened in the sunlight, her blue eyes glittered with coy playfulness, and her... Leon had to cut himself off there, any more thoughts about her looks and his anger and antipathy toward her may lessen.

[Remember, boy,] she said as they stared at each other, [you owe me at least one child. Your power is within me now, as mine is within you. You won't get away from me, this pact will be completed one day.]

"I understand," Leon growled.

Naiad giggled again, then dove back under the surface of the pond, the rest of her body disappearing before she even entered the tunnel that led back to the lake.

Her giggle sent a shiver down Leon's spine, and he immediately turned around and left, trying to put this entire experience behind him. He didn't know how long he had until that pact caught up with him, but he knew he wasn't going to get away from her so easily. He had a vague notion of where she was in relation to him, and he had the impression that with her much higher power level, her idea of his location was much more refined. And with that much higher power level, she'd have little trouble getting to him, even if he were far away from any major bodies of water or protected by hordes of loyal warriors.

If he were a more conceited person, he might feel honored that such a powerful being found him worthy of being her mate, but the whole thing just left him feeling gross. Besides, it was one thing if she actually wanted *him*, but it was his blood Naiad was after, not him as a person. He didn't consider himself worthy of that attention on his own merits, it was all because of what he had inherited from the Thunderbird.

He had a lot of trouble getting this situation out of his head, to say the least; this, along with the attention of the vampire Bran, he was starting to get more than a little insecure about his own accomplishments and how much was actually the result of his own actions and how much due to his blood.

But this wasn't the time for such thoughts. He forced them out of his head, but in their place came thoughts about how much trouble he'd be in if he made it back to the Horns. It occurred to him that he

had no idea how long he'd been gone, a day at most if he were lucky, but regardless, he knew that Trajan would be indescribably furious.

'Ahhh, I really fucked up,' Leon thought to himself as he ascended a nearby hill and began to climb the tallest tree he could find. When he reached the top, he could see the chasm about six miles to the south. *'At least she didn't lie about bringing me back this far,'* he cynically thought.

He stayed up in that tree for about an hour trying to clear his head before he started to make his way back down. It was close to sunset and he needed to find a place to rest, so he started meandering his way south, keeping a paranoid eye on his surroundings—a forest with river nymphs was putting him back into old habits—and managed to snag himself a rabbit for dinner with a well-placed arrow to the neck.

A few minutes after, he built a small fire in a clearing to cook his meal, then made a bed of leaves so he wouldn't have to sleep in the dirt. Before he fell asleep, though, he had one last piece of business to take care of; the magic power he channeled into his invisibility ring was leaking out, preventing enough power from getting to the emerald and thus preventing the invisibility enchantment from activating.

Leon slipped the ring off his finger and gave it a thorough examination. He quickly discovered the problem: a long, deep crack on the opposite side of the gold band from the emerald. Leon couldn't help but sigh in dismay at the damage—if it were just a problem with the enchantment he'd be able to fix it, but the ring itself was damaged and that was beyond his current ability to repair.

Still, he had a copy of the enchantment in the documents within his soul realm, so if he made it back to Ariminium, he was confident that he could find a smith to fix the ring, and then he'd be able to fix the disrupted enchantment—or, failing that, find an enchanter or artificier working for Heaven's Eye to do so. But returning to the Horns would be a significantly more difficult task without invisibility.

Leon took a few minutes and pulled the ring into his soul realm. If it wasn't going to be useful, then he'd rather keep it as safe as possible for the time being. While he was awake, though, he decided to add to his collection of depleted spells. He retrieved a quill, ink, and spell paper, and got to work.

When he was done, he had one more of his Thunderblast spells and about a dozen more white-fire spells, but the sun had set and his eyes had grown heavy, so he put his enchanting supplies away and lay back on his makeshift bed. He didn't fall asleep right away, and his thoughts quickly became occupied with weighing his options for moving forward.

His best bet, he thought, was to continue going south. He'd never be able to make it through the plains to the west, and while there was the possibility that he could potentially find a safe way through the mountains to the east, he figured that it would take weeks if not longer, and he didn't believe he had that kind of time.

'No, I need to get back as soon as I can, and that means going south,' Leon thought. *'I'll have to be careful to avoid the inevitable Talfar patrols, and I have to find a way to cross the chasm, but south is still the only option I have to make it back in anything resembling a timely fashion...'*

With his mind made up, or rather, with his previous decision confirmed, his thoughts turned to other things. He thought about Trajan and how angry the Prince likely was with him. He thought about Alix and the look of anguish she had at being left behind yet again. He thought about Charles, Henry, and

Alain, and hoped that his friends were doing well—he knew that their Legion had been assigned to the main walls between the Horns and so they had likely seen some combat.

Finally, Leon thought about Anzu. When he'd left on his admittedly stupid and reckless mission, Anzu had been badly injured by a Talfar trebuchet. Leon hoped with everything he had that his little griffin was all right.

Before he could think of anything else, Leon's eyes closed, and he fell into a deep, mentally exhausted sleep that he didn't wake from until late the next morning when the sounds of an approaching Talfar squad resounded through his clearing.

Leon sprang to his feet as soon as his brain processed what those sounds were. He only had a few minutes to collect himself and he quickly came up with a plan. He retrieved his freshly-inscribed Thunderblast spell and hurriedly buried it in the ashes of his fire, then scrambled up a tree. He barely managed to get himself hidden when the first Talfar warrior stumbled into his camp...

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Leon jumped down from his hidden perch and surveyed the result of his lightning spell. Nine Talfar warriors were dead, and the last one was so mangled that he wasn't going to live long; Leon put an arrow into his chest and ended the man's suffering. The rest of the warriors were some combination of burned, dismembered, and vaporized from the Thunderblast spell.

After his complete helplessness before Naiad, Leon felt immense satisfaction in this result, but he didn't stay long. The lightning spell had been extremely loud and Leon didn't want to get caught between any other squads that might be out in the forest converging on his location, so with a victorious smile on his face, Leon vanished into the forest.

He was a little concerned that there were warriors in the forest north of the chasm at all; he didn't think the hassle of getting across would be worth it.

'I guess they're more determined to find me than I thought...' Leon thought with a slight frown.

But on the other hand, the mere fact that there were warriors around at all meant that there was a way across the chasm he could use. He could approach the chasm and follow it until he found that way across. Leon turned south and moved through the forest like a ghost. He left no tracks and made little noise. He was essentially invisible even without his ring; only a high-tiered mage using their magic senses would be able to find him, but he restrained his aura to minimize this possibility, as while they were a powerful tool, magic senses weren't perfect.

As he was on his way, though, he heard the sounds of another squad of Talfar warriors clumsily hacking and ripping their way through the forest, and he stopped for a moment. His heart still beat with anger and frustration from his experience with Naiad, and here he had another perfect opportunity to vent a little.

Leon quickly climbed up into the dense canopy of dark green leaves and stared to the east, where the noises were coming from. From his vantage point, he could see ten warriors, with the strongest mage among them being a single fifth-tier mage.

'I can take that many... hopefully...' Leon confidently thought as he unlimbered his bow.

The squad was about two hundred feet away and they weren't even trying to be stealthy. They loudly swore as they stumbled their way past roots, vines, and bushes. Leon couldn't make out what they were saying, but he didn't much care, anyway. He simply conjured a handful of white-fire arrows from his soul realm and got down to business.

With practiced precision, Leon had fired three arrows before the warriors even knew they were under attack. These arrows accurately hit three warriors in the gaps of their lack-luster armor, and a moment later, incinerated them. Two more arrows were fired before the other warriors could even process what had just happened. In a matter of seconds, half of the squad had been rendered into ash and white-hot fire, including their only mage capable of elemental magic.

The rest of the warriors scrambled for cover, but Leon took care of them in short order with a few more well-placed arrows, but he refrained from using his white-fire spells on them, as in those spells he was running low. Instead, the two warriors he didn't instantly kill with his bow he finished off with his sword.

Once the job was done and Leon was left alone with the bodies of the warriors, he breathed a heavy sigh and looked around at each one of them. He enjoyed fighting a great deal, and he enjoyed hunting even more, but taking life wasn't something he particularly wanted to celebrate. Still, he found the hunt exhilarating, and he couldn't deny the catharsis that killing his enemies brought him.

He hardened his nerve and moved on. He didn't hate killing, after all, he simply found it fairly unremarkable. The warriors of Talfar were his enemy, and that was that.

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Emrys stared down at what little remained of Lorcan's body. The Thunderblast spell had vaporized most of his flesh, leaving a charred skeleton whose bones had been almost entirely fused together. Lorcan was only identifiable by his boots and the few scraps of armor that remained.

With rising fury, Emrys glanced around at his friend's dead squad, who were scattered in pieces around the clearing.

'He's alive,' Emrys thought with a level of hatred that he never thought himself capable of. *'I knew he survived that fall, and now he's killing more of my friends!'*

The hypocrisy of being a member of the army that started this war was completely lost on him; he hadn't made the decision to invade, and so he felt his rage justified when his friends were killed and his countrymen starved because of the rat.

This wasn't the first time Emrys had lost friends in battle; in fact, if Emrys were to count the number of friends he'd lost on his hands, he'd very quickly run out of fingers, and he wouldn't even be close to adding Lorcan.

So, while Emrys was enraged, he maintained his composure.

"Look for tracks, anything that might tell us where this little rat fucker went!" he ordered the nine warriors at his back. Said warriors spread out around the clearing while Emrys respectfully arranged the bodies of Lorcan's squad in a pile and incinerated what was left.

Generally speaking, most in the Talfar Kingdom were buried, but cremations were perfectly acceptable in times of war when bringing bodies home wasn't practical. In this case, Emrys had to admit to himself that bringing Lorcan's squad back to the Talfar camp was probably easy enough, but he didn't want to waste time when his quarry was still at large.

Once he was done, he looked to his squad, but none had found any evidence of where the rat had scurried off to.

Emrys scowled, then led his squad onward. *'The old-fashioned way, then,'* he thought as he projected his magic senses out into the forest. It might alert his prey, but he was determined to find and gut the rat that had already killed several of his friends.

'And I will find you, I swear it!' Emrys vowed as he led his warriors deeper into the forest.

Chapter 262: The Bull's Ghost II

Four days had passed since the bridge was completed, and Emrys had nearly all of his two-thousand strong force searching the dozens of square miles of forest on the northern side of the chasm. Well, to be more accurate, his seventeen or eighteen hundred strong force. Over the past few days no less than twenty squads had turned up dead, and another six were missing, and no living warrior had yet seen hide or hair of their prey.

To say that the atmosphere in the squads was tense would be putting it mildly; in the four days since crossing the chasm, Emrys' warriors were now so on edge that the Warrior-Chief was having to punish insubordination on an almost hourly basis whenever he wasn't actively participating in the search.

Compounding the issue was that supplies from the camp were frustratingly light. Emrys knew that Talfar's supply situation was in dire straights after most of it went up in flames, but that did little to help when his warriors' stomachs were rumbling so loudly that he was almost surprised the ground didn't shake. Hunting in the forest mitigated this a little bit, but Emrys couldn't devote too many people to foraging when their rat was still on the loose.

"Damn, that's a terrible way to die," one fourth-tier warrior muttered as Emrys' squad surveyed the carnage in one remote corner of the forest. Ten corpses were scattered around a blackened section of the forest, most of them little more than ash and scorched bone.

Emrys had heard the sounds of battle in the distance, but when they finally managed to work their way through the dense forest, the fight was long over and ten more Talfar warriors were dead. Most of them had been burned to death, but three of the warriors near the edges of the still-smoldering ambush area had been clearly killed with a bladed weapon rather than fire.

"Be careful," Emrys warned, "there may be mines left behind for anyone who came to investigate..."

There had been several times when squads had been found dead, only for those warriors that found them to be caught in traps left for them by the rat. However, those measures were mostly confined to areas closer to the bridge, and in this remote corner of the forest there likely wasn't much danger, but Emrys wasn't going to let his guard down when lives were on the line.

As Leon watched the Emrys' squad examine the dead squad he'd left behind, he clicked his tongue and thought, *'Knew I should've left a few mines behind. Oh well.'*

The lost opportunity stung a little, but he didn't dwell on it and he hauled ass away; he wasn't about to take on a sixth-tier mage in battle if he didn't have to, and he wasn't going to wait around for said mage to release his magic senses. Fortunately for him, it seemed like the sixth-tier mage was getting tired from the pressure Leon had been exerting on the Talfar force and had been getting slower by the day with his power.

Over the past four days, he'd been doing everything he could to whittle down the Talfar warriors searching for him. He chose his battles with caution, only launching an ambush if he knew he could take on the entire squad. With well-placed spells and arrows and his stellar ability to quickly move unseen through forested terrain, he'd killed twenty squads of warriors and left the others increasingly stressed.

Unfortunately, Emrys wasn't an idiot, and he'd flooded the northern forest with thousands of warriors and left the bridge heavily guarded, stymying Leon's desire to cross. Taking on ten warriors was one thing, but the forty that Emrys had assigned to the bridge was another thing entirely.

On the third day, Leon had gone east to scout out the plains between the forest and Briga and found the cataphract and chariot patrols too numerous to try and sneak past. So, his options were fairly limited. He could hide and wait for them to leave, he could go west and try to find a way through the Border Mountains, or he could step up his guerrilla campaign in the hopes of whittling the Talfar warriors down enough to make his attempt to cross the bridge easier.

