

Storm King 241

Chapter 241: Bleeding Leech

The deck of the flagship was silent on the quick cruise back into Ariminium's port. Out of the twelve Tribunes and three Legates that Trajan had taken with him on the mission, five Tribunes and one Legate had been killed, while the rest had no shortage of injuries. Fortunately, both he and Leon had little more than superficial injuries. What was more, there were at least eight hundred casualties in the four battalions that Trajan had taken on the mission, with more than a quarter of those being fatalities. The Prince fully expected those numbers to rise as the Tribunes in charge of those battalions finished their headcounts.

All in all, they had endured a savage beating from the Talfar army for little gain. Initial estimates put the Talfar casualties at higher than theirs, but not high enough to justify the expedition—not that Trajan particularly cared about the number of enemy dead when so many of his own soldiers had been killed.

And worse, Bran was still alive. Killing him was the entire point of the mission, and in that respect, it was an abysmal failure.

No one spoke much more than necessary on the way back to Ariminium.

Alix, Anzu, and the rest of the knights' squires were waiting at the docks. They hadn't a place in the shield wall or as part of the mission to kill a seventh-tier mage, so they were left behind to ensure their safety. The sixteen squires were incredibly tense as they waited for their knights to return, and that tension only seemed to grow as the solemn ships returned.

There were a few relieved cries when some of the squires saw their knights alive and well, and a few tears shed when the squires of the dead knights realized that their mentors were gone. When Leon got off the ship, his helmet in hand, Alix noticed his dark and slightly murderous expression breaking through his usual stoic exterior.

"... It didn't go well, then?" she hesitantly asked.

Leon simply shook his head. He couldn't say anything, because he felt that if he did, he'd spend the next few hours cursing Bran. The vampire had been right there in front of him, but the monster had still escaped after bloodying his hands, despite everything the Legion had done to kill him.

However, for all the rage that Leon didn't manage to restrain, Trajan was even worse. He radiated killing intent like the sun produced light, and he wore an expression on his face that parted the crowds before him like a herd of sheep before a charging bull. The Prince was in a similar situation to Leon, being unwilling to speak for fear of being unable to stop himself from shouting and swearing and cursing Bran, so after clapping a few of his knights on the shoulder and waiting for the bodies of the dead to be unloaded from the ships, he swiftly departed for the Southern Horn.

Leon, Alix, and Anzu followed. Anzu was ecstatic at Leon's return, and the young knight almost had to shake the quickly-growing griffin off of him in order to walk. Anzu's head now reached just past Leon's hip, and he weighed a lot more than he appeared to; Leon didn't want to be knocked down by a happy griffin trying to express his affection by jumping all over him, especially after such a costly loss.

And so, the three walked in silence behind the Prince, with Alix dying to know what had happened and Anzu happily bouncing along and rubbing his head on Leon's hand, completely ignoring the somber atmosphere of the rest of the knights and Legion soldiers that followed behind them.

The battle between the 21st Legion and the Talfar cavalry was a bloody, grinding mess. Thousands on both sides had already fallen, and neither had gained much for that sacrifice.

Arthwyn watched with a sour look from his chariot as his cataphracts began another charge against the Legion shield wall. When the battle had begun, he'd eagerly had his chariot driven up and down the lines, looking for wherever Trajan was. Several times Arthwyn had traveled those few miles, never catching a glimpse of the Prince he so despised. He refused to believe that Trajan wouldn't be a part of this battle. There was no way, Arthwyn had thought, that a Prince like Trajan would send his soldiers out to die while he hid behind the walls of Ariminium.

It wasn't until he received word of the separate Legion force led by the Prince deployed further south outside of Florentia that he settled down. Of course, by that time his forces had been committed and both sides had already started clashing. He couldn't just abandon it and drive his forces against Trajan's battalions—the army was actually large enough that it was conceivably possible, but the peasant levies were untrained and couldn't be relied upon to break the professional Legion soldiers, his cavalry was needed to fight against the 21st Legion, and he didn't want to have his own infantry assault a Legion shield wall if he had a choice in the matter.

He was forced to leave it to Bran's own force of fifty-ish thousand to deal with Trajan, and he wasn't happy about it.

The battle had been raging for half an hour, a short period of time for a set-piece battle. The Talfar cavalry had been giving as good as they'd gotten, and if things continued the way they had been going, then the Legion would be forced to retreat back behind their walls. The Talfar army's sheer weight in numbers would be enough to carry them through to the win.

But just as Arthwyn was about to swap out his cataphracts for his chariots again, a messenger arrived from Florentia.

"Your Lordship!" the young fifth-tier soldier shouted in greeting.

"What?" Arthwyn growled, his anger rising at the distraction.

"The Legion has been repulsed from Florentia! Lord Bran has pushed them back!"

"And Prince Trajan?" Arthwyn asked, his eyes narrowing and his killing intent spiking.

"Unfortunately, he escaped, my Lord," the messenger replied.

'That incompetent bastard let that man go?!' Arthwyn silently raged, barely managing to keep himself from shouting it out loud. It would only sow discontent and divide the army if he were to so publicly disparage a fellow Marshal, and for all his desire to kill Trajan, Arthwyn still managed to hold onto his discipline.

“And what of Marshal Bran? What state is he in that he could not stop the enemy’s retreat?” Arthwyn asked, phrasing his previous thought in a more diplomatic way.

“The Marshal has been... gravely wounded,” the messenger replied. He quickly went into specifics after enduring Arthwyn’s withering gaze for several long and excruciating seconds.

As the messenger was speaking, Arthwyn’s gave the slightly-delayed signal to switch out the cataphracts for the chariots, but as the cataphracts pulled back to make room for the chariots, a loud horn blast came from behind the Legion lines. The Legion immediately began to fall back in an exceptionally orderly fashion, with each battalion covering the others with their archers, and the defense towers remaining vigilant.

Arthwyn stared at the retreating Legion soldiers and briefly contemplated running them down. However, he wasn’t in a position to deal with the towers quite yet, especially since some were up on hills that had been partially flattened into artificial cliffs, preventing easy assaults from the front.

‘No,’ Arthwyn thought, ‘I won’t pursue. Not much point without Trajan... Besides, my people have taken casualties, best to give them some rest...’

The order to fall back was given, and the Talfar cavalry began to pull back to their camp. The site of the battle was marked by the bodies of four thousand dead soldiers.

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“This is where he’s been staying for the past few days?” Owain asked Bran’s assistants outside of the villa that the Marshal had occupied in Florentia. Arthwyn’s cavalry were busy reorganizing, tending to their wounded, and retrieving their dead, as were the Legion soldiers. There would be no more fighting for the next couple of hours, at least, so both Arthwyn and the Prince had quickly driven their chariots down to Florentia to check on Bran, to see for themselves if his injuries were as serious as they’d heard.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Bran’s head assistant replied.

The villa wasn’t that large, and both Owain and Arthwyn knew that Bran had to have noticed their arrival. That he hadn’t come outside to greet them showed just how terrible his injuries were. Or how insubordinate he had decided to be, neither honestly knew which it was.

Without another word, Owain led the way inside with Arthwyn just behind him and a few other high ranking Warrior-Chiefs behind the Marshal. However, before the assistant opened the door for the Prince, Owain turned to the rest and said, “Perhaps it’s best for the Marshal and I to proceed by ourselves?”

Arthwyn cocked an intrigued eyebrow, but he otherwise remained quiet. Both he and Owain knew exactly what Bran was, and though the others probably suspected, they likely didn’t know for sure. To associate with a vampire wasn’t a good look, and since the injured Bran had been left alone with several medics—medics who hadn’t come outside in more than an hour—Owain thought it best to leave the others outside. He didn’t know what they would find, and he preferred to maintain some level of discretion in this matter.

The reactions of the Warrior-Chiefs varied from confusion to slight offense to anger, but none of them argued with the Prince. They all hung back as Owain and Arthwyn entered the villa.

The two were immediately assaulted with the metallic stench of blood. They could hear a few whimpers coming from a nearby room, and a heavy sense of dread settled into Owain's stomach.

Owain and Arthwyn exchanged a knowing look, neither particularly wanting to proceed but knowing that they should, nonetheless.

The first thing both saw when they entered the room where the whimpering had come from was a young man, his dress indicating that he was one of the medics assigned to deal with Bran's injuries, laying on the floor covered in surprisingly little blood given what had happened to him. His eyes were glassy, and his shirt had been torn, displaying the chunk of flesh that had been torn from his throat; he was obviously dead.

Three more of his comrades were scattered around the trashed room, one hung over the arm of a broken couch, another nailed to the marble floor with the leg of a wooden chair, and the last hanging upside down from the ceiling by a rope tied around his ankle. All were just as bloody as the first man. More shocking was the two Talfar soldiers there as well. One, who Arthwyn recognized as Bran's second-in-command, a sixth-tier Warrior-Chief, was sprawled on the ground with wounds far more vicious and savage than the others; one of his arms had been nearly ripped off his shoulder, his eyes were clawed out, and his throat ripped open. The second soldier was lying in a pile of broken furniture, his body more broken than the splinters of the chair and table he had fallen upon.

Despite all of the terrible injuries each person had suffered, there was very little blood, but neither Owain nor Arthwyn had to guess why; Bran was in the corner, his teeth buried to the gums in the neck of the last medic, whose whimpering had drawn the Prince and Marshal to the room, to begin with. The medic's feeble struggling grew weaker and his voice softer, until only a few seconds after the arrival of the two newcomers, he died, going limp in Bran's arms.

Bran stood there in the corner for several seconds, licking his lips and coming down from the high of so much feeding and healing. He barely looked any worse for wear, and if it weren't for his bloody and tattered clothes, it might not have even been obvious that he'd just gone through a deadly struggle for his life.

The vampire turned to face Arthwyn and the Prince. His eyes were hungry, and he took a few steps toward them, causing Arthwyn to draw a sword from his soul realm and prepare himself for battle with a freshly-fed vampire.

But Bran stopped and after a few seconds of dazed staring at the shiny steel in Arthwyn's hand, lucidity returned to him.

"Ah," he said with some embarrassment, "you two seem to have caught me in a *slightly* compromising position..."

"... Yeah," Owain murmured. The Prince wasn't quite sure what else he could say in this situation. Fortunately for him, Arthwyn wasn't quite so tongue-tied.

"What in all the hells happened here?!" Arthwyn demanded.

"Oh, this?" Bran asked as casually as if he were commenting on a new shirt. "Well, *that* one," he indicated with his eyes toward his former second-in-command, "grew *insubordinate*, and I do not appreciate *insubordination*..."

"And the rest?" Owain asked, his tone deadly serious.

"They were just here. I was terribly injured, after all, and needed the sustenance to recover..."

"You have *weakened* us with this!" Arthwyn almost shouted. "Taking Ariminium will be this much harder now!"

"Don't go blowing this out of proportion," Bran said, a smile spreading over his face and his eyes narrowing in warning. "These were *my* people, not *yours*."

"And what happened with Prince Trajan?" Owain asked, heading off the argument that he could see brewing.

"He got away," Bran said with a shrug. He had long since stopped caring about the Prince; his thoughts were now dominated with Leon and his heavenly taste.

"Then we still have some options..." Owain muttered, taking a seat in the last remaining intact chair in the room and ignoring the corpse of the hanging medic only a couple of feet away.

"Such as...?" Arthwyn asked as he returned his sword to his soul realm in a few seconds.

"Give them a chance to surrender," Owain said. Arthwyn's face contorted in anger for a moment, but before he could complain, Owain continued, "They'll refuse it, of course, but we'd be *uncivilized* not to at least offer. Besides, I want to get a measure of Trajan."

"We should just assault their walls," Arthwyn said in a low voice. "We have the numbers, we don't need to talk, just take the damned fortress and put the Bull Prince down."

"For once, I think I agree with Arthwyn," Bran said.

"We're still assembling our siege engines, no?" Owain asked, to which Arthwyn nodded. "And how long will it take to complete them?"

"A few days" Arthwyn honestly answered.

"Then we have the time to talk for a little while. I can speak face-to-face with Trajan, and maybe we can all come away from this happy."

Arthwyn's face almost twisted in anger again, but this time he managed to control himself. The only happiness he'd ever receive in regards to Trajan was to see the man dead at his feet after weeks of retributive torture.

"This is a terrible idea, Your Highness," Arthwyn advised. "We've killed their soldiers, they're not going to want *peace*!" Left unsaid was how little *he* wanted peace.

"I'm going to try anyway," Owain said. He'd always been a little apprehensive about Arthwyn's plan. After these first few skirmishes, he'd come to doubt whether or not fighting this war would win him the

crown he desired, but he was now too committed to Arthwyn's plan to stop now. If he did, he'd look weak and forever lose his crown. "If Ariminium can be annexed peacefully, then all the better."

Bran just smiled and nodded. He honestly didn't care about the city or the accompanying fortress, he just wanted another shot at Leon. If he didn't get that opportunity in battle, then he'd just make one later on.

Similarly, Arthwyn was only here to kill Prince Trajan; the capture of Ariminium was secondary to him.

Still, he was hard-pressed to say anything against the peaceful approach, especially since Owain had acknowledged that it probably wasn't going to work.

The three made a few more plans, and then Arthwyn and Owain departed. Both were glad to be out of that charnel house of a villa, but each walked away with very different thoughts in their head. Arthwyn's were about any potential action he could take against Trajan if the latter accepted their offer of negotiation.

Owain, however, was trying to think of a way to get rid of Bran. The vampire was only allowed to continue to operate in the Talfar Kingdom if he was discreet in his feeding, and killing high-ranking officers in the army had certainly been prohibited. If the vampire were to continue, then he'd become a liability. But for the time being, he was still needed if the Talfar army were to successfully seize Ariminium.