Leon quickly chose the latter, as he had done several days before. He'd been gone from the Horns for almost five days, and finding a way south still seemed the fastest way back. To that end, Leon moved on to find a new target before the sixth-tier warrior decided to move on from the remains of the other squad.

With the number of warriors in the forest, Leon didn't have to go far to find another squad, but he kept moving instead of attacking—he was still too close to the sixth-tier warrior for his liking.

When he encountered a second squad a few minutes later, though, he didn't make the same decision. The fifth-tier mage leading this squad had taken the lead and was tensely walking through the forest in Leon's general direction. Leon quickly hid behind a bush where he wouldn't be seen and waited. The instant the fifth-tier warrior came close, Leon burst from the bush with lightning magic coursing through his body and moved faster than the warriors could react. He impaled the warrior on his sword and shattered his soul realm, killing him instantly.

The rest of the squad fell in short order. A quick blast of lightning killed the lower-tiered mages, and Leon's quick swordplay did likewise to the remaining pair of fourth-tier mages.

Once the deed was done, Leon moved on. He didn't linger at any ambush site, he just kept moving, using his sword and lightning magic to ambush Talfar warriors for the rest of the day. These were the best tools available to him since he was saving his spells for a plan he hoped would get him out of this mess.

Talfar lost fifteen more squads by the time the sun fell.

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Emrys established his search unit's forward operating base close to the bridge on the southern side of the chasm. This way, his warriors could keep an eye on the bridge and come to the aid of its defenders if they came under attack.

Every night, Emrys would hold a meeting with his top Warrior-Captains and get an idea of what had gone down that day. He had yet to be pleased with their progress.

"The Ghost killed seventeen squads today," one warrior dourly reported, eliciting a chorus of groans from the rest of the Captains.

"That's almost double what we've lost in the entire time we've been out here!" another Captain exclaimed.

A third Captain spoke up to air his frustrations with their current assignment, "How is this fucker doing this?! The Ghost runs through our squads like a hot knife through butter, and we've yet to find any evidence of his movements apart from the bodies he leaves behind!"

"We'll find this 'Ghost' eventually," Emrys testily added. Since none of the lower-tiered warriors had even seen the rat yet, they had started to call him the Bull's Ghost. Emrys didn't mind if the rank-and-file warriors used it, but he found the use of the nickname for their elusive rat in more formal settings distasteful, and he put a great deal of emphasis on the word to express it.

"What strategy would Your Lordship suggest?" one of Emrys' more level-headed Captains asked.

"Burn the forest," Emrys stated. "We've lost almost four hundred warriors to the rat. Tomorrow morning, we will flush him out of whatever hole he's hiding in and catch him in our trap! Burn the forest to the ground, and he'll show himself!"

Emrys' thirty remaining Captains nodded to him, and a few even clapped shouted in favor of the plan.

But then, an explosion ripped through half a dozen tents in the base and spread fire across another half dozen. The titanic noise hammered Emrys and the Captains' eardrums, stunning them into momentary silence as they tried to figure out what just happened. The screams of the dying pulled them back to reality, and the Captains burst out of the command tent.

Each of their tents held a squad, and there was now a massive burning hole where many of their tents used to be. A few warriors who survived the blast were either lying the dirt moaning in pain or shambling around in shock.

"PUT OUT THOSE FIRES!" Emrys roared, instantly taking command of the situation. The Captains instantly sprinted into the midst of the bright orange flames to do what they could. The earth mages buried the fires, the water and ice mages doused them, and the fire mages simply waved their hands and the fires disappeared. In less than a minute, the fire had been brought under control and the wounded were being seen to.

"How did this happen?" one Captain wondered out loud.

"It was—" Emrys began, but he was cut off by the ear-splitting roar of a second horrific explosion in another part of the camp.

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'These had better be hitting the target,' Leon bitterly thought as he prepared his third arrow.

Over the past four days he'd been in the forest, he'd made it so dangerous for the Talfar warriors that they would fall back over their bridge to the south side of the chasm when the sun set. Leon had capitalized on their absence to work on replenishing his stash of spells, but it wasn't his usual white-fire spells that occupied his time. Rather, he used those nights to inscribe five more of the explosion spells he'd created and two more Thunderblast spells.

But this night, however, was different. Instead of spending his time with paper and ink, he spent it scouting up and down the chasm looking for anything that could possibly help him get across. If he were a stronger mage, he would be able to jump over, but he quickly came to the conclusion that there was no safe way back to the southern side without using Talfar's bridge.

During that time spent scouting, though, Leon had seen evidence of the base where the warriors hunting him were sleeping. Specifically, he noticed some flickering lights through distant trees, and he saw the smoke from campfires in the sky. Realizing what it was that he was seeing, he quickly came up with a new plan.

To that end, he'd fired two arrows with his explosion spells at the enemy camp and hoped that his aim was true, and they were landing in the ranks of his enemy. He could hear the explosions and the panicked shouting, so he figured he was doing at least some damage, but he wasn't sure if it was enough.

He hesitated for a long moment, then fired his third arrow at an almost absurd angle, leaving him with only two explosion spells and two Thunderblast spells. He heard the explosion in the distance, followed by even more muted shouting and screaming.

Now he needed to decide if he ought to use one more.

'I might need them when getting back to the Horns, but there's no point to having them if I don't use them when I have the opportunity,' he thought. He'd need those spells if he were detected trying to sneak past the main Talfar camp, but another explosion might help him sneak past the warriors here.

Leon played around with the idea in his head for about another minute, then decided that one more explosion would do the trick. So, he fired off one more arrow and then was running for the bridge before he even heard the fourth explosion.

About a quarter-mile later, Leon arrived unseen at the stone bridge and found that the warriors guarding it were just as numerous as ever but were at least far more distracted now. In fact, all three of the fifth-tier warriors that were the main reason Leon couldn't get across the bridge had huddled together to discuss what was happening, negligently ignoring what was happening on Leon's side of the chasm.

Leon almost couldn't believe his luck, but this didn't stop him from pulling out a Thunderblast spell and immediately firing it at this tempting target. The three warriors in charge of the Talfar forces at the

bridge barely even registered that they were under attack before they were torn apart by a blast of lightning, along with twelve other warriors that were around them and severely injuring the rest.

Leon wasted no time and charged out of the forest and over the bridge. With lightning magic coursing through his body he was fast enough to kill three more warriors as he ran past, creating a hole in their defenses big enough for him to run through and reach the trees on the other side.

Chapter 263: Running for the River

Leon made it back to the southern side of the chasm, but he wasn't particularly subtle about it. The remaining warriors guarding the bridge saw him, and as he vanished into the forest, he heard the rumble of a horn as the warriors alerted the camp to his presence. Unfortunately for them, the fifteen warriors or so back in the camp were far more concerned with the burning camp than anything else, and none of the other twenty-two warriors at the bridge were strong or fast enough to pursue Leon even if his Thunderblast spell hadn't left them with bleeding ears and severe lightning burns.

So, Leon was essentially unchallenged as he bolted south through the forest.

He didn't stop for anything. He had a bad feeling that if he stopped before he reached the end of the forest, he'd be caught by the sixth-tier warrior that had been leading the search for him. This wasn't true, of course, and the rational part of his brain knew that, as that warrior was probably too busy tending to the damage Leon had done with his explosion spells.

Leon didn't know how badly mangled the Talfar force was, but he also wasn't going to waste time finding out. He was south of the chasm and that's what mattered to him.

He didn't slow down until he reached the tree line on the south side of the forest.

The main Talfar camp was visible in the distance, as were the dozens of chariots and cataphracts in the plains to the east and south-east. Leon was confident that with his lightning magic, he'd be able to outrun any Talfar mage on foot, but those cavalry units were another matter entirely. He'd almost been run down by Talfar charioteers five days prior when he was first forced to enter the forest, and he wasn't keen on repeating that experience.

But, despite the relatively flat plains between himself and the camp, there were still a few small hills and natural ditches here and there, not to mention the tall wild grass that blanketed the region south of the Border Mountains. With the darkness, Leon was sure that there was enough cover for him to try and go west back to the Horns.

But that wasn't to say that he was completely certain in his decision and lacked all hesitation, he was incredibly nervous about his course of action.

Regardless of his misgivings, Leon darted into the plains and stuck to the tallest grasses as best he could. There were a few areas where this wasn't possible, and he sprinted through them as fast as he could, trusting his black armor to keep him hidden in the early evening darkness.

And it seemed to be working, he made it about halfway between the forest and the camp before he had to stop for a passing cataphract patrol. There was a brief moment where it seemed like he had been detected, as one of the cataphracts paused for a moment near the patch of tall grass Leon had hidden himself in, but after a few brief words with the patrol commander, the cataphracts moved on.

Unfortunately, Leon was in for an unpleasant surprise as he drew closer to the gap between the camp and the mountains, for that happened to be just the place that Arthwyn had ordered the replacement siege engines be built. Work had stopped for the most part when the sun went down, but there were still enough warriors among the construction equipment and half-built trebuchets and siege towers that Leon knew there was no way he was going to get past.

Leon grimaced in dismay. He hadn't been able to see this area until he was almost on top of it as it was behind a gentle hill; he never would've come this far if he knew that slipping past wasn't feasible.

But this wasn't the time for regrets. He needed a new way to get west, and he needed it before he ran out of luck. In the few minutes he allowed himself, he could only think of one direction to go: further south. He'd need to swing all the way around the Talfar camp and hope that he wasn't spotted.

Leon clenched his teeth and began running south rather than west. This wasn't necessarily a fatal setback, but the land between the camp and Florentia that he would have to get through was much flatter and had less grass to hide in. Making matters worse, after about a mile, Leon could see that thousands of the Talfar war horses had been let out to graze, and were under heavy guard.

'FUCK!' Leon shouted in his head in frustration.

Unbeknownst to him, many of the scouts that Trajan had ordered deployed had been detected, so combined with the loss of the main supply tent, Arthwyn had security around the camp raised, leading to Leon's current situation. There was no way he was going to get past the guards around the siege engines or the warriors guarding the grazing horses without his ring of invisibility, effectively cutting him off from the Horns.

Or at least, cut off by land. Leon could see Florentia just beyond the grazing horses, and the Tyrrhenian River, shining a bright silver in the moonlight. The river ran straight to Ariminum, and the Talfar warriors were notoriously poor sailors.

Leon glanced at the camp, then back at the forest, and finally at Florentia again.

'I've come this far already,' he thought with a combination of determination and fear.

Leon started moving south again, but this time he was much more careful. There were more cataphracts out around the horses, so he had to move slower than before if he didn't want to be seen.

Partway to Florentia, as he was moving from a small patch of long grass to a natural ditch, he noticed a chariot team driving toward him. They weren't moving as fast as they would if they had seen him, but they would still be upon him in seconds. His first instinct was to start running for Florentia, but his rationality won out and he dropped to the ground and submerged himself in the shadows of the ditch.

"...something around here?" Leon heard the lead charioteers ask.

"I swear, I saw someone in this area," another warrior responded.

"Let's do a sweep. There's been too many damned Legion scouts in the area these days, we can't let even a single one slip through our fingers," the lead warrior ordered, and the chariot driver began taking them on a slow, methodical search of the area.

Fortunately, they did not see Leon, and it didn't seem like any of them were strong enough to use magic senses. Because of this and the fact that laying down in a ditch while Talfar warriors were searching for him was wreaking havoc on his nerves, Leon was tempted to unlimber his bow and hit the chariot with his last explosion spell. But again, his reason kept him in the ditch and his bow over his shoulder.

After a few minutes of searching, the chariot team drove off, and Leon was able to breathe a sigh of relief, but then it was back to sneaking toward Florentia with his body wracked with tension.

Through skill and more than a little bit of luck, Leon reached Florentia without being detected. Every road leading into the city was guarded, though, but the guards mostly seemed bored and weren't paying good attention. Leon was able to find a short wall near the main road and jumped right over, landing in the back courtyard of a small villa. From there, he made it into the streets.

Sticking to the alleys as best he could, Leon slowly made his way toward the river. He was fortunate that the city was long and thin, so he only had about a quarter of a mile to go from where he entered the city. In less than five minutes, Leon could see the Tyrrhenian River.

He looked left and right, and after not seeing anyone obviously watching the river, he sprinted forward and jumped into the water as quietly as he could.

Unfortunately, while he didn't see anyone monitoring the river, that didn't mean it wasn't being watched.

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"Did you see that?" a third-tier Talfar warrior asked his superior from the third story of a villa that gave them commanding views of the western side of the river.

"See what?" the fifth-tier Warrior-Captain asked.

"I swear I just saw something jump into the river!" the warrior explained.

The Captain frowned, not quite believing his subordinate, but he was a diligent man and wasn't going to take the chance he was wrong when Legion scouts had been out in force recently. The Captain grabbed a Fisherman's Spyglass from a nearby table and used it to take a look at the river.

This spyglass was an expensive magical device that allowed anyone who looked through it to see the auras of beings in water, an invaluable tool for anyone who has to regularly venture out into dangerous waters. And with this spyglass, the Captain saw a bright white-blue aura and knew that someone was in the river.

"Sound the alarm!" the Captain shouted, and the other three warriors on watch with him sprang into action. There was the possibility that this person was some stupid warrior, but the Captain wasn't going to risk it.