And then, he thought of something. Once he and Arthwyn split up in the camp, Owain turned around and made his way back to Florentia to make a proposition to the vampire.

Chapter 242: Peace Offer

Trajan glared at the letter in front of him as if its very presence profaned him and his Kingdom. It was a simple letter with an honorable request, but given recent events, Trajan couldn't help but be furious that such a thing was even asked.

Leon and Minerva were both with him, along with most of the command staff of the Bull's Horns, including Aquillius and the other two senior-most diplomats.

"Not good, I take it?" Leon asked, seeing Trajan's dark expression.

"No," Trajan growled. "Those bastards have the *audacity* to request a meeting to discuss peace!"

The entire room descended into angry grumbling, with one Legate even loudly saying, "Presumptuous little shits!"

"Do they think we'd take this seriously after their acts of naked aggression?" shouted another Legate.

"In the strictest sense, though, they haven't attacked us," Minerva quietly stated, causing the room to fall silent in shock. "We evacuated a city in their lands and arrayed our forces against theirs in the field. They haven't *invaded* us, yet." This statement angered many in the dark meeting room, but before anyone could castigate her for saying these things, Minerva continued, "Of course, marching an army of two hundred thousand to our doorstep makes their intentions clear, even if they haven't sent a formal declaration of war, and we have to defend ourselves and our citizens, no matter what side of the border they live on."

“So you’re saying I ought to agree to this meeting?” Trajan asked.

Minerva flashed the Prince a devilish smile and said, “That’s Your Highness’ call to make. I’m simply saying that they might make the claim that they’re not here for war and that they’ll then paint *us* as the aggressor. It’s hardly illegal for them to move armies around their territory, after all, and our actions in Florentia could be taken as both an invasion and mass kidnapping.”

“I agree,” Aquillius added. “This is an issue that needs a delicate touch, to prevent any outside interference.”

“Do you foresee any kind of involvement from other Kingdoms?” Trajan asked.

“No,” Aquillius said. “Or at least, not on Talfar’s side. From what I understand, Asturias to the southeast is too busy with wars on their own southern and western borders, and the Samar Kingdom’s economy is too closely linked with our own for them to rashly go to war with us. These are the only two Kingdoms that are close enough to worry about.”

“Hmm,” Trajan hummed in thought. He was admittedly curious about what Prince Owain had to say, but the anger he felt at seeing so many of his people die by Talfar blades was a difficult thing to get past.

“Can we trust anything said by those who willingly work alongside vampires?” asked Amatius, the Legate in charge of the 19th Legion.

“Indeed,” agreed Labienus, the 23rd Legion’s Legate, “there is only *one* proper response to those who consort with demons, and *talk* is not it!” Labienus meaningfully rubbed his sheathed sword that he displayed at his hip, making his meaning clear. Leon tried not to look too hard at this, and he wisely kept his mouth shut.

“I, for one, am not in favor of making peace,” Saufeia, the 21st Legion’s Legate said. “Most of my battalions lost people to that damned cavalry, they’re going to want revenge.” She didn’t say it outright, but her tone made it clear that she wanted another crack at the Talfar army as well.

“Even if we don’t make peace,” Trajan said, “I’m hesitant to fight in open battle again. We killed more of them than us, but we need our soldiers more than they need theirs. I’d rather we stay behind our fortifications and only sally out if we absolutely need to, or if a great opportunity to inflict damage on our enemy’s army presents itself.”

“Should we take this to mean that Your Highness is going to turn down this offer of peace?” Aquillius asked, his eyebrow cocking in surprise.

“Not necessarily,” Trajan answered. “I’m inclined toward keeping this fight going until we can get reinforcements and counter-attack. Have we received word back from Pretani?”

“Nothing of note, Your Highness,” Fonteius, the diplomat assigned to the Talfar Kingdom, stated. “My people in Talfar’s capital have sent word back that they’ve had several meetings with secretaries to Talfar’s Elders, but so far haven’t managed to get a sit-down with anyone of importance yet.”

Silence descended over the meeting room as Trajan closed his eyes in thought. It seemed a long and tense quiet that no one wanted to break, but in reality, it only lasted two or three minutes.

Finally, Trajan opened his eyes and said, "I want to hear what Owain has to say for himself. I will agree to his meeting to discuss the possibility of peace."

Many of the faces around the room contorted in anger and surprise, but no one argued with the Prince. He'd taken counsel with the highest ranking soldiers under his command, and he'd made his decision; to question him now would not be wise.

"Who will Your Highness take with to this meeting?" Aquillius asked. Trajan, of course, couldn't go alone; should the peace offer turn out to be a trap, he'd need plenty of people with him who weren't strangers to combat.

Trajan glanced around at the assembled knights. His group would have to be relatively small, but as a Prince, he couldn't skimp on his entourage when meeting with another Prince from a hostile Kingdom.

"Sirs Leon, Aquillius, Fonteius, Cispus, and Dame Oscia," the Prince said, and each of the five called out nodded in acknowledgment. To everyone save Leon, Trajan ordered, "Each of you will bring along three men-at-arms or junior diplomats."

Again, those four nodded. Leon was the only one called out that wasn't a sixth-tier mage, and since he had no one officially under him except Alix and Anzu, there wasn't much of a need for him to prepare to accompany Trajan.

Fortunately, it wasn't Leon's nonexistent military support that Trajan wanted Leon to come with him to the meeting; rather, it was to give the young man experience in dealing with matters of extreme importance. Over the past year and change, this had become well understood among the top echelons of the Bull's Horns that Leon was essentially Trajan's unofficial apprentice.

"And the rest of us?" Minerva asked, despite already knowing what Trajan would say.

"You'll be directing our defense efforts while I'm gone," Trajan said. He then turned to the three Legion commanders and said, "And you three will have your battalions in their defensive positions and ready for combat. I don't think that this little talk will go south, but just in case, we have to be ready for anything."

"Yes, Your Highness," Saufeia, Labienus, and Amatius said in unison.

"We've lost more than a thousand soldiers so far," Trajan said with a solemn look and a slow cadence, making sure to make eye contact with the dozens of knights present to impress upon them the importance of what he was saying. "They *will* answer for this. Sir Aquillius, Sir Fonteius, I'll leave it to you two to arrange this meeting."

"Yes, Your Highness," the diplomats said as one.

With that, the meeting was over. Trajan left with several of his secretaries to inspect the walls, while Minerva returned to the Northern Horn. Leon at first tried to follow the Prince, but Trajan, perhaps seeing the shadowed look in Leon's face, sent him home to rest. The younger knight wasn't saying much about it, but Trajan could tell that whatever he'd seen in Bran's nightmare, it still weighed heavily on his mind and that without rest, he wouldn't be paying much, if any, attention to the duties that Trajan was trying to expose him to.

'I hope he pulls himself out of this soon,' Trajan thought to himself as he watched Leon amble out of the meeting room. Despite walking relatively quickly, Trajan could tell that Leon lacked his usual purpose and direction to his movements. The latter's every step was usually calm, direct, and purposeful, but now there were hints of hesitation and uncertainty that Trajan could pick up on.

But, as much as he may have wanted to, the Prince couldn't afford to dwell on Leon's problems when there was an enemy army in the field and an entire fortress to see to. For the time being, he could only sigh and hope that Leon could work through whatever was going on in his head himself.

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As usual with these war councils, the squires of the high ranking knights waited outside. Leon met up with Alix and Anzu as he walked out of the meeting room.

"What now, Sir?" Alix asked.

"Home," Leon said.

"And then?" she inquired, hoping for more than a one-word answer.

Leon quietly sighed, then filled her in on what had been decided, after which Alix frowned and went silent. Neither spoke again until they returned to their rooms.

As usual, upon walking inside, Anzu sprawled out over a couch that by now was covered in fur and feathers, despite Leon and Alix's frequent cleaning. Alix, however, wasn't nearly as laid-back as Anzu, and, in the absence of any instructions from Leon, changed into her training outfit and began training in the sandpit.

Leon, meanwhile, went into his bedroom, closed the door, and quietly sat down on his bed to think. He cradled his head as he shook in anger and grief, his thoughts filled with images of Artorias, Elise, and Valeria. He'd hoped that killing Bran would help him banish these thoughts, but the vampire had escaped.

Without anything else to do, Leon decided to train. He felt a powerful need to speak with the Thunderbird and to do that he needed to reach the sixth-tier. A fringe benefit of this training was that, for at least a little while, he managed to get his mind off his darkness-induced nightmare.

But that wasn't a permanent solution, and after about two hours, he knew he had to get up and do something rather than just sit in his bedroom like the mooney teenager he didn't want to be.

When he exited his bedroom, he found Alix still in the sandpit, slowly working through a sword form with her eyes closed that Trajan had taught her several months before. Her face was red from exertion and her clothes were damp with sweat, indicating just how intensely she was training. Seeing her, Leon felt more than a little terrible, as, despite his own determination to reach the sixth-tier, Bran's escape was leaving him distracted.

Leon walked over to the edge of the sandpit to watch his nominal squire train. It occurred to him that he hadn't taught her that much in the past year, barely a fraction of what a more experienced knight could show her. And yet, he never detected even a hint of resentment coming from her despite his rather lacking knightly qualities.

As Leon grimly smiled to himself, silently laughing at his own uselessness, Alix opened her eyes and saw him watching her. She finished up a few last swings before stretching out a bit, then asked, "Feeling all right?"

Leon almost answered, "Yes," without thinking, but the word died on his tongue.

Alix stared at him in obvious concern; he had bags under his eyes like he had trouble sleeping, his hair was messy, and his face had gone unshaven for days. All in all, while he didn't look bad, per se, compared to many of the other knights in the Legion he was down-right disheveled.

Alix calmly walked over and took a seat beside Leon. They weren't the teacher-student pair that most knights and their squires were. She was his squire, lower than him in rank, magical ability, and even—assuming Leon ever identified himself to the Bull Kingdom at large—his political inferior. But she was also older than him, if only by a couple years, and that tiny age gap helped them to grow closer and become friends despite the difference in their stations.

So, with that relationship in mind, Alix sat next to Leon and waited for him to speak. She could tell that he wasn't himself since waking from Bran's attack several days prior, but she didn't push him for information. She just waited for him, for whenever he was ready to talk.

She waited a while, about ten agonizingly slow minutes, during which Anzu meandered on over and lay down at Leon's feet. Alix almost commented on how fast the griffin was growing, but she also knew that Leon might take that as an excuse to move on from his current state, so she just sat and waited while running her hands through Anzu's soft fur—which the griffin, at best, tolerated.

Finally, Leon whispered, "I'm doing about as well as can be expected."

Alix glanced at him and almost asked what he meant by that statement, but after seeing his face which was struggling not to show the bitter anguish he felt, she changed her mind. "Well, whenever you're ready to talk, if you ever decide you need to talk, I'm here, for as long as you'll have me. We're friends, after all!"

"Right," Leon said, his face slowly relaxing into a smile. "Thanks."

"By the way," Alix said, moving the conversation onward, "what will I be doing on this little sojourn to meet this Talfar Prince?"

Leon's face again twisted in discomfort, but this time it wasn't the prospect of talking about his insecurities that did it.

Seeing this, Alix asked, "I'm being left behind again, aren't I?"

Leon silently nodded.

"I hate being left behind," Alix said bitterly.

"Then there's only one thing to do," Leon replied, standing up and retrieving a training sword. He wasn't confident in teaching Alix anything other than some of the fighting styles that he'd learned from Artorias, but he was at least willing to do that much.

Alix smiled and joined Leon in the sand. It was Prince Trajan who dictated who was strong enough to accompany him on his missions. Leon was strong enough, but neither she nor Anzu were. Anzu, as a young griffin, would continue to gain strength as he grew larger, but she didn't have such a luxury; her only recourse, if she wanted to join Leon in his later missions, was to train and gain strength through hard work.

And she could feel herself nearing the third-tier. She didn't know when she might finally cross that threshold, but she could feel that it was getting relatively close.

Chapter 243: A Royal Proposition

The atmosphere around the Bull's Horns was so tense it could almost be cut with a careless swing of a blade. The 19th Legion manned the walls, the 21st prepared themselves in the Northern Horn, and the 23rd readied for battle in the Southern Horn. The fleet had deployed to the mouth of the Tyrrhenian River to watch for any approaching Talfar soldiers using boats seized in Florentia and to bombard any units of their army that strayed too close to the shore.

The people of Ariminum could sense this tension, and even though many went about their day as usual, many more barricaded themselves in their homes.

Prince Trajan was going to meet with Owain on this day, and the possibility of the meeting turning violent was high. Everyone had to be ready for the walls of Ariminum and the Bull's Horns to be assaulted.

When the time came, Leon, Alix, and Anzu made their way over to the keep and met up with Trajan, Aquillius, and the others who would be going to the meeting. As he approached, Leon bowed slightly to the Prince—who was speaking with Aquillius, Fonteius, Minerva, and a handful of other high-ranking knights—then nodded respectfully to Aquillius, Anna, Lucilius, and Juliana, who he had been acquainted with during his short assignment to the Diplomatic Corps.

"Hi, there!" Anna almost shouted as Leon walked up. She darted forward and threw her arms around Leon's neck and pulled him into a tight hug.

Leon certainly wasn't expecting this, and he froze up for a moment as he tried to think of what to do. He gently returned the hug and quietly said, "Hello."

Anna released him and flashed him an impish smile, reveling in his awkwardness.

"Must you do that *here*?" Juliana said, chastising Anna for her undignified public behavior.

"Yep!" Anna responded, grinning at Juliana in turn.