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'Shit, shit, shit!' Leon thought as he dove beneath the water's surface and began to swim as fast as he could. He couldn't so much hear as feel the water around him shake as the deep alarm raised by the watching warriors thundered through the city. There was no way in his mind that it wasn't because of him.

Fortunately, it wasn't like there were hundreds of warriors already in place ready to take him down, so he had some time. He used those crucial moments as best as he could, swimming like his life depended on it—because it very much did.

He had almost made it out of the city by the time a proper response was mustered by the Talfar warriors. About a dozen archers were placed in tall buildings by the edge of the city on the river, and they shot numerous arrows at him. The Talfar Kingdom, though, wasn't known for having spectacular foot archers—most of their best marksmen were put in chariots—so barely even a tenth of the arrows shot at Leon down near the riverbed even so much as grazed his armor.

Leon kept swimming, but as he left the range of the archers on the riverbanks, Talfar wrangled together a few captured fishing boats and pursued him. Leon could see their hulks slide in above him, causing him to grimace in frustration. There were far too many miles between him and Ariminium to remain below the water the entire time.

To counter the boats, Leon called upon his magic. He didn't know how effective his lightning would be from the bottom of the river, but he didn't have much choice unless he wanted to go for broke and use the last of his spells. Leon extended his hand toward the boat directly above him, a small thing that could barely hold a dozen people without sinking, and a bolt of golden lightning burst out of him and crashed into the boat's keel. The fishing boat was nowhere near as magically reinforced as a proper war galley, and the keel almost completely disintegrated, sending the boat crashing down into the river.

But that also meant that Leon now had to contend with a dozen Talfar warriors in the water with him. He kicked himself forward, sliding his sword into the throat of a third-tier warrior directly in front of him, then twisting as fast as he could and slashing a pair of second-tier warriors. The water hindered his movements, but he was still a fifth-tier mage, and his prodigious strength kept him far more lethal than the Talfar warriors would've liked.

And then a rock spike burst out of the river bed and would've impaled Leon had he not pushed himself just barely out of the way, causing the spike to brush past his armor and knock him closer to the surface. The remaining nine warriors in the water surrounded him, including the earth mage who had the biggest shit-eating grin on his face as he stared Leon down from just below the surface.

Leon almost shouted in anger as he called upon his magic power to summon his last Thunderblast spell, but just as the paper appeared in his hand, he felt the river current pick up to a startling speed and sweep him right past a Talfar warrior. The warrior attempted to stab Leon with his short spear as he passed, but the water around him constricted and sliced him into several dozen pieces.

The rest of the warriors stared in horror at their buddy's gruesome death, but when the earth mage attempted to summon another rock spike to attack Leon with, the fingers on his extended hand were instantly severed by tiny water blades. His hand followed, then his arm, and then the rest of his extremities. He had just enough time to scream in pain and terror before one last water blade sliced his head off and everything went dark.

Leon rocketed down the river at a speed that made it obvious there was a water mage somewhere helping him along, but when he looked around, he didn't see anything. A possibility occurred to him, but he'd lost the feeling that told him Naiad's general location after he got far enough away from the pond where she'd left him, and it hadn't returned.

With no other evidence, he decided to just thank his lucky stars and let the river carry him onward. There were still three more boats after him, but the pace at which the river carried him was helping him to rapidly outstrip them. He even had enough space to surface and take another breath before diving back down to avoid the subsequent rain of arrows.

About two miles from the mouth of the river, where three massive stone towers stood at the end of the walls of Ariminium that could each easily sink the tiny fishing boats, the Talfar warriors called it quits and turned around. They weren't going to risk their lives for someone who they thought was no more than a single Bull scout.

Leon relaxed, seeing the boats turn around, but he didn't surface until he was well past the towers; he didn't want them to shoot him if they thought he was a Talfar warrior, even though he didn't honestly think that would happen. Regardless, he didn't even try to avoid the alarm enchantments as he passed them; he could already see on the docks of the first island a company of Legion soldiers mustering to capture him in the likely event he was a Talfar warrior.

But the sight only calmed him down and released most of his tension. He'd made it back to Ariminium.

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Miles behind him, an invisible being watched him. The water was her territory, her body had even transformed until it was indistinguishable from the river around her.

Her eyes tracked Leon as he swam for the closest docks on the first island, rolling slightly when he climbed out of the water.

'Stupid boy, taking such a risk,' she thought. 'You owe me a child; you can't die until you pay your debt!'

Chapter 264: Punishment and a Pleasant Surprise

Leon hauled himself out of the Tyrrhenian River with some difficulty; he was extremely tired from the running and fighting he'd done over the past week—and this day in particular. It was nearly midnight, and he'd been going strong for more than six hours, and this was after a day spent hunting the Talfar warriors that had been hunting him.

The Legion soldiers at the other end of the pier did nothing to help him out of the water. They still weren't certain who he was, and until they found out, they were going to assume that he was hostile.

As Leon rose to his feet, the local Centurion shouted, "Stay where you are, no sudden moves!"

Leon complied. In fact, he just sat down on a nearby cleat and waited for the soldiers to make their move. He was too tired to even offer his own name. His obvious power put the watching soldiers on edge, but after a few minutes of waiting for stronger soldiers to arrive, the company watching him started to relax.

As he waited, Leon's thoughts turned toward what happened in the river. None of the soldiers around seemed strong enough to have been responsible for the water magic that aided him, and he couldn't think of anyone that might have been around to have used that magic. For a few brief terrifying seconds, he thought he might have been followed by Naiad, but he couldn't feel her presence like he could after they made their pact, leading him to think that she wasn't around.

“Hey, what’s your name?” the Centurion called out, pulling Leon out of his thoughts.

“Leon Ursus!” Leon shouted back, and he heard an audible gasp from several of the soldiers.

“What unit are you a part of?” the Centurion continued.

Leon rolled his eyes, but he understood the man’s caution and the need for these questions, even if he were too tired to appreciate them. “I serve in Prince Trajan’s retinue!” Leon replied.

He didn’t get out and interact with most of the rank-and-file soldiers much, so Leon didn’t truly understand how famous he was. Nearly every soldier stationed at Ariminum knew the names of most of the Prince’s most prominent knights, and Leon was no different. Of course, few of them knew what he looked like or the appearance of his armor, so he wasn’t immediately recognized.

“I apologize, Sir,” the Centurion said after some thought, “but we’re going to have to ask you to stay put for a little while longer, Sir Constantine is on his way here!”

Leon gave the man a thumbs up and got back to waiting. But he didn’t have to wait long, barely five minutes passed by before Constantine’s familiar short and stocky frame appeared at the front of the company.

“Ursus?!” the knight shouted, getting Leon’s attention.

“Sir Constantine!” Leon shouted back in greeting as he removed his helmet to give the other knight a good look at his face.

Constantine was shocked speechless for several moments, but he quickly gathered himself together and said, “His Highness has been waiting for you, best not to keep him waiting!”

The knight waved at Leon to get him to follow, and the two began their journey to the Southern Horn. It was a somewhat awkward trek, as neither had much experience in dealing with the other, but about halfway there, Constantine asked, “Soooo, had a good time out there?”

Leon gave the other man a bitter smile but didn’t say a word. He hadn’t much time to truly process everything he’d done and reaching Ariminum was bringing all of it back to the forefront of his mind in vivid detail.

“I’ve got to warn you, His Highness is furious with you,” Constantine mentioned.

“Not surprised,” Leon replied. He knew what he had done was stupid and reckless, but he did it anyway. He wasn’t going to shy away from taking responsibility for it now.

They reached the keep of the Southern Horn soon enough, and they went straight to Trajan’s meeting room. Right before entering, though, Constantine gave Leon a quick nod of solidarity before returning to his duties; Leon entered the dark meeting room alone.

Trajan was already there waiting for him on the raised dais, his face cast completely in shadow. The room was otherwise devoid of people, and Leon felt his heart rate skyrocket. It didn’t matter that his reason told him that Trajan wasn’t going to harm him, his primitive instincts were screaming at him that Trajan was an enormous danger and to run away.

But Leon didn't run away. He calmly walked right up to a respectful distance and bowed to the Prince.

"Your Highness, I've returned," Leon said, trying to keep his voice calm and steady. He was only partially successful.

"I noticed," Trajan grimly muttered. His aura was heavy, and it pressed down uncomfortably on Leon. The younger knight was still on one knee, waiting for Trajan to allow him to rise. "I wondered multiple times how I ought to react should you return alive," Trajan continued in a slow and morose tone. "You abandoned your post, you abandoned the soldiers around you, and you abandoned your squire and war-beast. I considered shouting at you in anger until I was blue in the face, I thought what kind of punishment would be appropriate for such actions, and I even entertained the idea of throwing you out the Legion entirely..."

"It's exactly as Your Highness says," Leon said with a formality that was uncharacteristic of the interactions between the two in the year-and-change the two had known each other.

"Give me your report," the Prince growled, and Leon began to explain everything that had happened since leaping down from the tower. Trajan had already known about Leon's invisibility ring from Aquillius' report about the events surrounding the Cradle, so that didn't come as a surprise.

Leon carefully explained everything about the trebuchets, his destruction of the Talfar supplies, his detection and subsequent damage to his invisibility ring, and finally the chase into the forest to the north-east of the Talfar camp. He did not, however, tell Trajan about his encounter with Naiad. Instead, he told the story of how he defeated a water nymph and climbed up the chasm on the north side, and then his guerilla war with the Talfar squads sent to find him. He finished his story with his return south and swimming down the Tyrrhenian River.

"That's a hell of a story," Trajan brusquely said. What Leon could see of his shadowed face was stoic and expressionless. There was no anger, wrath, happiness, or glee that Leon could read in the Prince's face.

Leon began to sweat a little.

"The reports I've received from our scouts have largely confirmed everything you've said," the Prince finally stated after a long silence. "We found the remains of the trebuchets you destroyed, we discovered the dire supply situation that our enemy has found themselves in, and we noticed the number of warriors they sent into the forest—it was obvious now that they were looking for you."

Leon was quiet. He had no intention of speaking unless Trajan specifically asked him a question.

"These are accomplishments worthy of reward. Under *normal* conditions, at least," the Prince said in a voice almost low enough to shake the entire keep. "You, however, did all this by leaving your post. If you have ever wondered why you have not been assigned a command, it's for reasons like this. I'd hoped your reckless streak would've been stamped out by now, but it's clear to me that it hasn't been."

Leon could feel Trajan's disappointed gaze bore into him like a team of a thousand miners carving their way into the side of a mountain, and his eyes dropped to the floor.

"I'm not going to shout or throw you out of the Legion—there would be little point in doing so. Instead, you will ride out the rest of this war at my side. You will not fight again unless I specifically give you

permission, and that permission won't come easy. Your rank as Tribune is also revoked, to be returned only when I believe you have earned it."

"Yes, Your Highness," Leon acknowledged.

"I will continue to consider what punishments ought to be levied, should I decide they're necessary," Trajan continued. "You may leave. Be here first thing tomorrow morning, assuming the Arthwyn and Owain don't decide to attack before then."

"Yes, Your Highness," Leon repeated, and he rose to his feet and swiftly moved toward the door of the meeting room. His back was slick with sweat, and his mind wasn't at all put at ease, knowing that it was still incredibly likely that he would be punished later.

He was suddenly stopped when Trajan said, "Oh, and well done making it back home. It's good to have you back, son."

Leon could feel a stinging sensation in his eyes, but he managed to keep his composure. Still, it was all he could do to simply respond, "Thank you, Your Highness," and he walked out of the room.

Instantly, all thought of what Trajan had just said and his potential punishment was pushed out of his mind when he heard someone in the waiting room scream, "Leon!"

He turned around to see who it was just in time to catch a flash of bright green eyes and a headful of brilliant red hair before a pair of familiar arms wrapped around his neck and pulled him into a deep hug. Lips he knew well locked with his, and after his surprise wore off, he wrapped his own arms around Elise's waist and hugged her back.

The two lovers remained there for several seconds until Leon became self-conscious about the stares they were receiving from Trajan's assistants and secretaries. He reluctantly parted from Elise and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"There a problem with me being here?" she asked as a playful challenge.

"Of course not, I just wasn't expecting you," Leon replied, showing off a rare smile.

"You sent off for some things from your vault in Teira. I decided to deliver them to you personally!" Elise happily explained. "I got here yesterday, and His Highness directed me to your room, where I left your package."

"Ah," Leon said, suddenly feeling awkward. "Did His Highness tell you why I was gone?"

"He did," Elise replied, her joyous smile faltering a little.

"Maybe we ought to head somewhere a little more private, then," Leon said, taking Elise's hand and steering her toward the door.

"Let's do that," Elise whispered as she squeezed Leon's hand.

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"That damned idiot," Trajan muttered as he collapsed into his couch in his favorite sitting room.

"He's back safe, at least," Minerva replied.

"I just... I don't know what to do with him," Trajan said exasperatedly. "How should this sort of thing be stamped out? Damnit, what was he *thinking*, running off and taking on the entire damned Talfar camp *alone*?!"

"Indeed, taking the initiative is one thing, but doing something so profoundly stupid is another," Minerva murmured as she ran a hand through her silky black hair. "It's hard to remember, but he's still only eighteen. Nearly all boys his age are stupid and reckless and think they're going to live forever, and he also has the power to summon lightning, which I guess makes him even more over-confident."