"It's good to see you again, Sir Leon, Miss Alix," Lucilius said, interrupting Juliana before she could retort.

"And you," Leon said, while Alix nodded as respectfully as she could to the older knight.

"Hopefully this will turn out better than our last mission did," Lucilius said with a wry smile.

"Yeah, assuming I don't screw something up," Leon replied with a self-deprecating smile. They had accomplished their last mission together, but Leon had recklessly endangered it when he went exploring in the stone giants' Cradle.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Anna pitched in, "it's not like this is going to hinge on whatever you decide!"

"True," Leon conceded, "though to be fair, last time wasn't supposed to, either..."

"Just stick with His Highness and everything will be fine," Juliana responded. "If anything goes wrong, it won't be because of us."

"Got it," Leon said.

As they were speaking, the last of the sixth-tier knights that Trajan was bringing along showed up, along with their men-at-arms, and Trajan shouted, "Everyone here? Then let's get this thing done with!"

Everyone finished up their preparations and fell in line, but before Leon took his place in Trajan's entourage, he turned to Alix and said, "Keep an eye on Anzu, all right?"

"Yes, Sir," Alix said with a somewhat regretful smile. She hated being left out of important things that her knight was participating in, but as she was still only a second-tier mage, there wasn't much she could do about it.

She laid a hand on Anzu's back, and Leon whispered, "Stay here, buddy. Keep an eye on Alix for me."

Anzu hated being left behind probably more than Alix did, but he was starting to get used to it. He sat down and watched Leon turn around and hurry to catch up with Trajan with a rigid expression as if he was just waiting for Leon to change his mind and call out to him to join the mission.

But he didn't, despite glancing back once with a look of regret that almost matched Alix's.

—

Once the group reached the main gates through the walls, Trajan called the group to a halt. A number of horses had been prepared, but none of them mounted just yet.

"Has the Talfar Prince been seen, yet?" he asked a waiting Tribune.

"Not yet, Your Highness," the Tribune responded.

"Hmm," Trajan growled in displeasure.

"It's not like they were going to arrive early and wait for Your Highness," Minerva said with a hint of chastisement that only those familiar with her could pick up on.

"They could've," Trajan responded. "Not like *we're* the ones who asked for this meeting!"

"Perhaps..." Aquillius hesitantly began, before leaning in closer so that the others wouldn't be able to hear, "... Perhaps a little more patience with those who marched an army to our border would be prudent?"

Trajan almost shot back about his own patience, but realized just in time that it wouldn't help. He took a deep breath and calmed himself, but made sure that it was subtle enough that he wouldn't appear less confident to the nearby soldiers watching the group. If he were to be honest with himself, his patience was thinner than normal after seeing so many of the soldiers under his command killed after so many

years of relative peace. It took him a moment to regain the regal calm he learned during his childhood in the Royal Palace in the capital.

As he was re-centering himself, he glanced at those who were to accompany him, and his gaze landed on the helmeted Leon. With his face obscured and restful body language, he appeared to be the embodiment of undisturbed calm. The Prince couldn't help but be a little jealous of the young man for his ability to remain poised in this situation. Even Aquillius and Minerva were a little on edge, despite their admonishments of his behavior.

A soldier suddenly shouted from the gatehouse, "Four chariots on the field coming from the Talfar camp!"

"Time to go," Trajan said, and his group got on their horses, with the exception of Minerva.

"Let's hope this isn't a waste of time," Lucilius muttered.

"That depends on them," Aquillius said.

"Given how things have gone so far, I doubt we'll get very far today," Trajan cynically added.

Once everyone was mounted and ready, both of the gatehouse's portcullises began to slide upward almost without a sound.

"Don't burn this place to the ground while I'm gone," Trajan said to Minerva with a cheeky smile.

"Oh, you'll be lucky if the Horns are still here in half an hour when I'm done with them," Minerva tried to quip back, but her worry for the Prince was shown when her voice quivered a bit.

Picking up on this, Trajan replied, "We'll be right back."

"Yes, Your Highness," Minerva said, bowing her head as Trajan led the group through the wall.

The other two central gatehouses opened to let the Prince's group pass through, closing behind them so that only a single gatehouse was open at any one time. It was rare for these main gatehouses to ever be open all at once, as that would present a huge weak spot in the walls; for caravans and travelers that want to pass through the walls, smaller gates at the ends of the walls would open, forcing those who want to pass to zig-zag up and down between the walls as a security measure.

Several minutes later, Trajan's group was riding through the fortified vale between the Horns and Talfar territory. Within the half dozen or so towers and small forts, the passing group could see the soldiers tense and waiting for the Talfar army to make a move, but so far, only the four chariots that could be seen just outside of the eastern-most towers had approached Bull territory.

These four chariots patiently waited for Trajan's group to meet them. Each one was slightly larger than normal, owing to their function as vehicles for important people, and had five or six people riding within rather than only four. This meant that both groups were about equal in number, though Trajan's had the advantage in mobility, as each of his people had their own horse.

As the group approached the meeting point roughly at the designated border between the two Kingdoms, both Leon and Trajan scanned the riders of the chariots looking for Bran. Neither truly thought that the seventh-tier mage would miss something like this, but both were disappointed when

neither hide nor hair of the vampire could be seen. To be fair, it was a warm, sunny day, and vampires weren't known for their tolerance to the sun, but not knowing where Bran was still put both—Leon, especially—on high alert.

However, who they could see were two men in particular that stood out from the other soldiers. One wore the silver and blue plate armor of a Talfar Marshal and radiated the vigorous aura of a sixth-tier mage. The other was dressed all in rich blue velvet trimmed with silver, had blue-dyed hair, and watched their group riding toward him with a warm and jovial smile. As Trajan's group came closer, Leon could make out faint dark blue flowers embroidered in the blue man's elaborate doublet, destroying any semblance of humility that he may have wanted to convey with a near-monochrome outfit.

In contrast, Trajan was dressed in simple Legion red trimmed with gold, with the only decoration he chose being a golden bull on his chest.

"Prince Trajan!" the blue man called out once Trajan's group stopped in comfortable speaking range. "I'm so glad you decided to indulge my request for a meeting! You've no idea how relieved you've made me, giving us the option to settle these unfortunate recent circumstances amicably!"

"Prince Owain," Trajan growled, his voice so low that Leon almost thought the Prince was mimicking a stone giant, "these 'unfortunate recent events' have left thousands on both sides injured and dead. Because of your blatant aggression, it was my first *and second* instincts to refuse your offer to meet!"

"Our aggression?!" the man in silver armor almost shouted, his eyes staring death at Trajan, "It was *you* that invaded our land and *stole* our people from their homes!"

"Those were *our* people, and we simply assisted in their evacuation," Aquillius responded, his voice significantly calmer than the silver-armored man's. "It was your people who attacked first, in an attempt to prevent us from repatriating our people in Ariminium."

"Now, now, everyone," Owain interrupted before the Marshal could angrily shout back, "we've convened here to speak of peace, not of who did what and who's to blame for what and when!" The Prince turned his eyes toward Fonteius, and seizing the chance to defuse the others, said, "I remember you, Sir Fonteius! We met eight years ago when you traveled to Pretani!"

"Yes, Your Highness, for then-Princess Andraste's election as Queen," Fonteius replied.

At the reminder of his sister and his failure to take the crown, Owain's smiling mask slipped a little, showing a dark look and a lot of anger, but the smile was back in place almost as quickly as it had dropped.

"I think... that we may have gotten off on the wrong foot," Owain said through clenched teeth, barely able to hold in his rising anger.

"Cut to the chase, why did you request this meeting?" Trajan demanded, giving Aquillius the urge to face-palm.

"I was *hoping* that we could come to some peaceful arrangement that would solve our current predicament in a way that's beneficial to both sides," Owain explained, forcing his jaw to relax so that he could sound a little more earnest and straightforward.

"Given the blood shed in recent days, these benefits must be stellar indeed if Your Highness believes it can bring peace," Aquillius observed.

"I should think so," Owain replied, a confident smile returning to his face. "First of all, I should remind all of you not only of the size of my army, but also that it's led by Bran, one of the strongest mages in our realm who unfortunately couldn't be with us today, and Arthwyn, one of our finest military minds. I should also remind you of the current political situation within your borders, something which has even reached my ears. Your King is absent, and your Regents are more preoccupied with each other than with what's happening here."

Trajan scowled as Owain brought up things that he didn't think had spread outside of the Bull Kingdom yet, and Aquillius asked, "And the point of all of this, is what?"

"I have the power I need to take this fortress. You have, what? Three Legions and some men-at-arms? Seventy thousand at the best? Not even half of what I have..."

"Those are some interesting figures," Trajan muttered with a smile. "You'll never breach our walls before our reinforcements arrive."

"Maybe, maybe not," Owain said mysteriously.

"Don't underestimate our army, Bull Prince," the silver-clad Marshal said, spitting out 'Bull Prince' as if it were a horrendous curse.

"I'd rather not take this fortress by force of arms if it can be avoided," Owain said, cutting off another potential fight. "In fact, I'd rather not take this fortress at all."

The Marshal subtly glared at his Prince in confusion, which only Aquillius picked up on.

"That appeared to be a look of confusion, did they not speak about this beforehand?" the diplomat wondered.

"An odd thing to say, Your Highness, given how many citizens of Talfar that have been mobilized to take it," Fonteius replied, nodding at the gigantic Talfar camp.

"I don't like half measures," Owain said with a chuckle. "Anyway, to get to the point, we're both Princes with a great many warriors willing to kill for us. This is what I propose: that we both use our considerable military might to aid the other in seizing our respective thrones! You march with me to take Pretani, and I will march with you to seize your Central Territories!"

This time it wasn't only Arthwyn who stared at Owain in disbelief, but nearly everyone else present.

Trajan was silent for several seconds, which Owain thought meant he was seriously considering the offer. In truth, though, Trajan was simply stunned that Owain would suggest such a thing.

"I'm not one for treason," he eventually said.

"And it wouldn't be treason if we win," Owain countered, "it would be the legitimate monarch coming to power. I know that you relinquished your claim years ago, but--"

"Not going to happen," Trajan interrupted.

Owain stared at his Princely counterpart, his smile faltering a little. "Perhaps... you have not thought out the *benefits* this arrangement could bring us?"

"I've given this offer all the consideration it deserves," Trajan said with a deep scowl.

"I see..." Owain muttered. "I think you still don't trust me. How about this, then, I have more than twenty unwed sisters, you can have your pick of them if you take me up on this offer. Hell, you can have them all if you want, so long as you help me claim my throne."

Trajan almost burst out laughing at this suggestion. "If I wanted women, I wouldn't need *your* assistance to get my fill," he said.

Owain was quiet for a long moment, and Arthwyn managed to get himself back under control, shifting his glare from his Prince back to Trajan. Trajan picked up on the killing intent in the Marshal's eyes, but it didn't concern him enough to bother looking back at Arthwyn.

"Then... that's how it's going to be, then," Owain said quietly, almost to himself. "You have chosen the path of blood. I will claim my throne over your rotting corpse."

With that, Owain gestured to his chariot driver, who turned the Royal chariot around to start marking its way back to the Talfar camp.

Trajan was about to do likewise when Arthwyn suddenly asked, "Do you remember me, Your Highness?"

Trajan glanced at the Marshal, and despite seeing something familiar in the man's face, couldn't place it. "No," he growled.

"A shame," the Marshal whispered. "It seems you will die without *truly* knowing the man who bested you." Arthwyn then joined Owain in riding back to their camp, with the rest of their guards in close pursuit.

"Well, that was *enlightening*," Aquillius said. "Maybe get your contacts in Pretani to speed things up with that Elder Council of theirs, yeah?" he said to Fonteius. With Queen Andraste out in the field fighting against the Han Kingdom, the Elder Council was the only body with the power to recall Owain from his current campaign.

"They're working hard, but it's domestic problems and their eastern wars that take up their time right now," Fonteius said with a hint of bitterness.

"Let's get back to the Horns," Trajan said. "We don't want to be caught out here talking if that army decides to attack now that their offer of peace fell through."

"By your word, Your Highness," Aquillius said obsequiously.

Chapter 244: Infiltration

Owain's anger had cooled by the time he returned to his tent in the Talfar camp. The high-ranking Warrior-Chiefs of the army had been waiting for him and Arthwyn to come back, but as soon as Owain walked into his tent, he dismissed everyone. Conveniently already absent was Bran, though no one was all that upset at the vampire's lack of appearance. Arthwyn did send a few messages to the vampire before he and Owain left to meet with Trajan, but all he got in return had been silence.

In contrast to Owain, Arthwyn's anger had not lessened over the short drive back to camp, though he at least waited until the rest of the Warrior-Chiefs left him and the Prince alone before letting it show.

"Respectfully, Your Highness, what in all the hells was *that*?" the Marshal demanded, his face rapidly turning red.

"If this is your idea of 'respectfully', I question your understanding of the word," Owain drily said as he took a seat behind his desk and leaned back in his chair.

Arthwyn wasn't amused with Owain's quip, and furiously said, "When I agreed to support your bid for the throne, *you* agreed to take my counsel in *all* things!"

"I remember," Owain said as he leisurely stretched out in his chair.

"Then why was I not consulted about the terms you offered to that bastard?!"

Slowly, Owain leaned forward until his elbows rested on his desk, and he released a tiny modicum of killing intent, something that Arthwyn didn't think the young pampered Prince was even capable of.