"Well, whether he's confident or not, he's not going to be doing something like this again," Trajan vowed. "He isn't going back out into battle unless it's at my side for the duration of this war."

"With the numbers we have stacked against us, do we really have the luxury of doing that?" Minerva asked.

"We do," Trajan said definitively.

"All right, then," Minerva replied with a smile. "He's a good kid, and there's a great deal of potential within him, we ought to do what we can to keep him alive a little longer."

"Mmm," Trajan hummed in agreement. Switching gears, as asked, "How far out are our reinforcements?"

"The 20th Legion will be here in a matter of days," Minerva replied. "Beyond that, we don't have concrete times for the 22nd or the 25th, but Prince August has crossed the Naga and shouldn't be much later than the 20th."

"Good. We only need to hold out a few more days and we can push these bastards back."

"Do you think we're going to be attacked in that time?"

Trajan frowned, then said, "It's possible. From the reports our scouts have made and what I heard from Leon, Talfar is busy replacing their siege equipment and figuring out their supply situation. If they do decide to attack, though, they'll be leaving more of their dead behind than last time..."

"They won't crack our defenses," Minerva vowed.

"No, they won't," Trajan agreed, "but pushing them out of their defensive position will be another thing entirely..."

Chapter 265: Killing the Mood

Leon led Elise back to his and Alix's barracks room, though it wasn't entirely necessary as Elise had been there before to drop off Leon's diamond and sapphires. The main room was fairly dark, but it must not have been that long since Alix went to bed, as she immediately came out into the main room fully clothed and with her sword drawn.

"Leon!" she said in surprise. She quickly composed herself and drily quipped, "I thought you would've been back sooner."

"Things got... complicated," Leon said quietly as Alix set her blade down on the table in front of the couches.

Elise and Alix warmly greeted each other, and Alix said before Leon could ask, "Anzu is fine, Sir. He's currently with the beastmasters, but they wouldn't let me take him home without you."

"Thank you," Leon said with a genuine smile. "I was worried about him, it's good to hear that he's doing well."

"Not as well as he could've been doing," Alix replied. "With you gone for so long, apparently the beastmasters had to separate him from the rest of the animals in their care for their safety. He was going a little crazy."

Leon seemed to nod and cringe at the same time, and he said, "I'll go get him tomorrow morning."

"Can I go with you? You've told me so much about Anzu, I really want to see him for myself!" Elise asked, her eyes bright with enthusiasm.

Leon nodded, and she gave him a quick hug.

"Well," Alix continued awkwardly, "It's good that you're back, Sir. I think I'll be heading to bed now."

Again, Leon nodded, not quite sure what he should, or even could, say that might improve things. Alix quickly hurried back to her room, leaving Leon and Elise alone with each other.

"So, where have you been staying since you came here?" Leon asked.

"An apartment in the Diplomatic Corps," Elise responded. "What they gave me was pretty nice, like this place but bigger."

"Guess being the daughter of the top Heaven's Eye official has some perks, doesn't it?" Leon asked teasingly.

"There are a few, here and there," Elise playfully responded. "But now that my idiot boyfriend is back from his *idiotic* suicide mission, I would like to stay with him, if that isn't an imposition?"

Leon took her in his arms and pulled her close, whispering into her ear, "You're never an imposition."

"And *that* is the correct answer," Elise replied. She pressed her lips onto Leon's, but quickly pulled away and said, "You need to bathe."

Leon chuckled at the way she said it, but he had gone almost a week without a decent shower or bath, and he had been quite physically active during that time. His dip in two rivers and an underground lake helped it not be too overpowering, but he knew that he probably stank quite a bit.

Twenty minutes later, Leon emerged from the bathroom feeling like a new man. He had taken off his armor for the first time in five days, he was clean, and he was wearing clean clothes. He went back into his room to find Elise waiting there, sitting on the edge of his bed with a thin case made of dark red wood in her lap.

"Those are...?" Leon began.

"The gems from your vault," Elise replied as she opened the case. Leon saw a brief flash of light as the enchantments locking the case released and the lid swung open, revealing four small sapphires and a clear white diamond the size of Leon's thumb glittering in black velvet padding.

"Those ought to be perfect," Leon said.

"What do you need them for, anyway?" Elise curiously asked.

Leon honestly wasn't sure what specifically Xaphan wanted the gems for, but he didn't find it that difficult to spin a little white lie.

"I'm working on some of my family's enchantments and needed some materials. Didn't want too many, though, I'd rather not blow through what I inherited so quickly," he said. He took the case and placed it on top of his desk, then joined Elise on the bed.

"Now that my business is done, I don't know what to do..." Elise said as she leaned back on the bed and gave Leon a smoldering look.

Leon smiled and leaned in, but just as he was about to kiss Elise, he stopped, and his smile grew strained. He paused there for what seemed like an eternity, and just as Elise was about to rise a little bit and meet him partway, Leon pulled back to a sitting position on the bed, turned slightly away from her.

"What's wrong?" Elise asked with extreme concern. Every time they'd had sex before, both of them had been enthusiastic, to say the least, so Leon's current behavior wasn't something she'd been expecting. She quickly looked herself over; she was wearing a long dark red dress with a plunging neckline that had been perfectly tailored to cling to her body. It even had an enchantment that she had activated once she and Leon were alone that tightened the fit, in order to show her body off to her lover even more without just taking the dress off. She'd also put her hair up into a loose bun and bathed not long before Leon returned.

In other words, she had dressed up and cleaned up, so she didn't think that there was anything about her that would turn Leon off, but his reaction made her check anyway.

Leon sighed and went silent for a long time, and Elise frowned in dejection when he didn't even turn around to face her.

"You can talk to me, tell me what the problem is," she said as she gently hugged him from behind. She grew even more concerned when she felt him instinctively pull away, but he overcame that instinct and ended up pulling her closer.

"It... it hasn't been a fantastic few weeks," Leon finally said after sitting in silence for several agonizing minutes. "There was a darkness mage in the enemy ranks. He was a vampire and a seventh-tier mage..."

Leon proceeded to tell Elise everything about Bran and the illusion that he was subjected to. It wasn't easy to get through, and he needed to pause several times, but he made it.

"That bastard!" Elise raged. "How *dare* he use *me* to strike at you!"

Leon smiled despite himself and unconsciously leaned back into Elise's well-endowed chest, while at the same time Elise tightened her embrace around his shoulders and pulled him in closer. During the story, the two had moved back from the edge of the bed, so Elise's back was braced against the wall.

"Is this swamp leech still alive?" she demanded to know.

Leon shook his head,

"I love you," Leon whispered after her rage had cooled a little.

"I love you, too, with all my heart," Elise whispered back as she curled herself around his head and broad shoulders and ran her hands through his black hair. "You know that I would never say those things, right? The idea that you aren't worthy of anyone you want is ludicrous and is an idea that I would ne- *will* never entertain!"

"I love you," Leon repeated, bringing a smile that could shame the sun to Elise's face. But what he said next brought it crashing down. "I need to tell you something else..."

He slowly and hesitantly told Elise about his experience with Naiad and his subsequent pact. He paused here and there, trying to find the proper words to not only describe the events but also to reassure his lover that there were few things he wanted to do less than fulfilling the terms of said pact.

When he was finished, Elise was fuming with anger, but whether it was at him or Naiad, Leon couldn't say.

'Probably both,' he figured as he waited for her response. She hadn't said a word since he told her of Naiad emerging from the pond in the middle of the underground lake.

After a long few minutes, Elise finally said, "This... is some unpleasant news, if you'll forgive my understatement..."

"I've been trying to think of ways to get out of this pact, but nothing has come to me so far," Leon muttered.

Elise hugged him even closer and he could feel her shaking and her heart racing in anger. "You came back to me, that's what matters," she whispered half to herself and half to Leon. "There are some people back home who are familiar with magical pacts, I'll see if they have any way to get out of this... I don't want you sleeping with someone I don't know..."

Leon was grateful, but he had no idea what he could say in this situation. He'd basically told his girlfriend that he was obligated to sleep with another woman; despite nobles having the right to take multiple spouses, there was always the expectation that the other spouses would have a say in these things, and sex outside of marriage was still frowned upon in the upper reaches of society—surprise bastards could complicate title succession and inheritances, after all.

But for all Leon's nervousness from telling Elise about Naiad and his anger in recalling how close the latter had come to raping him, as well as Elise's own suppressed anger, neither started shouting or pushed each other away. Instead, they cuddled together as close as they could and eventually fell asleep. They didn't make love, as they so often did when alone together; Leon's news had killed the happy mood at their reunion.

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"*One* rat! ONE!" Arthwyn raged as Emrys looked appropriately apologetic. "How many of our warriors did this *one* bastard kill?!"

“More than four hundred,” Emrys responded.

“More than *four hundred*! And yet, you let him get away! You had a damned *week* to catch him, and he slipped through your fingers!”

Emrys frowned, but nothing that Arthwyn said was false. Still, the Marshal’s face was red with rage and he was clearly desperately holding himself back from screaming even more at his subordinate. Screaming wouldn’t help the situation, after all, and would likely make him look bad in front of his other Warrior-Chiefs, who were watching Emrys’ castigation with varying levels of anger and apathy.

Arthwyn took a deep breath to steady himself, then said, “We are in a bad situation right now. We’re barely getting enough supplies to keep the levies from starving and there’ve already been reports of desertion among their ranks. We need to get our towers and trebuchets finished and get this fortress conquered before the army dissolves.”

“I understand our situation, my Lord,” Emrys replied.

“I didn’t say you could speak,” Arthwyn snapped. He immediately regretted it as several other Warrior-Chiefs sent disapproving looks his way. Still, Emrys failed in his task and Arthwyn felt he needed to be punished. “For your failure, Emrys, I’m sending you back to Briga to supervise the supply shipments to the army.”

Emrys clenched his jaw in frustration—he was a charioteer, one of the most highly respected warriors in all the army, being assigned to logistics was an enormous slap in the face. Still, he couldn’t deny that even after being given two thousand warriors, he still failed to capture the Bull soldier who had put their supplies in such dire straits, to begin with.

“Pack your things and get moving,” Arthwyn commanded, and Emrys departed the command tent barely able to suppress his ugly look.

The Warrior-Chief was furious in both his own failure, and in the punishment that Arthwyn decided to give him, but words could not properly describe Arthwyn’s wrath. His carefully planned assault on the Bull’s Horns had been stymied at nearly every turn—and mostly by Owain, at that. The Prince had sent Bran on a suicide mission, he’d tried to broker peace with Trajan, and he’d ordered a retreat after their supplies had been destroyed.

Arthwyn could now see the very real possibility that he would not achieve his revenge, and he was not happy, to say the least. In fact, he’d even started to contemplate removing Owain from power and continuing on with his campaign, regardless of the consequences.

The Marshal glanced around at his subordinates—most hid their emotions well, but he could see in the nervous tapping of feet and inability to meet his gaze those whose will to continue was flagging. A few chairs were empty due to death and injury, but his chain of command remained intact, at least, and those around him continued to do their jobs well enough.

Still, with mounting casualties and their supply problems, it was only a matter of time before he would start losing the support of these high-tiered warriors if he hadn’t begun to already. Starvation was one of the quickest ways to mutiny, after all. The army could continue for only so much longer in this state.

He needed a win to raise morale, and he needed it soon if he was to accomplish his goals with this campaign.

Chapter 266: Heart-to-Heart

The morning after Leon returned to the Horns, he and Elise woke up in each other's arms just as the sun was beginning to rise over the horizon, still dressed in their clothes from the previous night. They were intimately entwined with each other, with their legs tangled, Leon's arms snugly wrapped around Elise's waist, and Elise almost holding Leon's face to her neck and chest with hers.

And yet, as their eyes opened and they slowly awoke, they silently separated. Without a word, they changed their clothes, and there was none of the suggestive staring or drawn-out movements that they had so often enjoyed teasing each other with when changing. If anything, their first moments awake were almost painfully awkward, with neither particularly willing to break their long silence.

But that silence had to break at some point, and once they had changed into clean clothes and were about to leave Leon's bedroom, Elise put her hand on Leon's arm and stopped him from opening the door.

"I'm going home today," she said, and Leon's heart sank into his feet. But before he could say anything, Elise continued, "I'll consult with some of my people in the Tower about your pact with that nymph monster and whether we can break it. I'll be waiting for you to come back to me at the capital, so don't do something reckless again, all right?"

Leon softly smiled and slowly leaned down to press his forehead against hers. To his relief, she didn't pull away.

"Promise me you don't do something reckless again, promise me you'll come back alive," she repeated.

"I won't do something so stupid again, I'll be sure to come back to you when this is all over," Leon agreed.

"I'll hold you to that, dummy," she whispered, which she followed with a gentle kiss.

Their moment of intimacy was over all too quickly when Elise broke their kiss and slid past Leon to open the door of the bedroom. Alix was already awake and quietly training in the sandpit, but she paused when the two exited the bedroom.

"Sir," she said with a curt nod to Leon.

"We're meeting up with Prince Trajan in a few minutes," Leon said. "After that, I'd like to go and get Anzu back from the beastmaster."

"Yes, Sir," Alix said in the same terse and dispassionate manner, causing Leon to cringe a little. However, she did spare a second to warmly smile at Elise, but the latter was so distracted that she barely managed to return it before Alix went to get ready.

For a moment, Leon contemplated getting into his armor, but he figured that there wasn't much point if he was going to be with the Prince for the duration of the war.