"I am not your slave," Owain said with a tone of deadly seriousness. "I am your *Prince*! I am not beholden to you!" The Prince took a deep breath to calm himself before continuing. "I took the liberty of looking through your history in the service of the Kingdom, and I understand that the first unit you ever commanded was wiped out in the Bull Kingdom's counter-invasion in the last war. I understand your personal desire for revenge, which is undoubtedly the real reason why you recommended we go on this campaign, rather than marching on Pretani."

With every word, Arthwyn's face grew redder and his expression contorted even more with anger. However, he held his tongue; he wanted to hear everything that Owain had to say.

"You were not made a Marshal without reason," Owain continued, "and I respect your experience and expertise. However, this is *my* campaign! I am the Prince here, not *you*! I will dictate our strategy, and *you* will obey!"

"You would then put my support for you in jeopardy," Arthwyn angrily whispered.

"No I wouldn't," Owain countered. "You've already committed to me. You've done too much for you to extricate yourself from my cause, now. Besides, you're not going to abandon this before it's finished, you're going to stay here to see your revenge for your fallen comrades completed."

Aeronwen's face flashed in Arthwyn's mind, and his shoulder began to throb. "You don't know a fucking thing," he growled. Seeing that his words got to his normally unflappable Marshal, Owain wore a smug and confident smile, and Arthwyn had to beat back the urge to smash the Prince's teeth in.

"Whatever you think I do or don't know is irrelevant," Owain responded. "The only thing that matters is my throne. Having the support of foreign royalty would've given my reign legitimacy, but that ship has sailed. Now it's time to do things the hard way. Prepare an assault on the Horns."

"To attack them now would be a fool's errand," Arthwyn said through clenched teeth. "Their guard is up, and will stay that way for a day, at least."

"I'm not going to wait for them to get their act together and *force* us back," Owain said. "As we speak, I'm sure they have reinforcements marching their way! I want Ariminium to be mine by the end of the month!"

"*You're giving me time limits?*" Arthwyn asked with mocking amusement. "*You*, who have never fought a war before, let alone conducted a siege, are telling *me* when to take this fortress?! Have you forgotten that we have our own reinforcements on their way? Marshal Gwen will be here in a matter of weeks, and she'll be bringing fifty thousand more soldiers with her!"

"Then let her come to a city flying the Talfar banner," Owain said. "She can accompany us back to Pretani, at least. Just get on this. I want a plan ready by the end of the day."

"It will take at least two or three days to organize an attack in our current state, we still need to finish setting up the camp fortifications," Arthwyn coolly replied.

"Excuses are unbecoming a man of your stature," Owain shot back.

Arthwyn had to fight not to grind his teeth in rage, but the Prince had given an order and he had to follow. He turned and left the tent, pausing only to wipe his face clean of anger, and pointedly not bowing to his Prince.

For his part, though, Owain no longer cared about Arthwyn's insubordination. '*Such unbecoming behavior,*' the Prince thought, '*would only matter if Arthwyn survives long enough to see me crowned, which that bastard most assuredly will not.*'

—

When the portcullises of the last wall opened, Alix and Anzu were still there, waiting to greet the return of Trajan's group. Anzu didn't sit and wait for Leon to approach, though, and bounded forward to run alongside Leon's horse, startling the poor beast in the process and almost throwing Leon off its back.

"Better be careful with that little guy, Sir Leon," Lucilius said, "he's getting too big to play rough."

"You can say that again," Leon said with a nervous laugh as he righted himself in his saddle. He knew from conversations with the beastmasters and his own research into griffins that Anzu, being just over a year old, had entered into his primary growth spurt. He'd probably be big enough to ride in a matter of months, around which time he ought to be around the late third-tier or early fourth-tier. The beastmaster that Anzu had been assigned guessed that he'd grow to be about twenty or thirty percent larger than even the burliest of destriers and had been providing Leon with special food—mostly high-quality beef and lion's milk—to help the griffin grow as large as he could.

Given that Anzu was now comparable in size to the biggest breeds of dogs, had sparkling red eyes, and a coat of gleaming white fur and feathers, Leon knew that whatever else the beastmaster put in his food was exceptionally good for him.

As if knowing that he was being talked about, Anzu chirped and fluttered his wings, kicking up a cloud of dust off the road and causing him to sneeze.

Seeing this, Trajan seized upon the moment of levity and added, "I think we might have to see about getting you bigger quarters, otherwise that one isn't going to fit through the doors!"

"If Your Highness insists, I *suppose* I could live with a larger place," Leon said with a sarcastic smile.

"We'll get it done, then," Trajan replied.

The group dismounted there at the gates and started walking back to the keep, which was actually faster than riding all the way back to the stables in the Southern Horn.

Along the way, Alix quickly caught up to Leon and asked, "So, we still at war?"

"Mmhm," Leon responded. "Though no one's made any formal declarations..."

"We don't need declarations to kill our enemies," Trajan said, hearing the question and answer. "It's clear enough that they're here for conquest, and they'll be left wanting."

"That they will," Leon agreed, though it was Bran his thoughts turned to rather than the main Talfar army.

The vampire didn't show himself during the brief meeting, and Leon found himself feeling a little unsettled.

When the group arrived back at the keep, they went straight to Trajan's meeting room and took their seats, with Leon standing at Trajan's side while Alix and Anzu waited outside the room, as usual. There they waited for a few more minutes while the high-ranking Legates showed up—the entire command staff wasn't needed, so more than a few Legates and nearly all of the Tribunes stayed at their posts.

"Was there a peace agreement?" Amatus asked.

"You ask like it's not obvious," Labienus responded, glancing over at the grim faces of the diplomats.

"It's always best to confirm these things," Amatus chided. "I'd hate to make false assumptions. Either way, though, my 19th Legion is ready."

"That's good," Trajan said, his deep voice echoing in the spacious room, "because we are, indeed, still at war. I'm sure there's going to be an attack soon, perhaps even tonight, so we need our readiness level to be high."

"I'll make sure we're at twenty-five percent guard," Minerva said. This would have one out of every four guards manning the walls to be awake and on duty, which was about fifteen battalions, not including those outside of the three combat Legions.

"We're going to need a force of cavalry to ensure those in the towers and forts to the east can fall back if necessary," Saufeia mentioned.

"Two or three thousand should do it," Minerva said. "We only need to screen the retreat, not break the Talfar cavalry on its own terms."

"It's not like their cavalry can easily take fortified positions, though," Labienus stated.

"We're not going to leave five hundred knights and men-at-arms out there to die," Trajan growled.

"About how long can they stay out there, though?" Labienus asked.

"Not long, if they get surrounded," Saufeia answered.

“Which they *will* be,” Amatus added.

“With the ships at the mouth of the river and our own cavalry and archers giving them hell, falling back won’t be an issue; Constantine won’t give up his positions without putting up one hell of a fight,” Minerva confidently stated.

Suddenly, the door burst open and a Tribune hurriedly entered. “We have a situation!” he breathlessly explained.

“What is it?” Trajan demanded.

“Your Highness, we may have detected someone infiltrating the fortress!”

—

The mouth of the Tyrrhenian River was wide and relatively calm. That being said, if a mortal—or first-tier mage and possibly even most second-tier mages—were to try and swim across, they would find themselves quickly being swept out into the Gulf of Discord. There were no bridges or walls spanning this part of the river, only three enormous towers at the end of the wall protecting Ariminium, though the local Bull fleet was out in force, just in case any enterprising Talfar officer tried to infiltrate the city beyond the walls—which didn’t have any walls west of the Horns—using captured Florentine boats.

But Bran didn’t need boats, and he certainly wasn’t going to be swept out to sea anytime soon. Not long before Owain and Arthwyn set off for their meeting, Bran had left his soldiers in the care of the highest-ranking Warrior-Chief in his division that he hadn’t eaten, then slipped into the river. He sank down into the water, and even further into his shadow, then rode the current down the river.

He had a strong darkness demon on his side, plus prodigious power in his own right, but he still had to be careful as he drifted down the river. There may not be any bridges spanning the river, but there were certainly plenty of enchantments that he had to avoid, not to mention the sheer magical power required to move the warships that radiated out into the water could force him out of his shadows if he lost concentration. On top of all this, he was unable to rise to the surface in order to breathe, though as a seventh-tier mage he could hold his breath for hours if he didn’t exert himself too much.

And it was like this, with ships patrolling above him, and the eyes of soldiers in the tower scanning the water that surrounded him, that Bran slithered past the walls of Ariminium.

‘That wasn’t so difficult,’ the vampire thought as he sped toward the Southern Horn, unaware that he had tripped one of the alarms on his way past the towers overlooking the river, an alarm that no fish or ship could trigger.

Leon’s taste had faded somewhat in the days since he’d first sampled it, so Bran was a little more lucid as he emerged from the water as nothing more than a shadow. Still, with all the speed of his darkness, Bran didn’t arrive at the Southern Horn until after the meeting between the two Princes had concluded.

The gates of the Southern Horn were a little trickier than the river, as the walls enclosed the Horn completely, preventing him from just drifting past and trusting in his shadows to hide him from detection; if he were to try and go over the walls, he’d almost certainly be caught.

Luckily, the gates of the Horn were still open, and carts of supplies were being brought in and out in great numbers. Bran simply hid in a dark corner of one of the carts and let himself be taken into the Horn with little trouble.

However, yet again, he tripped some alarms, and he had to speed away on the other side of the outer walls when the guards watching over the gate pulled the merchant over to inspect the supplies he was delivering. He didn't, however, notice exactly how many alarms he'd tripped.

The vampire's next biggest challenge was finding his prey. There were thousands of people in the Southern Horn, and he couldn't release his magic senses without fear of discovery, and so that left him with nothing more than the manual approach. He'd have to search the entire Horn for Leon, something which would likely take days, and then he'd have to wait for an opportune moment to strike, when the young knight was on his own, preferably.

But Bran was patient, and as he shot up a small tower to get a better look at the Southern Horn's layout, the glittering white marble towers of the keep entered his view.

'That delicious morsel was with Trajan both times we fought, so might as well start someplace where the Prince is likely to be,' Bran thought, and he began to slowly make his way past more walls, gates, and defensive wards meant to deter infiltrators, all of which failed against the seventh-tier vampire.

Chapter 245: Losing Patience

As Trajan was meeting with Owain at the Bull's Horns, August was meeting with Legates back in the capital. Much like at the Bull's Horns, the capital had three Legions permanently stationed around it. Further out in the Central Territories were four more Legions, but as the Central Territories was the most peaceful region in the entire Kingdom, this was more than enough.

That being said, despite having the smallest contingent of combat soldiers in the entire Kingdom, there were dozens of administrative and logistical battalions in the Legion headquarters, almost doubling the number of soldiers in the Central Territories. There were also three or four thousand sixth-tier knights within the Legion, though easily three-quarters of them weren't experienced in combat. Perhaps a quarter of all the Legates in the Legion were in and around the capital.

It was with as many of the combat Legates as possible that August had met in those three days as he attempted to scrounge up some additional reinforcements to bring to the Horns. Unfortunately, most of these Legates didn't want to go against the will of their Consul, who was still refusing to march to Trajan's aid without an express order from Octavius, frustrating August's attempts to defend the Kingdom and bringing no small amount of stress down upon the Prince.

However, he was still making some small progress here and there.

"So, will you march with me to repulse these vile invaders from our land? Will you march to the aid of Prince Trajan, who has stood in defense of this Kingdom for decades?" August passionately asked the Legate in front of him.

"His Highness, Prince Trajan has been good to me," the Legate replied. "I served under him when I was a Tribune forty years ago. If he has the need for me and my Legion, then I'll be there."

“Good,” August replied, hastily concealing his surprise and glee. “I want to be on the road by the end of the week, are your soldiers ready for that?”

“Your Highness, all Legions are expected to be able to march in as little as two days after receiving the order to set out. Perhaps some Legions have fallen lax without a real enemy, but I have not allowed the men and women under my command to let their skills atrophy and their readiness degrade. My Legion isn’t one of those in the west who barely remembers which end of a sword to hold, we’ll be ready to begin the march to the Bull’s Horns by the morning after next.”

“I look forward to it,” August replied, a small amount of the tension of recent days melting away. He and the Legate spent a few more minutes discussing when and where to meet, as well as what the logistical situation was like on the road. Since they were marching through friendly territory, the soldiers rounded up by August would be able to resupply at every city they stopped at, so they didn’t have to weight themselves down with so many supplies.

Roland and the Brimstone Paladin were waiting in August’s office in the Royal Palace when he returned from his meeting in another part of the palace.

“Give me some good news,” August brusquely said once the door was closed and they had some privacy.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Your Highness,” Roland replied. “I was stonewalled by the logistics guys I met with.”

“Same here,” Brimstone replied. “Neither the 5th nor 6th Legions will march without the Consul’s orders.”

“Disappointed,” August said with a dark look. “I at least managed to get the 7th Legion on our side.”

“Two Legions, then,” Roland whispered. They’d managed to get the 3rd Legion on board the day before, but none of the other Legates were going to move their Legions in defiance of their Consul.

“Three Legions at the Horns, three more assembling there from other parts of the east, and our two...” August muttered. “Half of what my Royal Father brought to bear on Talfar eighty years ago...”

There was a long silence as August worked through the problem in his mind.

‘Should I demand Legions from the other Consuls...? No, that would alienate them. Besides, the Southern, Western, and Ocean Consuls are all probably already in my brother’s pocket...’

This predicament truly brought to light how poor of a situation August was in, as regardless of the issue of facing a foreign invasion, the response he’d gotten from so many parts of the Royal Legions made it obvious that Octavius’ reach was a lot wider than he’d thought. The longer he thought about it, the angrier he became. The thought of the other Consuls and Legates putting personal ambitions and loyalties ahead of the Kingdom, preventing him from assembling a force to drive the Talfar armies back to where they’d come from infuriated him so much that he almost lost his royal demeanor a few times when dealing with them.

August had even grown desperate enough to assemble troops to march east that he'd attempted to contact Octavius with a comm stone, but his brother hadn't deigned to reply so far, despite days having passed.

August sat forward in his chair, his eyes dark and his aura growing slightly colder with killing intent.

"Has either Bronze or Penitent made a decision yet?" he asked.

"Not yet, Your Highness," Brimstone replied.

The Prince rose to his feet with a barely concealed look of anger on his face. "Then let's go wring a decision out of them. Our Kingdom is at war, and they... You know what? I'd rather save my words for them! Let's go!"

August then led Roland and Brimstone out of his office and toward his father's recuperation villa. Roland and Brimstone exchanged slightly perturbed looks as they followed behind the Prince; it had been a stressful few days, and it seemed that only getting two Legions to agree to march to Ariminium had frayed at August's patience.

The King's villa appeared the same as it had the last time August visited, with nothing to break the peace of the quiet grove around it save the wind. August had to almost fight with himself to maintain that peace by not bursting through the front door like a man possessed.

Just as before, the only people within the villa were the Bronze Paladin standing guard outside the King's door and the Penitent Paladin within the King's bedroom.

"Here to speak with His Majesty?" Bronze politely asked as August walked up to him with a face that communicated nothing but death.

"No, I'm here for you and your brother-in-arms," August replied.

"You haven't sent any messages with your answer to our request for aid," Brimstone added, his face stoic and serious enough that it could've been carved from stone, with none of the usual warmth and respect for the Bronze Paladin, one of the oldest and strongest warriors of the Bull Kingdom.

"We must guard His Majesty," Bronze explained. "His *condition* demands that we maintain our vigil, at least until he wakes."

August was quiet for a moment; it was all he could do to not immediately explode in frustration at the Paladin's obstinance, and he needed that time to ensure that he didn't start shouting the instant he opened his mouth.

Finally, he whispered, "Come with me," and he pushed past Bronze to open the door. Normally such an act would see the person's head rolling across the floor courtesy of Bronze's bronze ax before the encroaching person knew what happened, but since it was a Prince doing so and the Penitent Paladin was inside, Bronze let it slide.

"Your Highness," Penitent whispered in greeting. The bedroom was almost completely isolated from the outside, with enchantments preventing most noises from entering the room. The exchange with Bronze just a few feet away wasn't loud enough to get past these enchantments.

"Have *you* made a decision about whether to ride out with me and defend this Kingdom?" August demanded.

"I have," Penitent replied, throwing August for a loop. However, the Prince's brief moment of hope and surprise was quickly quashed when Penitent continued, "I have decided to stay here with His Majesty. He has done so much for me that I cannot abandon him when he is at his weakest."

The look of quiet devotion on Penitent's face gave pause to August's anger, but the latter wouldn't stay bottled up for long.

"Is *this* all you two are?" the Prince asked, his voice trembling with anger and disappointment. "Are you nothing more than guard dogs, nothing more than glorified sentries watching over a sick King?"

"Your Highness..." Roland began, hoping to cut off August before he said something too disrespectful, but August flashed him a look that immediately shut him up.

"Sir Praecilius," August began, turning to the Bronze Paladin, "I have given you days to think. What is your answer? Will you ride with me the day after tomorrow, or will you stay here with your ass glued to my Royal Father's bedroom door?" August's voice rose as he spoke, almost turning into a shout as he finished his question.

"I serve *His Majesty*, not a whelp that has yet to even bloody a man," Bronze coolly replied.

"I am one of the *Regents*!" August barked, "When my Royal Father left to focus on his training, he left me and my brother to run the Kingdom! My brother shortly thereafter abandoned his duties, leaving me to run this damned Kingdom at only *fifteen years old*! For *six years* I have tended to this Kingdom's problems, and now we face an invasion by a hostile foreign army! To be honest, I don't give a single fuck about the technicalities that regulate the Paladin hierarchy, all I care about is the Talfar army pressing upon Ariminium and my uncle that stands against them! His Legions are outnumbered more than three to one! So *give me your answer, Paladin!* What are you going to do?!"

Bronze was stunned at August's tirade. He didn't expect anything quite like it from the thin pale boy that August still was. Bronze's eyes subtly flitted to Penitent, but he found no aid there.

After waiting a long moment for Bronze to reply, and when no answer came, August's face contorted in anger and he spat, "Unbelievable. The two strongest, most *respected* knights in all the land, content to play bouncer. Unbelievable."

With that, August turned and stormed out of the room, with Roland and Brimstone at his heels. For his part, Brimstone looked over his shoulder at Bronze and Penitent before he closed the door and shook his head in disappointment.

The two Paladins, left alone with no one but the King to hear them, sat in the King's bedroom in silence for a few long minutes as they processed what just happened. Finally, when the two made eye contact, they almost broke out into raucous laughter at being bull rushed by a young man, not even a tenth as old as they were.

"Well," Bronze said, choking back the chuckles that echoed in his bronze helmet, "I daresay that was the first time he acted even the slightest bit *Kingly*."

"Indeed, it was good to see," Penitent replied, "but he's too eager to jump into battle. Let Trajan handle this, he's the warrior that August isn't."

"That boy has never been tested in battle before, it remains to be seen whether he's a warrior or not," Bronze replied.

The two Paladins sat in silence for a long time, contemplating the reality of their situation.

"What would old Blackstone think of us now, I wonder..." Bronze wondered aloud. The two were the last remaining Paladins of the previous generation, the last of the legendary knights that had served the father of both Prince Trajan and King Julius.

"... You want to see, don't you? How Kingly August can be?" Penitent asked quietly.

Bronze let the question hang for another long moment before slowly nodding his head and whispering, "I do."

"August hasn't undergone the ritual to awaken his blood. Until and unless that happens, he'll never be able to succeed to the crown."

"That doesn't matter to me, all I want to see is how he conducts himself when war is thrust upon him. As far as I know, that entitled shit of a brother he has that *has* awoken his blood hasn't done any better with this crisis, preferring to stay in the west and party, or whatever else he's been wasting his time with."

Penitent sighed and glanced at the sleeping form of the King. "To guard the King is a grave duty, but it doesn't take both of us to watch over His Majesty..."

Bronze lifted an eyebrow in surprise and curiosity, though his helmet obscured it. "So you're saying..."

"Go. See what this young calf can do."

Bronze smiled a smile that Penitent couldn't see and clapped his brother-in-arms on the shoulder. "I'll give those Talfar bastards a good thrashing, and then I'll come right back!"

"Take your time, not like His Majesty is going anywhere right now," Penitent said with a sarcastic smile.

Bronze left the villa to make his preparations. When August rode out of the capital two days later, the Bronze Paladin was right behind him.

Chapter 246: Stalking a Lion

It had been almost three days since Bran first stepped into his shadow and infiltrated Ariminium. He found Leon quickly enough by sneaking through gates whenever they opened until he reached the keep, then waiting until Leon showed himself. But Bran didn't make his move right then, rather he decided to wait until Leon wasn't surrounded by hundreds of other mages who would rush to his aid.

And so began more than two days of stalking, with Bran following Leon's every move.

Most of the time Leon was accompanied by Alix and Anzu, but Bran didn't think too much of a pair of second-tier beings, but the problem Bran faced was that Leon didn't leave the keep or the neighboring

barracks, both of which were too heavily enchanted for Bran to be nearly as confident in infiltrating as he was in passing the walls of the Southern Horn.

Fortunately for the Royal Legions, the vampire was single-minded in his pursuit of Leon. He didn't attack any other knights or try to steal information. All he wanted was Leon's blood, the rest of Owain and Arthwyn's war he'd long since stopped caring about. What was more, he was deeply in debt with his demonic Lord now, and paying it off would likely cause even the Talfar Kingdom, which had so far been incredibly tolerant towards him, to attempt to have him killed.

So, when Owain approached him with a request to infiltrate Ariminium and cause some chaos, Bran agreed without reservation.

Over the next couple days, Bran started wondering what was happening outside of the walls. The Talfar army was still there, so the peace talks had evidently not gone anywhere, but beyond that, he had little idea. It seemed like every time his mind started to wander and he thought about what he would do if he were in Arthwyn's shoes, Leon would appear, and all thoughts about the upcoming battles would be driven from his mind.

And now, something similar happened. It was near midnight and Bran had followed Leon home to the latter's barracks several hours before. In that time he was waiting he had started contemplating when the Talfar assault would begin, what kind of siege weaponry was most assuredly being constructed, how the famed walls of Ariminium and the Bull's Horns would fare against a sustained assault, when out of the barracks came Leon, walking through the deserted keep bailey like he owned the place.

More notably, neither Alix nor Anzu were with him; he was all alone.

'This is it,' Bran thought. The streets of the Southern Horn were largely deserted, with most of the soldiers on the walls. The main streets and baileys in the Southern Horn still had a fair number of people, but Leon clearly wasn't heading towards them. In fact, he was walking directly away from the keep.

The vampire gleefully followed, sticking to his shadows, doing his best to keep Leon in view at all times. The instinct to seize him now was almost overwhelming, but Bran kept himself in check, there might still be other people around that could raise the alarm.

Leon walked through the streets and baileys, through several gates, and eventually arrived in one of the small business districts filled with shops and restaurants operated by civilians for the soldiers in the Southern Horn. At that time of day, the place was completely devoid of people.

Bran smiled to himself, stared at Leon's back as he strode confidently through a small empty market square, and lunged unseen toward the young man's back like a dark meteor.

—

"So, what do you make of all this?" Trajan asked Caecilius' ruby. The ruby and its accompanying onyx plate lay on a crude wooden table in the center of the sparsely furnished room they were waiting in, a room that afforded a great view of the market square just below.

"It's a good plan, given the short amount of time you and that boy had to put it together," Caecilius replied, his voice resonating from the ruby. "Though, it does make a few assumptions, like whether or

not this invader that's been tripping silent alarms throughout the fortress these past couple days is really the vampire you've crossed blades with."

"I couldn't imagine anyone else it could be," Trajan muttered.

After careful scrutiny, it was determined that the repeated alarms that had been raised hadn't been false, someone truly was in the fortress who shouldn't be. The question of who it could possibly be had come up many times before in meetings Trajan had with his subordinates, but he could think of no one other than Bran who had both the power and the will to infiltrate the Horns. With the Talfar army outside the walls, he wanted this problem dealt with before the person could wreak havoc when the Talfar army inevitably assaulted the walls.

To that end, a plan had been decided upon, thought up mostly by Leon who volunteered himself as bait. He had been one of the first to agree with Trajan that it was most likely Bran they were dealing with, and in that case, the vampire would target him above anyone else.

After some debate, Leon's plan was put into motion. The bait was dangled before the vampire's eyes, now all they had to do was wait.

—

Leon stopped in the center of the market square. His heart was beating so fast it felt like it was trying to break free from his chest and his hands were shaking a little bit. An enemy that was in front of him, he could deal with relatively easily. One that was unseen, that was doing nothing but watch him, that was terrifying and put him on edge. During the entire walk over from the barracks, he could almost feel his mysterious stalker's eyes on his back, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Fortunately, it seemed that they weren't confident in their ability to escape the Southern Horn after attacking him, and so, for the time being, hadn't laid their hands upon him despite his walking alone through the midnight streets. This actually calmed him down somewhat, as he feared that whoever was following him might be related to those who killed Artorias and his father's side of the family instead of the vampire everyone else assumed them to be. But given that since those people had the resources to kill Archduke Kyros in his own home, Leon figured that if anyone in that particular group knew who and where he was, then he'd have been killed long before now.

Of course, another option was just that this person didn't intend to harm, or at least *kill* him, but that still left their motive unknown. For the moment, it was better to assume their hostility rather than be surprised by it later.

So, Leon stood in the center of the market square, looking around as if he were waiting for a friend, and held back the urge to project his magic senses. There would be no need to do the latter if this wasn't a trap, and since magic senses could be perceived, he didn't want to tip off the infiltrator.

He didn't have to wait long. The magic lanterns lighting the square dimmed and the shadows grew deeper and longer. Some of them stretched into tendrils and slowly reached for him as if to hem in and keep him from running. Behind him, the shadows rose from the ground and took the shape of a man, and Bran stepped out into the light.

"I have been waiting a *long* time for you, little morsel," he cooed.

Leon turned to face the vampire, his anxiety dissipating somewhat now that he knew exactly who he was dealing with. But then, the memory of the illusion Bran trapped him in came back, and his killing intent spiked, but he didn't speak. Since Bran seemed to want to talk for a little while himself, Leon figured the vampire could do as he pleased until the trap was sprung.

Ignoring Leon's lack of surprise, panic, and unwillingness to speak, Bran continued with his indulgence, "*Days* I have been watching you, waiting for the right time, and then you walk out here all alone, where no one can hear your cries for help. Really tickles me pink that you made it so easy after making it so difficult. But, like savoring a fine wine, a good meal must be taken slowly. The hunt is always an indispensable part, don't you agree? You have the air of a hunter about you, I'm sure you've--"

And then the magic lanterns suddenly regained their brightness, twenty sixth-tier mages burst out of the doors of the nearby shops, the roofs were lined with archers, and the anti-darkness spells of Leon's that had been scattered around the square activated, locking Bran where he was.

Without wasting another moment, Leon drew his sword from his soul realm and began to channel his magic power, wreathing the blade in bright golden lightning that further chased away Bran's shadows.

Capping these events off, Trajan jumped out of the window of the shop he'd been waiting in, landing in the square next to Leon with an earth-shaking crash.

"Well, you've certain--" Bran began, but he wasn't able to complete the thought.