And so, once Alix had changed into more formal clothing and armed herself, the trio left the barracks and made their way over to Trajan's tower in the keep. Once entering the tower, one of Trajan's assistants helpfully guided them to the small sitting room that Trajan was resting in.

The Prince glanced up from the reports he was reading as they walked in, but there was little of the warmth and affability in his eyes that Leon had come to expect from him. Trajan wordlessly gestured to the empty couch in front of him for Leon to take a seat, while Alix moved to stand near the back wall.

Elise, meanwhile, put on an amiable expression and said, "Your Highness, your hospitality has been most appreciated, but it's time for me to leave."

Trajan smiled back at her and replied, "My Lady, wherever I may be, you may consider yourself welcome there."

A few more words were exchanged in the over-long ceremony that Leon had come to expect from nobles dealing with the Prince, and Elise departed in due time, but not before leaning down and tightly hugging the sitting Leon one last time, not caring that both Alix and Trajan were watching.

"Next time we see each other, I expect a proper introduction with little Anzu," she whispered.

Leon smiled and returned her hug, whispering back, "Of course, my love."

With that, Elise straightened up and left the sitting room. As the door closed behind her, there was only one thing on her mind: *'I will not let that monstrous bitch have her way with him!'*

Once she was gone, the tension in the sitting room became much thicker. Trajan turned his eyes back to the report in his hand while Leon sat awkwardly in front of him.

After an excruciatingly long time, Trajan finally said, "I have decided on your formal punishment for abandoning your post, Leon."

Leon paled a little, but he didn't say a word.

Trajan glanced up and said, "As I said last night, you will be stripped of your formal rank of Tribune, though your status as a knight will remain intact. You will check in with me every day an hour after sunrise and an hour before sunset; I may decide that there's some extra work that requires your attention."

Here, the Prince paused and stared at Leon with an expression of deadly seriousness. "You accomplished great things while you were gone, but abandoning your post is not something that can ever be rewarded. Your accomplishments, in fact, are the only reason you are still a part of the Legions."

Leon somewhat doubted that last part, he didn't think that Trajan would honestly throw him out of the Legions given who his family was, but he also couldn't say he would be surprised if the Prince did follow through with that unspoken threat if Leon did something that reckless again.

"I expect professionalism from my knights, a trait that you displayed right until the moment you left the tower Dame Minerva sent you to. I cannot have that."

"I understand, Your Highness," Leon said.

"You'd better. I won't tolerate this kind of behavior again." Trajan stared at Leon in the eye to impress upon him the seriousness of what he was saying, and Leon could feel from the intensity of his gaze that Trajan wasn't playing around in this respect—he'd be screwed if he did something so stupid again. Of course, given how his self-imposed mission went, Leon wasn't eager to launch another one, even if he hadn't been warned by both Elise and Trajan.

After a few moments of letting Leon contemplate his situation, Trajan said, "I have nothing for you to do right now. You're dismissed, come back an hour before sunset."

Leon rose from the couch, bowed, and took his leave, with Alix right behind him.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Leon let out a long sigh. Trajan was tremendously disappointed in him, he could tell from the Prince's expression and tone, even if Trajan didn't say it expressly. And that disappointment hurt Leon far more than he thought it would've.

For perhaps the thousandth time since being detected leaving the Talfar camp, Leon thought, *'I am never doing something like that again!'*

"Let's go get Anzu," Leon muttered, bringing a subdued smile to Alix's lips. As they exited the keep and began the long walk to the stables, Leon said, "I'm sorry. For leaving you behind again."

"I understand why you did it," Alix quickly replied. "I'm too weak to accompany you, I don't have the weaponry to do what you did, and I certainly don't have an invisibility ring."

Leon almost froze as soon as Alix brought up his ring and his heart sank. In the wake of telling Elise all that had happened to him over the past couple of weeks, he'd completely forgotten to inquire as to whether Heaven's Eye could fix the damn thing.

'Shit!' he thought. *'An issue for later...'*

"Well, I'm never going to leave like that again," Leon said out loud, moving on from his own stupidity. "It did not end well, though I survived everything that happened."

"You can't promise that," Alix whispered. "Almost everyone I know has left me; I barely even have any family left..."

Leon glanced at his squire just in time to see her trying to subtly brush her eyes, and his heart almost broke at the sudden realization of what his constant leaving meant to his friend.

"I was too weak to save Sam and everyone I knew back north, and I'm too weak to help you when you're in trouble," Alix said, feeling slightly awkward that they were having this conversation as they walked through the streets of the Southern Horn, but unable to stop now that she'd started. "I've wanted to be a knight ever since I knew what that title meant, but I can't do anything! I'm a terrible warrior, I'm a weak mage, I can't even command Anzu to eat his dinner, let alone a unit in battle! I'm useless as a squire, and I'd be worthless as a knight!"

Her attempts to prevent her tears from falling failed and they began to pour out of her eyes like a broken aqueduct. And this only saddened, angered, and frustrated her more, causing even more tears to fall.

Leon stopped and immediately gave Alix a hug. He barely even registered that he was doing so until she was already in his arms; he generally hated physical contact with other people, and there were a fair number of people around boring holes into him with their eyes, but still he held Alix close.

"You're not useless, you're not worthless," he whispered into her ear as she buried her face in his shoulder. "You're a damned good warrior, and magical strength will come with training. Plus, stick with Trajan, and you'll be a fine commander as well. You're a smart woman, you'll pick these things up. And I'm not going to leave you again if I can help it. You're my squire and my friend, it was irresponsible to leave you when I did and I won't be so stupid again."

They stood there in the street for a few more minutes as Alix dried her eyes and composed herself, attracting strange looks all the while from the other knights and soldiers that passed them as they went about their duties. Still, Leon didn't move until Alix started to pull away.

"Thanks, Leon," she said quietly as she wiped her eyes a few more times.

"Any time," he said with an awkward smile. "What else are friends for?"

Alix smiled and nodded, and the two continued on their way toward the stables, only pausing when Alix realized that what little make-up she wore was probably smudged. They stopped at the nearest place with a public bathroom so she could fix herself up, then proceeded onward.

There still wasn't much talking between the two, but Leon could tell that there was a little bit more spring in Alix's step after she finally let out her frustrations and insecurities and got some reassurances from Leon, the only friend she had left after departing from her home town and losing everyone she knew at Fort 127, that she wasn't going to be left alone.

When they arrived at the Beastmaster's stables, one of the assistants noticed their arrival and quickly hurried over.

"Sir Ursus, thank the Ancestors you've returned!"

"Hm?" Leon said in confusion. "What's wrong?"

"It's your griffin, Sir, he's been a *nightmare*!"

The assistant led Leon and Alix to Cecilia, the knight and beastmaster that took care of Anzu in Leon's stead.

"Well, I'm glad you're back," Cecilia said. "Little Anzu has been an absolute terror, he even pecked and scratched me up more than a few times..."

"I'm sorry about that, he's not that great with other people," Leon said with a tone of remorse. As someone who hated dealing with people he didn't know, Anzu having created trouble for other people was mortifying.

"It's fine, we understand," Cecilia said with a bright and cheery smile. "Since you're back, you can take him off our hands. Just follow me!"

The beastmaster led them through the stables, past thousands of horses, wolves, lions, and other exotic beasts, few of which Leon had seen participate in battle.

"How many of these are actual war beasts?" Leon asked out of curiosity as they walked through the huge stables.

"Not many," Cecilia admitted. "These are expensive animals, and many knights don't want to risk their investments unless they absolutely have to. Besides, there isn't much room in a shield wall for a war beast, and of those animals that belong to knights outside of a shield wall, most are fourth-tier and below, which is too weak for their knights to want to bring into battle."

"Makes sense... I guess," Leon muttered. He didn't quite agree with that philosophy, or at least it was one that he had no intention of following with Anzu. He may have tamed the griffin by imprinting on him, but Anzu was still a creature of the wild, and as such was capable of great killing intent. Leon didn't want to dull that particular weapon by keeping Anzu out of battle.

'That little guy's going to be quite the ferocious beast when he grows up!' Leon half thought, half vowed to himself.

Finally, Cecilia brought Leon and Alix to a stop in a remote and rather isolated part of the stables.

"We had to bring him out here, he was being a menace to the other animals," Cecilia explained. The stalls here were bigger and much more secure, with fewer other animals around. Given Anzu's temperament, Leon understood completely why Anzu was brought out here. The griffin generally hated being around other beings, human or animal, that he didn't know, and if Leon wasn't there to keep him in check or he wasn't able to hide, then he might get violent; he was still a creature of the wild, even if Leon had tamed him.

Cecilia quickly unlocked and opened the door, allowing Leon to step inside. The wooden floor was covered in straw, and there was a water trough and a tray of bloody fish and red meat sitting on the floor, which appeared to Leon to be completely untouched.

Leon didn't immediately see Anzu when he entered the stable, but once the griffin saw who had entered, he burst out of a bed of hay in the corner and almost knocked Leon over in his enthusiasm. He threw himself at his human, pressing his head and beak into Leon's neck and chest, chirping and whimpering the entire time.

"Hey there, little buddy!" Leon said with a smile wider than any he had all day.

"There's a happy boy," Cecilia cooed from outside, but the sound of her voice seemed to cool Anzu's abject joy, and the pure white albino griffin settled down.

"He looks like he's grown a bit!" Leon observed as he ran his hands through the feathers on Anzu's head. But he was in for a bigger surprise, as when he off-handedly investigated Anzu's aura, he noticed that the griffin had grown to the third-tier!

"... In more ways than one," Alix jealously muttered.

Picking up on her tone, Leon said, "Then let's get home. I can see from your aura that you're close to ascending as well. We've been slacking a bit in our own training, lately, and we should rectify that."

"Yes, Sir!" Alix agreed with more enthusiasm than Leon had seen her express in weeks.

Cecilia helped them get Anzu checked out of the stables, and then they returned to their barracks room to train.

Chapter 267: Xaphan's Gems

Leon, Alix, and an ecstatic Anzu returned to their room and immediately began preparations to train. Or at least, Leon and Alix did, Anzu just followed Leon around so closely that Leon almost tripped over him several times. Alix changed into loose clothes and grabbed a training sword while Leon moved the metal pieces of his armor out to the edge of the sandpit so that he could clean them up while watching his squire's training—his Skyflax padding was put into the same enchanted box as his clothes so that it would be washed automatically.

"Tighten your stance a little," Leon said as he wiped down his cuirass. "It's good to keep your center of gravity low, but you don't want to be so close to the ground that your balance is off."

"Right!" Alix said as she corrected her stance and kept moving through a series of slashes, stabs, and blocks, all the while flooding her body with as much magic as she could muster. Leon could sense that she was close to the third-tier, and with Anzu's ascension, she was training even harder than usual to reach that point.

When she did, Leon fully intended to knight her. He felt she'd earned it simply by putting up with his surly ass, let alone her own accomplishments on the battlefield. When he did, they would be friends and colleagues, as she would more likely than not join Trajan's retinue, and then they could do away with the formalities of knight and squire.

"So, Henry and Alain made it to the third-tier," Alix mentioned as she paused for a breather. "And from what I could tell, Charles is pretty close to ascension as well."

"That so? That's good to hear," Leon said with a smile. He was proud in the accomplishments of his friends, but he was even more happy by the simple fact that his friends had survived the assault on the walls; he knew that their Legion was stationed on the main walls between the Horns, so they would've been right in the thick of things. "We'll have to celebrate when this is over. Hopefully, we'll be celebrating more than just *their* ascension, though..."

Taking Leon's hint, Alix wiped the sweat from her brow and quickly got back to the business at hand while Leon pulled his cuirass into his soul realm.

For the next few hours, they worked in silence, Leon maintaining his armor and sending it to his soul realm, Alix training in the sandpit, and Anzu curled up beside Leon.

When he was done, Leon remembered one more thing that he had to do: deliver the gems to Xaphan. It felt like he hadn't spoken to the demon in a while, though it had only been a little over a week. Still, he was surprised that Xaphan hadn't spoken up and demanded that the gems be delivered to him as soon as Elise handed them over to Leon.

Leon continued to watch Alix train, but as he coated the box of gems in his hand with his magic power to begin the relatively lengthy process of pulling them into his soul realm, he said to his demonic partner, [Hey demon!]

There was no response, though.

[Xaphan! Demon!] Leon shouted in his mind.

Again, silence was his only reply.

[Heeeey! Demon!] Leon repeated. [Lightning is better than fire in every way! In fact, there is no power in the entire universe that is weaker than fire! Such a feeble and paltry strength isn't worthy of even the most pathetic of mages!]

[WHAT?! What do you WANT?!] the demon roared from within, shaking Leon so much that his storing of the gems was almost disrupted and he just about burst out laughing at what he had to say to get Xaphan's attention.

[I *wanted* to tell you that I have a present for you, but you were so absorbed in whatever it is that you do that my words were falling on deaf ears,] Leon shot back, his trolling smile evident in his tone even through his mental link with the fire demon.

[Then spit it out,] Xaphan growled, clearly annoyed at Leon's interruption of his healing meditations.

[Calm down, I just wanted to let you know that I finally got those gems you wanted,] Leon cheekily responded.

[You did?! Then bring them in here!] Xaphan shouted, all traces of annoyance vanishing from his voice.