"FIRE!!!!" Trajan shouted, cutting the vampire off. The dozens of archers on the nearby roofs rained arrows down upon Bran; the rest of the sixth-tier mages down in the square had given the vampire a wide berth for just this occasion.

Bran began to panic as he utilized all of the speed he had to dodge and weave out of the way of the falling arrows, but with Leon's spells in the surrounding buildings preventing him from fully utilizing his shadow magic, he wasn't fast enough to dodge all of the arrows. One arrow grazed his face, opening a shallow cut along his cheek. Another bit into his thigh but was unable to penetrate past his seventh-tier muscles to do serious damage. A third clipped his left elbow, leaving a small fracture that sent sharp jabs of pain into Bran's head every time he moved his arm.

Finally, the sixth-tier Legate that led the group of archers fired a special arrow, one with a spell wrapped around it just behind the arrowhead. The arrow bounced off the stone bricks under Bran's feet and burst into a ball of bright white light, bright enough to almost shroud the vampire from the view of the rest of the knights on the ground. Fortunately, they could still see him with their magic senses.

Bran screamed himself hoarse within that light as he felt his magic burn away. All of his shadows that remained melted like ice before a raging bonfire in that light, leaving Bran feeling weak and drained of energy. He still had copious amounts of magic within his body, and more was being released into his blood from his soul realm, but he was still greatly weakened.

"NOW!" Trajan shouted.

The twenty sixth-tier mages surrounding the vampire opened up with their magic power. Fireballs, breams of light, ice and rock spikes, water and wind blades, and one of Leon's lightning bolts tore into Bran as the light from the arrow died down. The vampire screamed again, this time so loudly that the

inside of his throat began to bleed, but in the terrible cacophony kicked up by twenty sixth-tier knights unleashing the full fury of their magic, no one heard him.

The barrage lasted only a few seconds, but to many, it felt like an eternity. In that violent fusillade, copious amounts of dust had been kicked up, but it quickly began to settle, revealing the scope of the damage just inflicted to the market square. The street was broken, scorched, frozen, and eviscerated by the power just displayed. But the damage done to the street wasn't what drew the attention of Trajan, Leon, or any of the other knights; rather, it was the dark figure still standing in the dust cloud.

"Ready!" Trajan called, and the knights prepared another magical salvo.

However, when Bran staggered forward, leaving the dust cloud and revealing himself, Trajan held off. The vampire's entire body was cut and burned, and his clothes were nothing more than blood-soaked rags. His aura was weak and feeble, and his killing intent couldn't intimidate a newborn bunny.

"Well..." the vampire began, his voice creaking like an old door, but he was interrupted by a bout of gasping and wheezing. His eyes glazed over like he was staring into oblivion, then they turned completely black. Trajan was a little startled and almost ordered his knights to attack again, but there was very little magic coming from the vampire, so he held off again.

"Well... played..." the vampire gasped. The darkness that clouded his eyes spread all over his body in an instant and the remains of the monster's battered body withered before everyone's eyes.

Leon recognized what was happening, and he almost surged forward to put an end to it, but he refrained. He'd already been afflicted by that demonic power once, and he wasn't keen on getting too close.

Bran's lifeless corpse fell to the ground, looking like a millennia-old mummy.

"What... the fuck just happened?" one of the Legates couldn't help but ask, and the sentiment was shared with most of the other knights.

"He served a demon," Leon said simply. "He suffered so much damage that he became unable to provide his Lord with any more power, so the demon took what little power the vampire had left."

Leon couldn't help but think about the demon in his own soul realm, and though he didn't think it was possible for Xaphan to drain him of all of his power and leave him for dead, seeing that very thing happen before his eyes a second time started to let a doubt or two trickle into his mind.

"*Disgusting!*" the knight replied.

"The monster's dead, at least," Trajan said, not being overly concerned with the state of Bran's corpse.

The Prince turned to Leon with a beaming smile, proud in the success of his protégé's plan, however, before he could say anything, a horn blast echoed over the entirety of Ariminium.

"That was Sir Constantine's horn!" one of the Legates shouted. "We're under attack! Talfar must be moving to assault the Horns!"

Chapter 247: Constantine's Stand

The successful killing of Bran was a thing worthy of celebration, but any jubilation Leon or Trajan felt in the vampire's death was quickly quashed when they heard Constantine's horn.

Trajan wasted no time; he turned to one of the administrative Legates he'd brought with—about half of the Legates he'd brought to the ambush weren't experienced combat veterans, but they still had sixth-tier strength and that's what Trajan had wanted—and ordered, "You're in command here, deal with this mess!"

The Legate looked a little flabbergasted, but before he could even say an affirmation, Trajan leaped onto the roof of one of the closest buildings and began running and jumping from rooftop to rooftop toward the keep, with Leon and the rest of the Legates in tow. The Legate left behind could only stare at the archers, Bran's corpse, and the broken street and sigh before getting to work. The vampire's corpse had to be secured and the square cleaned up.

—

Owain had wanted to assault the Bull's Horns the night after the brief peace negotiation, but there had been siege equipment that needed to be assembled and a hundred thousand peasant levies to organize. As a result, it was a couple days before the assault could begin.

During this time, Bran's absence was noted by the entire command staff of the Talfar Prince's army. The vampiric Marshal had infiltrated the Horns at Owain's order, but in truth, the Prince didn't expect him to return. After finding the vampire draining half a dozen medics and experienced commanders dry, Owain wanted the vampire dead. It was a huge loss to the army, but Owain didn't want Bran to destroy the entire upper-command structure of the army, which would be an even greater loss.

Of course, he didn't tell anyone about his decision, leaving them only to guess at the reasons for Bran's disappearance. Fortunately, Arthwyn had experience fighting alongside Bran, enough that the vampire had agreed to assemble his battalions and accompany Owain's campaign at Arthwyn's request, so Arthwyn knew that Bran himself wasn't a particularly reliable comrade. And with his disappearance, Bran had essentially ceded command of his battalions to Owain and Arthwyn.

So, while the loss of a seventh-tier mage cut deeply into their war potential, neither Arthwyn nor Owain were too upset by it.

"So, it's decided," Arthwyn stated. "The cavalry will surround the fortifications in front of the gates, the infantry will take those towers and the fort in the center, and the levies will move the siege equipment further toward the walls of the fortress," the Marshal summarized squeezing several hours of long debate as to their tactical options into a single sentence. He was obviously leaving out the specific details, but each of his subordinate Warrior-Chiefs knew what to do.

Just in case, though, Owain asked, "Is there anyone here who doesn't know their role in this fight?" When all that answered him was silence, the Prince said, "Good. Then let's get this show on the road."

Arthwyn was a little upset that Owain was taking a more active role in military matters, but he couldn't publicly defy the Prince, so he bowed to Owain and then dismissed the war council. His Warrior-Chiefs promptly left to organize their battalions for the upcoming assault.

They were ready by midnight. The camp was left with a token force to guard it, while the levies began their work to maneuver the siege towers and trebuchets forward. Bran's battalions had done likewise in Florentia, leaving a small token force to guard the city while most of the soldiers joined the main army in their march west.

Such a large movement of people couldn't be hidden for long, and as soon as the Legion watchtowers saw the Talfar army forming up, they sounded the alarm. Less than a minute later, Constantine was blowing his enchanted horn, letting the entire city know that his unit was about to come under attack.

And then, the knights in the area east of the walls waited. There was little else they could do except meet the charge when it came.

Owain and Arthwyn were at the head of the Talfar army. They weren't going to lead the charge personally, but it was crucial that they at least appear there at the start of the battle. To their right and left were thousands of the prized chariots of the Talfar military, while behind them were their heavily armored cataphracts, and the infantry bringing up the rear. Normally, such a formation would be ill-advised, but in the narrow, fortified vale to the east of the Bull's Horns, there wasn't an abundance of room to spread out into the kind of long battle line that most set-piece battles required.

"Marshal Arthwyn," Owain said from his chariot, "signal the charge."

Arthwyn fought back a grimace at the Prince giving him orders, but he could see the lights in the small mostly-wooden fort and towers in the vale and knew that every moment delayed was a moment they gave the Bull's Legions to prepare.

"Sound the charge," Arthwyn ordered one of the soldiers in his chariot, and the soldier broke out a long, thin horn and gave it one long blast, the signal for 'charge'.

The Warrior-Chiefs that led the chariot battalions began to charge, filling the air with the sound of beating hooves and turning wheels. The cataphracts charged next, shaking the earth and kicking up such a racket that Owain wouldn't have been all that surprised if it could be heard all the way back in Pretani.

Once past the narrow strip of land between the Border Mountains and the Tyrrhenian River, the cavalry spread out. There were dozens of square miles within the vale, and they intended to fill them with horses and Talfar soldiers, to keep the Legion from deploying outside their walls or coming to the aid of their comrades in the fort and towers.

As the cavalry spread out throughout the vale, Arthwyn could see bright lights shining from the walls of the towers and fort, illuminating the entire vale so that even the weakest of Legion soldiers could see in the darkness of midnight. He could also see dozens of tiny pinpricks of light, the light reflected off steel arrowheads as they were fired from the towers and fort.

The Marshal also saw those same arrows pierce horses and the soldiers riding them, he could see chariots overturn as their horses and drivers were killed, but these were in the vast minority compared to the entire cavalry force. And then, he saw bright flashes of light as the cavalry unit leaders responded to the arrow fire with their own arrows and blasts of magic.

—

“Get down!” Constantine shouted. Those who heard him ducked behind the wooden battlements as blades of wind sliced chunks of wood from the fort, as earth and ice spikes filled the walls with holes, and as blasts of fire washed over the central tower. The wooden fort had been magically reinforced, but it still shuddered with every impact. Fortunately, it survived the first responding salvo from the Talfar cavalry, but many of its defenders and companion towers did not.

Taking a quick look around, Constantine saw five towers that were heavily damaged enough that they weren’t particularly useful anymore, and three more towers that had been completely destroyed, either blasted or cut to pieces by Talfar magics.

“ACTIVATE THE TRAPS!” Constantine roared from the central tower of his fort. The Talfar cavalry were close enough in that there wasn’t any more point to waiting to break out their heavier weapons, as five hundred knights and men-at-arms armed with bows weren’t going to do much against a force a hundred times their size.

Around him were four large control panels covered in glowing runes. Stationed at each was two soldiers, and at his command, they began to press certain runes and activate various glyphs and runic circles.

Instantly, the battlefield was lit up by great fiery explosions, massive spikes of earth and ice erupted from the ground in the center of Talfar formations, and great pits opened up to swallow squads of chariots and cataphracts whole, which then sealed themselves up and filled with water.

In that moment, hundreds of the finest Talfar cavalry soldiers vanished from the mortal coil.

“Keep it up,” Constantine smiled as he watched the hellish scene outside. The traps that had been placed throughout the vale were operated from the central tower in Constantine’s fort, as that was where the knight could see everything. The traps could also be used from the walls of the Bull’s Horns, but Trajan generally left it to Constantine’s knights to use them, as it was only they who had the entire picture of the battlefield, including what was happening within the fort.

But a few traps weren’t enough to halt the Talfar advance. Constantine could see that, despite the damage that the traps were doing, there weren’t many dents being created in the Talfar hordes. His archers kept up the pressure, and the cavalry couldn’t storm the walls and take the fort, but in the distance, he could see the Talfar infantry advancing, as well as the cavalry officers preparing another salvo of magic.

“BRACE YOURSELVES!” the knight roared as the next Talfar wave of magic hit the fort. Even above the explosions and sounds of splintering wood, Constantine could hear the screams of his knights and soldiers falling in the barrage. In the distance, he could see two more towers fall, as well.

‘It’s well that His Highness only sent his most devoted knights and retainers out here,’ Constantine thought, ‘else I fear we’d have already lost this land to desertion...’

They served a purpose out there, he knew. They were obstacles in the path of the Talfar army as it moved toward the walls of Ariminium, and much like with the city of Florentia, Arthwyn’s hordes couldn’t advance without first taking the towers and Constantine’s fort, or else the Legions could continue to hit them from both sides.

So, Constantine and his knights held their ground. Even as the last of the towers fell and the fort was hit with a third wave of Talfar magic, they continued to fire their arrows. Even when the Talfar infantry closed in on their walls, their arrows continued to fly and those knights that could use magic did so with abandon.

And it wasn't like they weren't having any effect; rather, it was that the Talfar army was simply so numerous that they could simply eat the casualties Constantine's forces were giving them if it meant they could take the fort.

Fifteen minutes after the battle truly began, the traps in the vale ceased to work. The Talfar officers weren't stupid, and they went around destroying the stones and metal plates that the trap enchantments had been placed upon.

"Sir, what do we do now?" asked one of the knights as the last of the runic consoles controlling the traps dimmed. All of the traps had been destroyed.

"Now, we take to the walls ourselves!" Constantine vigorously shouted. "It's our duty to defend our Kingdom from all that threaten it! We will *not* abandon our duty!" As he shouted, he drew an enormous two-handed sword from his soul realm to complement his scale armor dyed Legion crimson. To accompany his shiny red ensemble, he summoned a helmet from his soul realm with an armored war-mask depicting the face of an Old God of death that had been worshiped in the Southern Territories before the Bull Kingdom had been unified and Ancestor worship imposed.

The other knights were all fifth-tier, and they roared their agreement, summoning their own weapons from their soul realms. They all jumped out of the observation windows of the tower and landed in various parts of the outer walls' ramparts just in time to meet the Talfar infantry.

The Talfar army had brought forth ladders so that their warriors could climb the walls. The walls weren't tall enough to prevent the higher-tiered warriors from jumping over them, but they had been enchanted to prevent just such a thing from occurring. A determined enough Talfar mage could get through that enchantment, but doing so would leave them vulnerable, so they all waited in formation for the ladders be placed.