Leon had, of course, already started the process to bring Xaphan his diamond and sapphires, but he wanted to poke fun at his demonic partner, so he said, [Hmm, I don't know, you were *quite* rude to me for someone who's staying in *my* soul realm...]

[And what of it?] Xaphan retorted. [I'm a demon and you're human. The only *proper* relationship that ought to exist between those like us is one of master and slave, but in my generosity, I have bestowed upon you the status of junior partner. You can put up with a little rudeness, surely, or are you too emotionally fragile to take it?]

Despite Xaphan's caustic tongue and inflated ego, Leon couldn't help but chuckle. He found that he had genuinely missed the demon's advice and presence.

[Relax, oh Lord of Cinders, Candles, and other tiny, *tiny* flames,] Leon countered, [the gems that you're so helpless without are on their way.]

Leon could almost hear Xaphan's teeth grinding in anger at the glaringly diminutive title he gave the demon, which was exactly what he wanted.

Forcing himself to move on, Xaphan suddenly said, [Why do I feel another's presence here?]

Leon froze in fear before his mind suddenly turned to Naiad. [What do you mean?] he asked with concern.

[There's another being's power in your soul realm!] Xaphan shouted in alarm. [It feels... like water...]

Leon nodded, knowing exactly what it was that Xaphan was sensing. He quickly explained his pact with Naiad.

[What?! How did I miss all of this?!] Xaphan cried in sarcastic, exaggerated anguish. [Ahh, this is truly a failing on my part, how could I have not witnessed such a humiliation heaped upon you!]

[Thanks, friend, you're really making it better,] Leon said bitterly. He was only half-joking, though, Xaphan making light of his situation somehow brought him a certain confidence, as if it weren't as serious an issue as he had thought it was. [I don't suppose you know of any way out of this pact?] Leon asked.

[Nope,] Xaphan instantly responded.

[Really?] Leon pressed. [Not even a mighty Lord of Flame knows of a way to get around this?]

[You made a pact with your *Mana Glyph*!] Xaphan explained. [When you do something like that, there is no possible way around fulfilling the terms of the pact. If you do, your soul realm will be severely injured, possibly even ending your life, but certainly doing irreparable harm to your magical foundation.]

[Well... Shit...] Leon responded.

[Describe this nymph, is she pretty?] Xaphan asked.

Leon complied, describing to the best of ability—and desire—to recall, from Naiad's bronze skin, her lake-blue eyes, dark hair, and well-endowed figure.

[Yeah, you sound like you're in for a *real* world of hurt,] Xaphan said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

[I already have Elise,] Leon responded.

[And how much of a difference does that make? Just take them both as wives!]

Leon fought the urge to facepalm, but his face did grow red from the prospect Xaphan casually brought up. He doubted that Elise would allow him to have multiple wives, and neither did he particularly want to share her. Perhaps a little greedy, he had to admit, but the idea of letting another man touch his lady wasn't something he was willing to abide.

So, he had consigned himself to the idea of monogamy, despite not having spoken with Elise at length about it. He supposed she might think the same, but at the moment, polyamory wasn't something he wanted to bring up with her when she was so obviously angry.

Leon sighed, then said, [I suppose that's just a bridge I'll have to cross when I come to it.]

[The coward's choice.] Xaphan taunted. [Not surprising, although, at the very least you don't have to worry about this power affecting you negatively. Now that I look at it closer, it shouldn't do anything other than vaguely track your movements.]

[Good to know,] Leon drily stated.

It took a few more minutes, but the gems were eventually absorbed into Leon's soul realm, appearing in a flash of light at the foot of the throne in the middle of the island. Xaphan immediately waved his hand and caused them to fly into his hand. The orange flames of his body incinerated the box, leaving only the four sapphires and one diamond.

[Perfect... perfect...] the demon cooed as he examined the stones.

[Are you going to use them or are you going to fuck them? Because you sound like you intend to do the latter,] Leon quipped.

[I'm going to use them in a magical formation that should speed up my recovery quite a bit,] Xaphan replied. He was far too happy with the gems in hand to care what Leon said to him right then.

On the ground around the demon, thousands of fire runes appeared, connected by thin lines made up of thousands of more runes, forming more than a hundred separate circular glyphs intersecting with each other. Xaphan's eternal fire was at the center, and right in front of him, he placed the diamond. Then, in the four outer-most glyphs, he placed the sapphires.

[Here we go...] the demon muttered in glee as he called upon his fifth-tier power and activated the enchantment.

Instantly, great clouds of the luminescent mist that surrounded the island began to swirl around and concentrate above the demon, then descended upon the sapphires. The sapphires glowed a brilliant blue, and then the runes began to glow, starting a massive fire that submerged Xaphan in a massive bright red bonfire. At his feet, Xaphan could see the power flowing from the sapphires, through the enchantment, and into the diamond, causing the pale white gemstone to glow a vivid gold.

The demon sat down in front of this glowing diamond and reached out to touch it with his glossy obsidian hand. Knowing what was about to happen, he hesitated just before his finger touched the stone, but it was only for a moment; the allure of regaining the power he lost during his imprisonment was too strong, and he quickly made contact with the diamond.

Xaphan almost exploded with power. The enchantment channeled the Mists of Chaos around the island into the demon, purifying the magical power and making it much easier for the demon to absorb. It wasn't too much power, but from the way his body creaked and the tiny cracks that spread out along his limbs, Xaphan knew that his body was only a few tiny wisps of power away from shattering under this tremendous pressure.

And yet, through the intense pain of his body nearly exploding under the pressure of the Mists of Chaos Xaphan could feel his demonic core in the center of his chest swell like a withered plant suddenly being given all the water it needed. He endured for minutes without end, vaguely aware that Leon attempted to ask what was happening a few times before going silent, and letting the power that surrounded Leon's soul realm surge through him.

For his part, Leon felt a strange hollow feeling in his chest, but he wasn't overly concerned. He could tell that Xaphan was doing something in his soul realm and that it undoubtedly required his undivided attention, but he still felt a little miffed that everything wasn't explained to him. At the very least, Leon wasn't in pain and he didn't notice any drop in his magic power, so he let it go for the time being.

But Leon expected answers from Xaphan just as soon as the demon was done with whatever he was doing.

Chapter 268: Treason

The general mood in the Talfar camp was extremely low. The retreat during the first assault, the casualties sustained during said assault and in previous engagements, the loss of the majority of their

supplies leading to quartered rations, the loss of Bran, and Emrys' failure to catch Leon all contributed to a severe drop in morale compared to the army's confidence when they were first mobilized.

Arthwyn did his best to hide many of the problems the army now had, but there were too many people who knew that the supply situation was terrible and that the rat that had made it that way had escaped. Now, it was all he could do to simply keep the levies working on the siege weapons, and even then, deserters were captured every day, though not nearly as many as were getting away.

The Marshal knew that he had a few weeks at most before the majority of his army would melt away.

But then, with barely two days left before the replacement siege towers and trebuchets were completed, he finally received some good news.

One of his adjutants burst into his command tent while he was reviewing the flow of supplies from Briga to the camp and said, "My Lord! Marshal Gwen has sent word that she'll be here in less than three hours!"

Arthwyn's eyes lit up at the unexpected good news, but he maintained his dignity as a Marshal and ordered, "Make sure that her tent is prepared and that there's room for her warriors in the camp."

"Yes, My Lord!" the adjutant replied as he scurried off to fulfill those orders.

Arthwyn sighed and leaned back in his chair, a feeling of satisfaction and glee finally blooming in his chest after so many setbacks. The army had taken more than forty thousand casualties between those killed and those too injured to participate in the battle anymore, but more than half of those were from the peasants. With Gwen's fifty-thousand-strong force, not only would the army increase even from when it was at full strength, it would be made up of a higher percentage of skilled, professional warriors.

Arthwyn quickly finished up his work and, when the time came, went to the camp's eastern gate to welcome Gwen and her warriors. Owain, meanwhile, chose to wait in the inner camp, as he said that waiting on a Marshal at the front gates wasn't becoming of a Prince's dignity, let alone that of a King.

Arthwyn didn't care what the spoiled Prince believed, he only cared that he was finally receiving the reinforcements he needed to storm the walls again once the siege towers were completed.

"Riders on the road!" shouted one of the guards in a nearby watchtower. After several seconds, he added, "Marshal Gwen is leading them!"

Arthwyn straightened himself up and waited with a large smile on his face. A smile that faded once the gates opened and Marshal Gwen rode into the camp on the back of a blood-red horse and accompanied by no more than three or four hundred cataphracts. Arthwyn glanced out of the gate, then back at the other Marshal; he didn't see any other warriors with her.

Yet, he didn't say anything out loud. He warmly greeted his fellow Marshal and led her further into the camp.

Gwen was an auburn-haired woman, tall and thin, but with muscle where she needed it. Her grey eyes were long and narrow, her cheeks were thin, and her century and a half of life had given her a few wrinkles in the corners of her lips and eyes, but she still possessed an attractive charm that drew the eyes of nearly everyone who saw her.

Of course, it could've just been her robust sixth-tier aura, indicating both her strength and vigor, but Arthwyn noted that he never got the same stares that Gwen was now getting as they walked through the camp making meaningless small talk. Arthwyn considered himself fortunate that the mess that had resulted from the fire that destroyed their supplies had largely been cleaned up, so it wasn't immediately apparent how dire their situation was.

Owain waited for them in the command tent, and upon their arrival, he quickly greeted Gwen after she bowed in respect.

"Marshal Gwen! It's so good to see you again, you've chosen a wonderful time to make your appearance!" the Prince said with a beaming smile. He had thought that the disaster inflicted upon the army by Leon might've destroyed his bid for the throne, but Gwen would've had to come with supplies that could mitigate their supply problems. "How soon can your warriors be deployed? I'd prefer we launch an assault on the walls in the next couple of days."

Unfortunately for him, Gwen hadn't come to reinforce their position.

"I apologize, Your Highness, but I have not come with the warriors you requested," the Marshal responded, eliciting surprise from Owain and an angry glare and hint of killing intent from Arthwyn.

"You... haven't come with reinforcements?" Owain hesitantly asked, seeking confirmation.

"I have brought only my personal guard," Gwen informed the Prince. "Perhaps we ought to sit down and have a chat, Your Highness?"

Despite her jovial tone, the Marshal wasn't asking. She took a seat and stared at Owain and Arthwyn until they did likewise.

"Explain yourself," Arthwyn growled as he contained his anger as much as he possibly could.

Gwen merely flashed a smile at the other Marshal before turning her attention back to Owain. "Her Majesty has learned of this campaign you've launched."

Owain instantly paled. He was trying to usurp his sister, so he wasn't going to follow her orders, but Queen Andraste was still more than powerful enough to halt his army in its tracks, even with the war with the Han Kingdom in the east.

"And what... does my sister have to do with this?" he coolly asked.

"Her Majesty has demanded that this foolish endeavor be halted immediately and that Your Highness surrender himself to the Elder Council for arrest. If Your Highness does not comply, she will come here all the way from the east to personally arrest you."

Owain gave the Marshal a bitter smile, and after a moment of thought sarcastically asked, "Oh? Is that all she wants from me? To give up everything I've ever wanted?"

"Furthermore," Gwen continued, "both Your Highness and Lord Arthwyn have been formally removed from your posts as governor of Briga and Marshal, respectively, as ordered by Her Majesty and more than fifteen members of the Elder Council."

Arthwyn remained silent, but Owain audibly gulped in nervousness as Gwen laid a letter signed by the aforementioned Queen and Council members on the table corroborating her statement.

"I have also been charged by Her Majesty to negotiate peace with the Bull Kingdom on her behalf, while she deals with the eastern menace." With that, Gwen's formal relaying of the decisions of Talfar's leading figures completed, her tone softened. She looked Owain in the eye and said, "Owain, stop this. If you turn yourself in, you'll be sent to a comfortable temple in the south. If you don't, you'll be executed, just like all the others that have rebelled in the past few years."

"I appreciate the thought, my Lady," Owain whispered in dejection. He didn't whine, ask for proof, or curse everyone in Pretani; he didn't believe that Gwen would lie about such consequential things. Besides, while he was more than willing to continue, he didn't actually *want* to keep this war going. "Perhaps I could have a few hours to think things over?"

"My guards will stay here to ensure Andraste's will is carried out," Gwen said with a sad smile. "However, I must go to Ariminium as soon as possible, just in case the Bull charges before we can begin negotiations."

"I understand," Owain replied. Gwen smiled, then turned her attention to Arthwyn.

"And you?" she growled.

"And I, what?" Arthwyn snarled.

"Will you relinquish your command and return to Pretani?" Gwen asked, her tone harsh and her killing intent spiking, making it clear without explicitly stating it what would happen to Arthwyn should he refuse.

Arthwyn stared daggers at Gwen for a long few moments, but then he sighed and said, "I suppose this whole campaign was a fool's errand, anyway. I will step down."

"Good, my cataphracts will take over running this army until I can return and dismiss it," Gwen said as she stood up. "Until then, I would prefer if neither of you left this tent."

The Marshal then turned around and left the tent. Arthwyn and Owain could hear her muted barking of a few orders and then riding away a few moments later.

What followed was a long silence between the two. Owain sunk deeper into despair as he tried to think of a way out of his mess without directly fighting Andraste; he hadn't the money, food, or troops for such direct action, and if he could find the support to do so then he never would've begun this campaign in the first place.