Constantine landed in front of one of the Warrior-Captains leading the Talfar battalions in their assault, a fifth-tier man equipped in a similar manner to the rest of the Talfar infantry, with a one-handed spear, a small shield, and a sword barely bigger than a dagger at his hip. He was lightly armored, with little more leather covering his forearms and shins, mail for his torso, gambeson underneath, and a steel helmet.

'That gear doesn't even look enchanted,' Constantine thought with some grim amusement. It seemed to him that most of the budget for gear went to the cavalry, leaving the infantry little to equip themselves with. Those warriors who couldn't personally afford better gear were stuck with what this man before Constantine was wearing.

And yet, that didn't stop the Warrior-Captain from killing five of Constantine's men-at-arms and one of his knights once he reached the ramparts.

"You're the commander here?" the Warrior-Captain confidently asked after Constantine landed on the walls. The knight could almost feel the Talfar warrior's eyes sizing him up, and maybe even appraising

his armor; if he lost this fight, Constantine had little doubt that this warrior could be looting his corpse for the gear the Talfar army had failed to provide him with.

"I am," Constantine said with a smile concealed by his masks' indifferent visage. He raised his sword and took an aggressive stance; the knight could understand the other man's desire for his gear, but he wasn't going to get it without one hell of a fight.

"Why don't you just surrender right now?" the warrior asked. "You've already lost this, no sense in losing your life as well. Besides, your comrades have turtled up behind their walls, there's no one coming to save you."

As if on cue, the portcullis in the central tower of the Horn's outer wall creaked open and several thousand Legion cavalymen came pouring out.

Despite surrounded by the bodies of his knights and men-at-arms, Constantine gave the warrior a cocky laugh, said, "You were saying?" and charged before the warrior could wipe the look of stunned disbelief off his face.

Chapter 248: Trajan's Response

Within the Bull Kingdom, most buildings were single-story structures, two stories at the most. Larger cities like Ariminium or the capital had many buildings that were taller, but these were the exception. Because even first-tier mages could jump high enough to climb on these buildings, there were very specific laws prohibiting running along rooftops.

Trajan, his Legates, and Leon all ignored these laws as they sprinted toward the keep of the Southern Horn. They left more than a few broken roof shingles in their wake, but minor damage that Trajan could easily pay for wasn't on his mind; Constantine's horn had been sounded, and they could hear the distant sounds of massive formations of cavalry beginning to charge.

Due to their haste and unorthodox route, Trajan's group reached the keep in a matter of minutes from the market square. There, they found Minerva waiting for them with a dozen horses. She knew what the Prince was up to, and so had prepared for his arrival.

"See to your duties!" Trajan shouted to his Legates. About half weren't combat knights, and so they ran into the keep to get to work. The rest of the Legates joined Leon and Trajan as they mounted horses. They were to lead the cavalry to aid in the evacuation of the fort.

As they rode, Minerva reported, "The enemy has launched an all-out assault on the fortifications in the vale, there probably won't be many who survive out there."

"I see," Trajan grimly responded. "Still, we must go. I doubt Constantine's fort will fall so easily, at least."

"True, but we may lose those in the outlying towers..."

Trajan sighed, then asked, "And those on the walls?"

"The outer walls are ready," Minerva replied.

"Good."

When they reached the main gates of the walls, three thousand of the finest cavalry the Bull Kingdom could muster were waiting for them, which, unfortunately, wasn't saying much. In an inverse to the Talfar Kingdom, the Bull Kingdom focused primarily on its infantry, leaving their cavalry with little official funding for gear. They were lightly armored units, more suited to roles as rapid-moving skirmishers than the heavy shock units of the Talfar military. Even their horses weren't that great, as those knights that could afford the expense rode more exotic magical creatures, like stags, lions, and even a few large wolves. The horses didn't seem too pleased with the presence of these creatures, but they were trained well enough that it wasn't an issue.

Trajan rode over to the front of the formation with Leon at his side, his Legates spreading themselves out down the line. The Prince made no speeches, there was no time for them. He simply hardened his skin with magic, summoned his armor from his soul realm, and nodded to the gate guards.

The portcullis began to open, but as it did, the ground began to shake and shudder as enormous footsteps were heard; when Leon turned to curiously investigate, he saw Lapis making its way toward him.

"I would come with you, Div-... Leon."

"Well, I would hazard a guess that anyone as strong as you are would be welcome to come along..." Leon responded as he looked to Trajan for confirmation. The Prince took one look at the stone giant and nodded. Lapis had fought with them enough by now that Trajan was no longer worried about the stone giants' loyalties or willingness to fight with the Legion, he simply accepted the help when it was offered.

In truth, the Prince was quite glad that the giant offered in the first place. He only asked Lapis to participate in the failed ambush against Bran several days ago because he needed every person he could get to fight against Bran. But he was a Prince, a Consul, and an Exarch, and he couldn't ask for help a second time for fear of eroding the dignity of the Bull Kingdom.

But, fortunately, the stone giant asked to come along, making the Legion's force that much stronger.

When the portcullises opened, Trajan led the Legion cavalry through, with Leon right at his side. He couldn't help but lament that many of his plans for the continued fortification of the Horns hadn't had the chance to be implemented, such as the barely-started digging of the moat in front of the first wall or digging pits in front of the main gates and installing drawbridges, but that was life. He had to deal with the Talfar Kingdom without these additions.

Once the last portcullis was being raised, Trajan glanced back at his followers. He could tell from the massive aura they created and the killing intent they filled the air with that they were ready. The Prince nodded to Leon, who nodded back.

For his part, Leon wasn't looking forward to the battle if only for the fact that he wasn't yet comfortable with fighting on horseback. The horse Trajan lent him was highly trained and one of the few in the Legion stables that could compare favorably to those ridden by Talfar cataphracts, but these facts did little to alleviate his lack of confidence. Still, he wasn't about to shy away from this fight.

The last portcullis opened, and Trajan spurred his horse into a rapid charge. He summoned his war hammer and raised it into the air, giving a tremendous war cry as he rode out of the gatehouse that was echoed by almost every single knight and man-at-arms in the column.

The Talfar cavalry weren't expecting the Legion to ride out and fight them on their terms, so they were taken completely by surprise. That said, they had stayed as far from the triple-layered walls as they could get away with, in order to stay out of range of Legion bows. This wasn't entirely effective, as the Legion archers with the aid of enchanted bows could shoot far indeed, but they still had a fair amount of time to respond to Trajan's counter-attack.

Those closest to the wall, who were also the farthest rank from Constantine's fort, formed up into a rough line to meet the Legion charge head-on, but there was no true way they could prepare for Lapis' charge. The stone giant sprinted out in front of the column, moving at a speed that would've been nearly impossible for anyone to expect of a being that size made entirely of stone. The giant shrugged off a fireball launched from a nearby fifth-tier Talfar cataphract, then smashed into the cavalry line, sending men and horses flying through the air in pieces. Spikes erupted around it, impaling dozens more cataphracts, then fractured into tiny pebbles and exploded outward, peppering the horsemen further back.

In an instant, more than a hundred Talfar cataphracts were killed. More importantly, however, was the hole that Lapis punched in their line, which Trajan rode directly into, with the rest of the Legion column right behind him.

The Prince swung his hammer like it weighed nothing, and in every direction he swung, great rents were opened in the earth, not doing much in the way of direct damage but sending cataphracts tumbling down into the gaps. Those unfortunate souls that hit the ground first were crushed as more bodies fell upon them, and the Talfar lines were broken again. Making matters worse, their own earth mages couldn't close these rents without burying the cataphracts that survived the fall.

Trajan wasn't the only person liberally using his magic, right behind him Leon was conjuring lightning bolts and hurling them as fast he could. Each bolt would explode upon a cataphract, superheating their armor past the point where their enchantments could compensate, cooking them in their own protective gear. The lightning would then arc outwards, startling horses and hurting other cataphracts.

Fortunately, neither Leon's horse nor the rest of the Legion horses were panicking from the lightning that Leon was summoning or the accompanying thunder that Leon did nothing to dampen. These sights and sounds weren't too uncommon on the battlefield when mages capable of elemental magic were involved, and so most war mounts had been trained with that in mind.

Behind Leon and Trajan, the rest of the Legates and Tribunes were opening up with their own magics, ripping chunks through the Talfar lines. A few Talfar mages were able to retaliate, so it wasn't as if the Legion were simply walking through the Talfar lines, and many of the cataphracts' armor were able to resist their magical attacks, but the Legion column was much denser with mages capable of elemental magic than the Talfar cataphracts, and most of those higher-tiered Talfar mages were closer to Constantine's fort, so Trajan's cavalry column was able to carve a bloody path through the outer lines of Talfar cataphracts.

They were eventually forced to slow down as the ground ahead became too broken from magic, the bodies of soldiers and cataphracts piled up, and the air became choked with dust and smoke, further obscuring the view of those in the vale beyond the late-night darkness. A sixth-tier cataphract tried to

take advantage by charging at Trajan, hoping to strike a mortal blow against the Legion soldiers by taking the head of their Prince.

"Hear me, Trajan!" the Warrior-Chief roared as he spurred his horse into a charge. "I am Mihangel, the man who will take your head!" As he was busy identifying himself, Lapis appeared from the smoke of the battlefield and with a swipe of its long rocky arm, took out the legs of Mihangel's horse, sending the man crashing to the ground. The stone giant didn't waste a second, immediately conjuring a stone spike from the ground and impaling the Warrior-Chief before he could react.

Trajan might have laughed at the absurdity, but not in the middle of a battle. He could spare no more attention to that Warrior-Chief after his failure. He could only keep pushing forward.

By the time the Legion cavalry column reached the walls of Constantine's fort, they had lost a few hundred soldiers to the Talfar counter attacks, but they had left countless cataphracts and chariot teams dead in their wake.

The doors of the fort burst open upon their arrival, allowing Trajan, Leon, and several dozen other Legion soldiers to ride straight in.

"Constantine!" Trajan shouted, looking for his knight.

"Up here, Your Highness!" came an answering shout.

Both Leon and Trajan turned toward the voice and saw a warrior dressed in armor made of blood-red scales and wearing a helmet with the face of an indifferent god. This warrior was pulling his sword out of the chest of a dying fifth-tier Talfar Warrior-Captain.

"Let's go! You've done your job!" Trajan shouted.

"On my way!" Constantine responded, leaving the fifth-tier Warrior-Captain who failed to realize he was challenging a sixth-tier mage with decades of experience over him. "Let's go, everyone! Follow your Prince!"

The remaining soldiers within the fort leaped off the walls and assembled before Trajan. The Talfar soldiers who they had been fighting with tried to immediately follow, but blasts of magic from Trajan, Constantine, Leon, and other Legion soldiers deterred them long enough for Constantine's soldiers to join Trajan's cavalry column and leave the fort.

"Those in the towers...?" Trajan succinctly asked when Constantine approached.

"All dead, I believe," Constantine replied. "Even if they are still alive, they're now beyond reach..."

Trajan glanced over the plain, and from what little he could see through the dust and the haze of the dark battlefield, the towers had indeed all been destroyed, and the chariots, cataphracts, and infantry that had been dispatched to deal with them were being redirected toward Trajan's cavalry column. Even more dangerous, the surprise of their charge had worn off, and the Talfar forces that had surrounded Constantine's fort were rapidly regaining their coordination. Trajan knew that the Talfar army was about to push against them and that they couldn't linger.

With a heavy heart, he wrote off those soldiers and knights in the towers as lost causes; he'd grabbed Constantine and the survivors from the fort, and that was what mattered.

“BACK TO THE HORNS!” the Prince roared, and the Legion cavalry turned around and left, this time with Leon and Trajan in the back rather than the front. As they fell back, Lapis kept pace with Leon, using its earth magic to halt any enterprising Talfar cataphract or chariot from overtaking the rear of the Legion column.

When the Legion cavalry made it back to the effective ranges for arrow fire from the walls of the Horns, all pursuit from Talfar forces halted, letting the Prince and his horsemen return to the safety of the walls.

Chapter 249: Continued Assault I

“Our rough headcount indicates we lost one hundred and seventy-three during that attack, along with four hundred and thirteen soldiers who were stationed in the vale, and we only rescued eighty-nine,” the Legate reported.

“The number we rescued doesn’t matter that much, so long as it isn’t too devastating,” Trajan responded. “The important thing is to show that we don’t leave our people behind when it can be avoided.”

“Still, might it not have been better to simply abandon those watchtowers and the fort? Keep our men behind walls made of well-enchanted stone rather than hastily enchanted wood?” the Legate responded.

Trajan frowned. The thought had occurred to him to have Constantine and his subordinates abandon the vale and pull back to the Horns, but while that may have been the better idea if he wanted to keep every single one of his soldiers alive at all costs, it would’ve been a strategic mistake in his opinion.

But before he could respond, Leon spoke up, stating, “Talfar can’t be allowed to seize territory unchallenged. Hundreds of our people died, but thousands of theirs joined them in death.”

“It is the province of the Legion to protect the people of this Kingdom,” Trajan added. “We cannot shy away from our duty just to protect ourselves. Sir Ursus is right, we can’t let Talfar approach our walls without challenge.”

The Legate sighed, then said, “I understand, Your Highness, but it’s hard to keep perspective when counting the dead.”