Arthwyn, meanwhile, seemed eerily calm despite agreeing to end his attempts to gain revenge on the Bull Kingdom and Trajan in particular.

"So," the Marshal began with a light and airy tone as if he were about to comment on the weather or something else just as inane, "what are you going to do, really?"

Owain glanced at Arthwyn in confusion. "What do you mean? Everything is over now! I'm not the governor of Briga anymore, there won't be any more supply shipments! We can't feed or pay the army, there's nothing else that *can* be done!"

“Hmph,” Arthwyn snorted in disdain. Owain had attempted to assert himself throughout the few weeks the campaign had been going on, but he wasn’t the kind of monarch that Andraste was, the kind that could end a rebellion with a single letter.

“Don’t give me that shit!” Owain spitefully cried. “You’re in the same boat! You’re no longer a Marshal, and-“

Arthwyn interrupted the Prince by slowly rising from his chair, then, in a split second, hurled the table between them out of the way and lifted Owain by the throat.

“I don’t fucking care what Talfar calls me!” Arthwyn growled, keeping his voice low and menacing despite the enchantments on the command tent preventing their voices from escaping. “That bastard Trajan took everything I ever cared for from me, and I *will* see him dead at my feet for it!”

Owain’s eyes were wide in panic as he saw the real possibility that Arthwyn would kill him. With no other option, the now-former Marshal revealed the true depths of his hatred and need for revenge. Arthwyn had a wild, crazed look to him, and Owain struggled against his tightening fingers. The edges of his vision began to darken, and in his panic, Owain tried to summon his magic power, but it was too late. His hands fell to his sides and everything went dark.

“I’ve waited a *long* time to do that, you little shit,” Arthwyn growled as he tossed the Prince’s unconscious form on the floor.

Gwen rolling in and taking away all of his political power infuriated Arthwyn, to say the least. Once he managed to calm down and realized what he had done, though, he wasted no more time. He stepped over Owain’s barely-breathing body and confidently strode out of the tent.

Once outside, he was greeted by the sight of the hundreds of cataphracts that Gwen had brought with her relieving his subordinates of their duties.

“HALT!” Arthwyn roared, and the entire inner camp froze under his powerful sixth-tier aura. All of his Warrior-Chiefs and Captains turned their attention to him, as did Gwen’s cataphracts.

One of Gwen’s warriors, a sixth-tier mage himself, shouted, “Lord Arthwyn, please remain in your tent until the Marshal returns!”

Arthwyn rolled his eyes and waved his hand at the warrior, causing half a dozen stone spikes to burst out of the ground and impale the man, killing him instantly.

“MARSHAL GWEN INTENDS TO SURRENDER TO THE BULL!” Arthwyn bellowed, letting his voice reach every ear within the camp. “SHE IS A TRAITOR TO THE CROWN WHO HAS ASSAULTED PRINCE OWAIN AND ATTEMPTED TO USURP AUTHORITY WITHIN THIS ARMY! EVEN NOW, SHE VISITS THE BULL PRINCE OF ARIMINIUM TO SELL TALFAR LAND IN EXCHANGE FOR A POSITION IN THEIR ARMY!”

Arthwyn was making things up as he went along, and whether or not his immediate subordinates believed him was something he didn’t know, but he did see Gwen’s warriors starting panic with his words and many of his lower-tiered warriors reaching for their weapons and glaring at Gwen’s warriors.

Arthwyn continued with one last statement, "I HEREBY RELIEVE MARSHAL GWEN OF HER COMMAND AND CHARGE HER WITH TREASON! ALL WHO FOLLOW HER ARE TO BE JUDGED JUST AS GUILTY AND ARE ORDERED TO SURRENDER TO THE NEAREST TALFAR WARRIOR!"

Gwen's cataphracts were stunned at Arthwyn's accusations, and many began to panic as Arthwyn's people, already angered at the less than gentle treatment they received at the hands of Gwen's warriors, surged toward them to take them into custody. There were a few thoughts of resisting, but in the end, the hordes of Arthwyn's army proved too much, and Gwen's warriors surrendered without a fight.

As Arthwyn watched in satisfaction, one of his top Warrior-Chiefs ran up to him and asked, "My Lord, what are your orders?"

"We must prevent Gwen from succeeding in her plot," Arthwyn said, extending his lie despite the conflicted look that passed over the Warrior-Chief's face. "Order the assault on the walls. It doesn't matter if a few of the trebuchets or siege towers aren't finished, we'll make do with what we have. The Bull's upper leadership will be distracted dealing with the traitor, so we can manage with what we have."

"Yes, my Lord," the Warrior-Chief responded.

Over the next hour, the Talfar army began mobilization as fast as they were able. While this was happening, Arthwyn had Owain taken to a hospital tent and ordered that he be kept sedated for the time being. When the attending medic tried to protest, Arthwyn unleashed his aura on the man, pushing him face-first into the dirt. The next medic did not argue with Arthwyn and placed a few enchantments on Owain that would keep the Prince unconscious for the time being.

"Good," Arthwyn muttered with a smile. After his plans being set back time and time again by Owain, he found it immensely satisfying to finally be rid of the Prince.

Three hours after Gwen arrived at the camp, the entire Talfar army began to slowly march west, toward the walls of the Bull's Horns.

Chapter 269: The Second Assault Begins

Xaphan sat in the center of a raging maelstrom of power. The Mists of Chaos that surrounded the island in Leon's soul realm swirled around him in great clouds, while the enchantment he created siphoned off a few wisps, purified the magical power, and channeled it into the demon's body where it would nourish his withered core.

This process lasted for several hours until one of the four sapphires broke with a loud crack, causing the entire enchantment to fail and the cloud of mist above the demon to immediately dissipate.

With a sigh of disappointment, Xaphan sat back and took stock. His power had grown substantially in those few hours, so he wasn't that upset, but much like with the potion he had Leon take, it had had the potential to be significantly more effective.

[You done, demon?] Leon suddenly asked, having heard Xaphan's sigh.

[Yes, I've done all I can with what you gave me,] Xaphan said as he examined the other four gems. The three sapphires were notably less lustrous, though they were at least intact. The sapphire that broke had split right down the middle, preventing it from holding magic power and essentially rendering it into nothing more than a dull blue rock. The diamond was the best looking of them all, but whereas it had sparkled before, it was now cloudy and much less radiant. [I don't think even the most skilled of jewelers could make these attractive anymore,] Xaphan muttered.

[You broke the stones?] Leon asked with mild annoyance. He hadn't paid any money for the gems, but they were still extraordinarily expensive. In the year and a half that he'd been serving Prince Trajan, his account with Heaven's Eye had grown to more than eight million silver—it was quite lucrative to be a knight serving a Prince—but Leon would still hesitate to buy those gems, they were worth so much.

[Hmm, one broke, the others won't be able to stand much more magic put through them. I was, admittedly, a little rough on them,] Xaphan said.

[What did you *do*?] Leon demanded to know.

[I used an enchantment to help me to absorb the Mists of Chaos that surrounds your soul realm,] Xaphan said.

[So is that why I feel slightly hollow?] Leon asked.

[Probably,] Xaphan admitted. [However, the Mists of Chaos are not yours, they are a primordial force that surrounds all soul realms. The Mists are a, quite literally, unlimited resource. You may feel a little empty right now, but that feeling will pass as the Mists replenish themselves.]

Leon carefully controlled his reaction. He was busy monitoring Alix's training, as well as training himself, and he didn't want to look mysteriously furious just sitting at the edge of the sandpit.

[How about you explain in detail what this enchantment of yours did?] Leon asked, controlling his tone just as much as he was ensuring that his face maintained its usual stoicism.

Again, Xaphan sighed, and he simply sent the entire enchantment into Leon's head, as he had done with the spells that countered Bran's darkness magic. The enchantment was so complex and so dense with information, though, that Leon experienced a momentary sensation of vertigo and almost lost his lunch.

[Why don't you do me a favor and build one of these when you get started on your mind palace?] Xaphan said. [I *suppose* you'll be able to use it as well, but if it's not properly built then it'll break just as mine did.]

[So, you didn't build it right?] Leon asked as he caught his breath and consigned the information he was just given to memory.

[I may reside within your soul realm, but it is not my space. Anything I create is temporary and not as sturdy as it could be,] Xaphan answered testily, clearly annoyed that he had to explain this to Leon.

[I'll consider building one,] Leon conceded. He was personally quite curious as to how the enchantment worked, and he intended to study it in his off time. But there was one last thing he wanted to know. [By the way, demon, how strong are you now?]

[Hmm, that's hard to say without a more thorough test, but I'd say I'm currently equal to an eighth-tier mage,] Xaphan answered, and Leon again had to control his reaction, but this time it was abject shock and surprise.

Before anything else could be said, though, there was a loud knock at Leon's door. Putting the conversation on hold, Leon shook himself out of his shock and quickly went to answer, finding one of Trajan's assistants on the other side of the door.

"Sir Ursus, you've been summoned to a council by order of His Highness," the assistant said.

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Trajan's meeting room was silent as a grave. The Prince, Legates, Tribunes, and diplomats who had assembled were all staring at one person: a woman standing in the center of the room before Trajan's raised dais.

"What I have said is true," Marshal Gwen said. "The Elder Council and Her Majesty have jointly disavowed Prince Owain's actions here. He has been stripped of his titles and authority and is being recalled to Pretani. The same happened with Marshal Arthwyn. If either continues this war, they will be committing treason against the Talfar Kingdom, and no action will be taken by Her Majesty regardless of how Your Highness wishes to deal with the matter."

"You say these things, and yet there is still an army of a hundred and fifty thousand encamped uncomfortably close to my walls," Trajan growled.

"I just arrived a few hours ago," Gwen explained. "There hasn't been enough time to direct Owain's army back to Briga. I simply wanted to come here first to request a temporary truce while I and my subordinates see to its disbandment."

Trajan glared down at the Talfar Marshal, his eyes unblinking and his killing intent soaring. And yet, Gwen didn't so much as bat an eye, even with the other knights in the room doing likewise. Trajan couldn't help but be impressed by her composure, but he wasn't sure he believed her.

"What proof of your claims do you carry?" Trajan asked.

Gwen instantly summoned several letters from her soul realm and held them out for the entire room to see.

"These are letters written in Her Majesty's own hand specifically stating her hope for peace between our Kingdoms, and that Prince Owain's actions were not directed by her. She wishes to restore the peace that settled between us eighty years ago and has ordered the immediate withdrawal of Prince Owain and his army. Her Majesty has also requested that this unfortunate dispute be settled through diplomatic channels rather than through force of arms."

"Would Queen Andraste be saying these things if she weren't fighting a war in the east?" Saufeia wondered out loud. Her 21st Legion had suffered the most casualties out of any of the units stationed at the Horns, and while she would accept whatever decision Trajan made on the issue, seeing a negotiated peace at this stage wouldn't be satisfying to her.

"I believe Her Majesty would fight for peace," Gwen replied.

"You missed your calling, Marshal," Aquillius stated with a wide smile, "you would make a fine diplomat with such an ambiguous answer."

"And what part of my answer was ambiguous?" Gwen inquired, smirking at the diplomat.

"How, exactly, would your Queen 'fight' for peace?"

"Enough," Trajan growled, and Gwen's retort died in her throat. "Let me read that letter."

Gwen handed over the one addressed to him, then the last two she carried to Aquillius and Fonteius, the diplomats assigned to Trajan and operations in the Talfar Kingdom, respectively. The contents of the letters were just as Gwen described, and they had not only Queen Andraste's signature but her personal seal as well.

But Trajan wasn't impressed. "Paper and ink is all well and good," he said, "but what concrete assurances can you give that your intentions are honorable?"

"What assurances would you like? My Queen has bestowed upon me the power to negotiate binding treaties, so whatever you need, I'll happily consider," Gwen replied, causing all of the diplomats in the room to stare at her in disbelief. She wasn't herself a diplomat, after all, and giving such a privilege to a military officer wasn't something that was done in the Bull Kingdom.

Gwen waited patiently for Trajan to give voice to his desires, but the Prince simply glanced over at Aquillius, who nodded and rose from his seat.

"My Lady," he began, drawing Gwen's attention, "one thing we would like to see before anything is for the Talfar warriors occupying Florentia to remove themselves from the city."

"Florentia is not your city to bargain for..." Gwen said with a hint of confusion.

"It was established by citizens of the Bull Kingdom, and those citizens are now refugees languishing in our docks. We want your guarantee that they are safe to return home."

Gwen made a show of thinking about the matter, propping up her right arm on her left and resting her head on her knuckles, but after several seconds, she said, "Done."

Pulling the Talfar warriors out of Florentia would dramatically diminish their war potential, but if the Legions swooped in to occupy the city in turn, Gwen was confident that she could oust them. Regardless, she didn't think that the Bull had enough soldiers to assault the Talfar camp regardless of the position of their Legions; if they had, she believed they'd have done so already. In other words, this was an easy deal to make, and if it brought some trust between their two Kingdoms, Gwen was happy to do it.

Aquillius was slightly stunned that Gwen agreed, but he managed to maintain his dignity and simply smile and say, "Wonderful."

"Is there anything else the Bull wants?" Gwen asked. "As I said, Queen Andraste is committed to peace, so now's the time to ask..."

"We'll wait until your army pulls back to Briga before we begin negotiations," Aquillius said.

Gwen looked to Trajan, but the Prince merely said, "Then that is that."

Suddenly, a high-pitched alarm sounded that stabbed right into the ears of everyone in the meeting room. Several Legates bolted up and drew their weapons, trapping Gwen between them.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Gwen shouted, struggling to make her voice heard above the alarm.

Trajan slapped a runic circle on the dais beside him and the alarm shut off. He then rose from his seat and began walking to his office in the back of the meeting room. "We'll see," the Prince responded to the Marshal.

Once in his office, Trajan stared out his window and saw that the Talfar army had left its camp and was slowly marching west toward the walls. From what he could see, they were fully armored and in battle formations, and their siege towers were right behind the front lines.

Striding back into the meeting room, where the Legates and Tribunes were clearly anxious and starting to panic after the alarm, Trajan stated, "The Talfar army is on the move toward us. Get to your stations!"

Instantly, the commanders sprang to their feet and began to hurriedly leave the meeting room.

Trajan walked over to Gwen, looked the Marshal in the eye, and asked, "Were you sent here as a distraction?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!" she shouted in protest and the three Legates that surrounded her pressed in just a little bit closer in case she tried anything with the Prince.

Trajan sighed, then said, "Take her into custody. We can work out what's going on after the battle."

"Is this how you treat diplomatic guests, Prince Trajan?! I am here as a representative of my Kingdom, and you take me prisoner?!" Gwen indignantly shouted.

"There are chambers in the Diplomatic Corps suited for one of your station, My Lady," Aquillius stated. "They're secure, so perhaps we can let her wait there while we sort out this situation?"

Trajan nodded his assent, and Aquillius and the other two sixth-tier diplomats took custody of Gwen, allowing the other three Legates to see to their duties.

As Trajan himself was leaving, he turned and said, "Ursus! On me!"

Leon dutifully followed Trajan, but in his heart, he couldn't help but feel immensely disappointed. There was about to be a battle, and he wouldn't participate in it at all. Of course, he wasn't about to argue, but the disappointment was there, nonetheless.

As they were leaving the meeting room, Leon heard Trajan mutter, "Devious little bastards, luring most of our commanders away from the walls with talk of peace."

There were a couple Legates and Tribunes that were still on the walls in case something like this happened, and Minerva was in command while Trajan was speaking with Gwen, so it wasn't like the units were devoid of leadership. Besides, all of those Legates and Tribunes in the meeting room would easily reach their posts by the time the Talfar army entered trebuchet and arrow range, so Trajan was inclined to believe that this offer of peace wasn't made in bad faith.

Still, the Talfar army was now marching on Ariminium, and he wasn't going to allow that at all.

Chapter 270: Second Assault

The earth shook beneath the feet of the Talfar battle formations as they marched out of the camp and toward the walls of the Horns, miles away. The formations of the infantry were perfect, the cataphract armor glittered in the afternoon sun, and the charioteers looked heroic as they drove behind the siege engines.

However, there was a palpable sense of uncertainty; the army didn't move nearly as fast as they did when they last assaulted the walls, and Arthwyn could feel the stares of thousands of warriors around him and hear the indistinct mutterings of his subordinates. The Marshal had a dark look about him, despite his seeming composure, and it was clear that the highest ranked warriors in the army were not keen on moving the army at this time.

One of Arthwyn's highest ranked Warrior-Chiefs drove up to him in his chariot. He was a man so trusted and respected that Arthwyn had given him command of nearly all of the charioteers in the army.

"My Lord," the Warrior-Chief began as soon as he was close enough to speak without shouting, "may I ask a few questions?"

One of the reasons for the uncertain air about the Talfar army was just how quickly they were ordered to begin marching. Arthwyn hadn't even called the senior leadership to a meeting to plan the assault, he simply gave the order to get the army in formation and to get marching. Understandably, there were more than a few questions that the leadership had for their Marshal.

"If you must," Arthwyn growled, making it clear through his tone alone that he would've rather rejected the Warrior-Chief's request.

Regardless, the Warrior-Chief pressed on. "My Lord, there is a great deal of confusion amongst the ranks. We don't even know what we're supposed to do once we get in range of the walls!"

"I'm not hearing a question," Arthwyn snarled.

"My Lord, what happened to His Highness?" the Warrior-Chief suddenly asked.

Arthwyn looked surprised for a moment at the change in topic, but he regained his composure in less than a second and said, "Marshal Gwen assaulted His Highness before proceeding with her meeting with the Bull Prince. His Highness is currently receiving medical care, I've seen to it."

"Was there nothing My Lord could've done at the moment? To protect the Royal Family is one of the greatest duties a warrior has!"

Arthwyn whirled around and glared at the Warrior-Chief. He'd barely spared the man a few glances before now, but after that question, the Chief had his undivided attention.

"What are you implying?" Arthwyn asked with a dangerous look in his eye. But the Marshal restrained himself when he saw that several other Warrior-Chiefs were watching and listening to the conversation. Despite everything, he needed these warriors to keep the army together and moving, and he couldn't afford to alienate them. And they clearly had doubts about his story, doubts which only grew when he ordered the current march on Ariminium.

"I request that we turn around and return to camp," the Warrior-Chief said, finally getting around to his point.

"Denied," Arthwyn instantly replied. "We're taking this fortress and this city, that is what this army was assembled for!"

"My Lord, our Prince is injured, and a Marshal has been accused of treason! The morale of the army is in tatters, we can't fight like this!" the Warrior-Chief protested.

"I have given you your orders, if you continue to argue against them, I will have you arrested for insubordination!" Arthwyn shouted, finally losing his patience. "Return to your duties! I will hear no more of this!"

The Warrior-Chief stared at his Marshal, and for a few seconds, it appeared like he was going to continue arguing. However, he backed down under Arthwyn's withering gaze and quietly returned to his place at the head of the chariot corps. The other Warrior-Chiefs paled a little as Arthwyn swept his gaze over them, and any thoughts of adding their voice to the previous Warrior-Chief's vanished.

And yet, it was clear to Arthwyn that the army wasn't moving with the purpose it had only a week before. But Arthwyn was long past caring about that. What he had done would quickly come to light if he were to stop and take the time to try and alleviate their concerns or come up with a more concrete plan, so he kept them moving forward. He'd already committed treason and attacked a Prince, after all, and the lives of the rest of the thousands of peasants and warriors paled in comparison to his vengeance.

And so, despite moving slower and with much less purpose, the Talfar army marched on.

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From the command tower, Leon and Trajan could see everything in the vale. The Talfar army advanced like a rising sea, but the walls of the Horns were strong and thick, and neither were too worried about their chances.

"They have less siege towers and trebuchets than before," Leon observed.

"Thank the Ancestors for small mercies," Trajan whispered before turning back to the soldiers manning the enchantment consoles. "Let's begin," he ordered, and the soldiers began to monitor the enchantments and occasionally activate runic circles.

Leon could see everything that happened. All along the vale erupted geysers of fire and bright explosions, pillars of rock and ice burst from the ground and literally poked holes in the Talfar lines, killing a few and causing the rest to slow down. As the Talfar army drew closer to the walls, a long line of rock spikes burst from the ground like anti-cavalry spikes.

By the time the Talfar army reached arrow range, they had already left more than five thousand of their comrades lying dead or severely injured in the vale.

"By the Ancestors..." Alix muttered from beside Leon. As his squire, she was allowed here—as was Anzu, but the griffin didn't care about the battle down below and preferred to sit next to Leon's feet, lean against his leg, and slowly preen his wings while occasionally glaring at the soldiers who glanced at him.

The Talfar army huddled together, firing their arrows back at the Legion archers on the walls as they advanced, but to limited effect. The Legion archers were much more effective, and the Talfar infantry paid in blood for every step they took.

The siege towers were tougher, and they shrugged off explosive spells from arrows and trebuchets. The peasants pushing them, on the other hand, fell in droves. They took so many casualties, in fact, that Leon could see a few peasants try to run, only to be caught by the infantry behind them.

The first siege tower fell before it even hit the walls. Five Legion trebuchets concentrated on a single tower and fired star shells—pots covered in an explosive enchantment and filled with a special blend of resin, oil, and the blood of fire beasts—at the tower. Under this kind of literal firepower, the enchantments protecting the tower failed, and the five-story-tall siege engine burned to ash in minutes, along with the couple hundred Talfar infantry who had entered when the tower neared the walls.

Talfar's remaining seven towers kept moving, though, and the Talfar trebuchets returned fire. Explosions flashed up and down the first wall, and Leon knew that scores of Legion soldiers had just died.

Still, the battle was going much better than it had a week before. Discipline in the Talfar ranks was breaking down enough for even Leon and Alix to see from their vantage point, and the piles of Talfar dead were growing.

The first siege tower hit the wall, with the ramp crashing down on the battlements of a tower. It was the one closest to the river and would've been in range of the Fire Lances had the fleet been in position, but with the surprise assault, the fleet hadn't been deployed in time to stop it. Talfar warriors poured out of the tower, displaying for the first time in the battle the same fighting spirit that they had during the first assault.

Unfortunately for them, they encountered stiff resistance in the tower, halting them in their tracks. A shield wall had been established on the wide roof of the tower with a pair of fifth-tier mages out in front. Talfar's warriors, despite fighting ferociously and displaying great courage, simply failed to get past this iron wall.

"There's something off about this assault," Leon muttered as he watched everything happening. His hand kept moving to rest on his sword, but the weapon was in his soul realm, leaving his hand grasping at nothing and leaving Leon's tic unsatisfied.

"What're you thinking?" Trajan asked, causing Leon to almost jump out of his skin. The younger knight had been so engrossed in watching the battle that he hadn't realized the Prince was back at the window.

Leon quickly explained what he had observed, from the desertion of the peasants to the weakened unit cohesion between the Talfar units, and their much slower speed and ferocity.

"Hmm," Trajan hummed in thought. "Well, it would make sense, given what we've heard from you, our scouts, and Marshal Gwen. This seems to me like a last-ditch attempt to snatch victory, regardless of the cost. I couldn't imagine an assault when their supplies are so devastated and when their commanders had just been replaced under any normal conditions..."

"It's something to consider, but for now, it doesn't change the fact that the walls are under assault. We'll push them back and sort through the rest later."

“Should be much easier given how they’re fighting right now,” Leon said. A second later, one of the Talfar trebuchets was obliterated by a Legion trebuchet directly hitting it with an earth spell; a rock spike the size of a four-story building rendered it into little more than splinters and smashed the Talfar team manning the weapon to bloody pulp with the speed of its creation.

“Indeed,” Trajan murmured.

Two more towers were destroyed in quick succession from intrepid Legion Tribunes, and it was clear that the other five towers weren’t doing so great. The infantrymen at their feet were far more concerned with blocking arrow fire than they were with entering the towers and storming the walls, and with every warrior that was killed, there were fewer replacements ascending the towers.

All in all, it was not looking good for the Talfar army.

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“This is terrible,” one Warrior-Chief muttered.

“We never should’ve attacked in our current state, we’re going to be annihilated if we don’t retreat,” another responded.

Both men were speaking in low, hushed tones, but Arthwyn was still able to hear them, despite the sounds of the battle before them.

“Quiet,” the former-Marshal growled, silencing both of the Chiefs with a terrible glare.

There were others speaking as they were, of course, but it had taken about an hour after the battle began for the Chiefs to start voicing their concerns amongst themselves. Fortunately for Arthwyn, there weren’t any other Warrior-Chiefs around him that were so vocally discouraged, but as a trebuchet went up in flames from Legion counter-fire, he could feel the eyes of his immediate subordinates boring holes in his back.

The situation was terrible, they were losing warriors far too quickly to sustain this assault, and yet Arthwyn steadfastly refused to order the retreat. The Talfar forces had seized about half of the towers on the eastern-most wall during their first assault, but now, after an hour of fighting, they had yet to gain control of a single one.

Making matters worse, a fourth siege tower was cut in half by a Legate wielding light magic, causing the top two-ish floors to topple to the ground and render the remainder useless.

Four siege towers remained, and a mere eight trebuchets were able to continue the bombardment. There were a few broken sections of battlements here and there, and a couple of the towers were starting to crumble, but the gatehouse held strong and the Talfar warriors were rebuffed in their half-hearted attempts to seize it.

“My Lord...” one of the Warrior-Chiefs hesitantly began, “... Perhaps a... retreat... might be in order?”

Arthwyn remained silent. He honestly didn’t think he’d be able to respond to his subordinate without going off on him, so he didn’t even spare the man a glance.

Taking this man's lead, a Warrior-Captain added, "It's all we can do to keep the levies from beginning a mass-rout, and it's clear that our infantry is simply not up to this task, My Lord! We *must* retreat back to camp!"

"NO!" Arthwyn roared, startling everyone around him. "We will *not* retreat! We will burn this entire fortress to the ground! We will kill that bastard Trajan and his traitorous bitch, and then we will march home in *victory*! We are not stopping this assault until victory is assured!"

Arthwyn's aura spiked and his killing intent washed over his surroundings. Every warrior within a hundred feet of the Marshal felt like they were dunked into an ice cold mountain lake and their hair stood on end. Their heart rates shot through the roof, their hands began to shake, and any more warriors willing to speak up about the futility of their assault fell silent.

And then, from over the walls came the sound of a loud horn blast, and a cry of joy spread over all of Ariminium.

Arthwyn clenched his jaw in frustration, he knew what that horn meant: Legion reinforcements.