Trajan placed his hand on the Legate’s shoulder in solidarity, then turned to the rest of the knights that had gathered around him in the main observation tower of the Southern Horn. From there, Trajan could send signals to all the other towers along the walls as well as observe everything that happened on the battlefield. However, he didn’t intend to get too involved in the specific tactics employed by his commanders. The Legions needed to be flexible and be able to respond quickly to changes in the battlefield, and to that end Trajan had delegated much of his authority to commanders he trusted, such as Minerva who took over command of the section of the walls between the Horns, where he expected the Talfar army to concentrate their attacks.

“What are our estimates for the number of enemies killed?” the Prince asked.

“Anywhere from two to three thousand, including those killed in the traps,” Constantine replied. The knight had been offered a chance to rest, but he refused so long as the Talfar army was still in the field.

And indeed, the Talfar army was still occupying the vale, though they had yet to approach the walls of the Horns in any serious manner. Instead, they seemed to be taking their time burning the fort and watchtowers.

Silence descended on the tower as many of the knights asked themselves if the price they paid to delay the Talfar advance was worth it. The soldiers on the wall were ready and waiting for the Talfar forces to charge, so in that respect the time bought was crucial, but since the Talfar army had yet to begin the actual assault on the walls, it left the tactical defeat feeling a little more important than the strategic victory.

“Why are they doing that?” Leon wondered aloud as he watched the fires ravage the fortifications in the vale. “Couldn’t they have used the structures—or what’s left of them, anyway—instead of destroying them outright?”

“I’d guess they feel they have no need for them and want to prevent us from reoccupying them after pulling out of the vale,” Constantine replied.

“I’m sure that’s part of it,” Trajan agreed. “Their army has much greater mobility than our Legions, and so they don’t really need a strong point so close to our walls. Plus, it’s not easy to see past all that smoke they’re making, making me wonder what they’re using that cover for. Probably bringing whatever siege engines they have closer to the walls.”

“What sort of siege engines should we expect?” Leon asked the room. He was the youngest knight in the room by far, though his place at Trajan’s side and his obvious strength prevented anyone from questioning his right to speak. Much like Trajan himself, most of the knights at the Horns were patient in light of his youth and inexperience and were usually more than willing to explain things to him if he needed the help.

“Siege towers are my guess,” one Legate replied.

“Definitely. Probably hundreds of ladders as well. Trebuchets to throw boulders with attached spells at and over the walls, and if they’re being particularly extravagant, maybe even a few Lances.”

“Lances?” Leon repeated in confusion. “Like the Fire Lances the fleet uses, or some kind of... hells if I know...”

“Fire Lance technology is an exceptionally powerful version of a siege weapon that’s been spreading around the plane in recent centuries,” Trajan explained. “These weapons supposedly originate from the Four Empires, and given their power I don’t doubt it. However, they’re tricky to use and easy to break, so easy in fact that they’re not easily made mobile. They’re expensive, not usually effective enough to be worth the time and material to build when faced with heavily enchanted walls, and are prone to breaking in the middle of battle.”

“But the navy seems to have found out a way to make these weapons a little more reliable,” Leon observed. “Couldn’t the Talfar Kingdom have done something similar?”

“Hmm, I suppose it’s possible,” Trajan admitted. “Still, the fleets are using a kind of Lance that isn’t particularly mobile, either, unless it’s been put on a large enough ship. I can’t imagine that Talfar has

created a Lance that's even as mobile as a trebuchet. Still, they may set a few up close enough to the walls to cause some damage, so we can't rule them out."

"Other than those, we don't have to worry about much apart from enemy mages using their power, though the enchantments in the walls are too strong for any single mage to penetrate," another knight added.

"A single mage *did* penetrate them, though," another knight reminded the room.

"If the Talfar army had an abundance of seventh-tier darkness mages, I think we would've already lost this war," the first knight shot back.

"Enough," Trajan whispered, instantly silencing the room and preventing the second knight from responding. He had noticed some movement in the smoke of the burning fort that filled the vale, a few glimpses of something that passed too quickly for him to identify. "Whatever those Talfar bastards are doing, I think they're just about ready," the Prince said. "Get ready, everyone."

The knights snapped to their workstations, eight consoles covered in glowing runes, much like the consoles in Constantine's fort. These were controller enchantments that could direct the magical defenses of the Horns, though they were extremely expensive in terms of magic power; a bank of a couple hundred sapphires each the size of Leon's head had been installed in the room below. These sapphires powered the defensive wards within the walls but were so extravagantly expensive that they weren't easily replaced when drained.

But Trajan wouldn't hesitate to run every magical battery he had dry if it meant defending his Kingdom from Owain's army.

Finally, hours after Constantine's remaining soldiers had been evacuated, the Talfar siege engines appeared out of the smoke. Ten enormous siege towers pushed by hundreds of peasant levies, each one about seventy feet tall or so, more than tall enough to reach the top of the first wall. Between these towers were several dozen trebuchets and thousands of Talfar infantry. The cavalry couldn't do much when assaulting a fortified position, so the chariots and cataphracts were in the back.

"It occurs to me," Leon said quietly enough that only Trajan could hear, "that I've yet to see Talfar archers..."

"They're out there," Trajan replied. "It takes quite a bit of time to train an archer, and the Talfar army prefers its cataphracts and chariots, so they don't have many archers. They're still out there, though."

"Hmm..."

Trajan glanced at the younger knight. He was still in his armor, but he'd taken his helmet off to reveal a deep frown of restlessness. It was clear to the Prince that Leon didn't want to be in the tower.

"Tell you what," Trajan said slowly, with a great deal of apprehension, "why don't you head down to the main gatehouse. Minerva should be there. If she needs reinforcements anywhere, you can assist her."

Leon looked at Trajan with eyes wide with gratitude. "Yes, Your Highness," he said, his frown immediately disappearing. He then bowed to the Prince and all but ran out of the observation room.

Trajan chuckled, amused at the young man's enthusiasm for battle and reminded at his own similar enthusiasm when he was Leon's age.

Outside of the main observation room, Alix and Anzu were waiting. They'd met back up with Leon when he and Trajan returned to the keep.

"What's the word?" Alix asked. She was both upset at being left behind again and exhilarated at the thought of joining the battle.

"Follow me and find out," Leon said with a subdued smile. He patted Anzu on the head and led his tiny group out of the keep.

—

'Incompetent morons,' Arthwyn thought as he glared at his Warrior-Chiefs. *'Fucking imbeciles let that bastard into their ranks and then let him go!'* He didn't say any of this out loud, though. He had to maintain the image of a respected and efficient commander, and his experience as a Marshal was telling him that even if he were more in control of the immediate tactics during the assault on Constantine's fort—which as the commander of an army the size of his, was an impossibility—he couldn't have gotten an effective response to Trajan's strike organized any quicker than his Warrior-Chiefs did.

Of course, this knowledge only made him more infuriated, but he had to let it go. His cataphracts and chariots had the man he most wanted dead almost completely surrounded, but they let him slip through their fingers. It was over and done with, and the best thing to do was to move on. The lost opportunity fiercely stung, but it didn't change his plans.

His army was arrayed before him. One hundred thousand peasant levies, fifty thousand infantry, fifty thousand cavalry—less perhaps five or six thousand from casualties already sustained. Many of the injured soldiers had already been healed and returned to service, mitigating much of the price that had already been paid to get the Talfar army to the gates of the Bull's Horns.

But they were there, with siege engines ready and soldiers practically chomping at the bit to begin the fighting. The peasants were a little more subdued, but they were ready as well.

Arthwyn sighed in satisfaction as he stared at his forces. It was with this army that he was going to crush the Bull's Horns and drag Trajan's broken body back to Briga. He couldn't wreak his revenge on Kyros Raime or Julius Septimius, but Trajan, the man who most deserved to die in Arthwyn's eyes, was within his grasp. And so, the Marshal relished the beginning of his revenge.

'Enjoy this moment, Bastard,' he thought as he stared at the Southern Horn. *'This will be the la-'*

"Go forth!" Owain roared from beside the Marshal, interrupting Arthwyn's thoughts. "Go forth and win for yourselves riches and glory! When I am King, you will all be honored with gold, with the men and women of your desire, with stories and poems in your honor! Go forth and take this fortress!" The Prince backed his words up with his magic power, and his voice reverberated across the field to every Talfar ear in the vale.

Immediately, the infantry charged, the peasants pushed their siege engines, and the cavalry roared a tremendous war cry—this being really all the horsemen could do for the time being.

Arthwyn snarled at the Prince ordering around the Marshal's forces. He paid the soldiers and levied the peasants, but he didn't blame them for following the orders of their Prince. Instead, he was angered at the Prince's presumption when it was Arthwyn's sole support that made him anything more than an impotent provincial governor.

He began to contemplate having the Prince murdered and continuing the war alone. If he blamed the assassination on a Bull assassin, he might be able to pull it off.

'Something to consider, at least...' Arthwyn pondered as he glared at Owain. But there was a time for those considerations, and as his war was truly, finally beginning was not it.

The Talfar armies charged across the field, and the Bull's Legions responded with arrow fire and blasts of magic. The Talfar forces responded in kind, and the darkness of the pre-sunrise morning was illuminated with flashes of magic and the ground shook with the footsteps of hundreds of thousands of warriors.

Chapter 250: Continued Assault II

Leon, Alix, and Anzu stood upon the wide ramparts of the first wall, surrounded by other Legion soldiers watching the siege towers slowly inch closer and closer. Even with each pulled and pushed by hundreds of peasants, the ten siege towers were slow and cumbersome things.

The Legion soldiers, including Leon and Alix, readied their bows to fire as soon as the towers entered effective arrow range. When Leon's group arrived at the central gatehouse where Minerva had set up her command center, the lady knight had accepted his request for assignment and sent him to the central gatehouse of the outer-most wall, the place where the enemy was most likely to assault as well as the most heavily defended section of the wall. She knew that this would be the safest place for Leon while also giving him the opportunity to participate in the battle.

On the way to Minerva's command center, Leon ran into Lapis. The stone giant wanted to join Leon in battle again, but as this was going to be a battle on the walls rather than out in the open where the giant could bring its bulk to bear, Leon had to refuse. He wasn't sure whether or not the walls would be able to support Lapis' weight, and even if they could, the giant would only get in the way of the rest of the Legion soldiers. With that out of the picture, the only real possibility for Lapis to join in the fighting would be to venture beyond the wall, leaving it alone and vulnerable to Talfar attack, which Leon didn't want.

He'd grown a fair amount of trust and respect for the giant. At first, he'd been extremely wary of it involving itself in his affairs, but they'd fought alongside each other enough times now for some trust in the giant to grow.

"So, this is familiar," Alix said to Leon, her slightly trembling voice bringing him out of his thoughts.

Leon grimly grinned. "This time is a *lot* different than that Valeman raid, though," he said. "You ready with that thing?" he asked, pointedly looking at the bow she had in her hand.

"Of course," she replied, a challenging smile quickly replacing her anxious expression. She'd trained plenty with the bow during their time at the Horns, and Leon knew that she had gained a certain proficiency with the weapon. She'd even displayed some of that new skill when dealing with the

smugglers. "I think the real one who might not be ready is this little guy," Alix said while stroking Anzu's head.

The griffin was shaking like a leaf in the wind. He was still only the equivalent of a second-tier mage, and the sound and rising aura of the approaching Talfar army was terrifying him to the point that he didn't mind someone other than Leon touching him.

"Hey, there, buddy," Leon whispered, pulling the griffin into a tight hug. It almost seemed to Leon that the griffin had been growing at a noticeable rate over the past few weeks, but right now his fur and feathers were pressed so tightly against his body that he almost seemed to have halved in size.

Anzu chirped and whimpered in Leon's arms, but he slowly calmed down and stopped shaking.

"Just stick with me, little one," Leon continued. He was starting to regret bringing Anzu, but he also didn't want to leave the griffin behind again, and he knew that this experience would help the young beast harden his nerve and refine his killing intent.

But the air was thick with the aura of hundreds of thousands of mages, and their combined killing intent almost seemed solid. It might have been the early morning darkness or the dust and smoke in the air, but everything east of the vale had become faded and desaturated in his eyes, and Leon was fairly certain that the oppressive aura that the Talfar army had built up was the cause. He could feel the pressure of that aura on his shoulders, weighing him down to a slight degree and making the air feel heavy and unsatisfying to breathe.

"Nock!" shouted the Tribune in charge of the rest of the Legion soldiers on the roof of the gatehouse, and the soldiers lined up and nocked arrows to their bowstrings, preparing to fire. The front line of the advancing Talfar army was a little over eight hundred feet away, or just a few steps past the maximum effective range of Legion bows.

Leon stood up and Anzu pressed his head into Leon's hip for comfort. Leon patted the griffin on the head, then nodded to Alix in solidarity. Alix nodded back with a confident grin that Leon wasn't entirely sure was genuine given the size of the opposing force, but he smiled back at her regardless. Both joined the Legion soldiers that were busy readying their bows.

"Draw!" shouted the Tribune, and the soldiers drew back their bowstrings.

Only a few seconds more and the real battle would begin in earnest. No more small-scale skirmishes outside the walls, no more fighting for less than an hour and returning home; the main event was about to start, where Arthwyn and Owain would throw their full might against the walls of the Horns in the hopes of bringing them down.

And the Legion would meet that might with everything they had. They'd been waiting for over a week now for this moment, and they weren't going to waste it. Soldiers and knights along the walls prepared their weapons and loaded trebuchets.

"Loose!" the Tribune shouted, and the hundred or so soldiers on the wide roof of the gatehouse fired their arrows, along with the thousands of other soldiers along the ramparts and in the dozens of other towers.

Arrows fell upon the advancing Talfar army like a heavy downpour, bouncing off helmets and getting lodged in cloth gambeson, and Legion trebuchets sent their payloads flying overhead. A few of the stronger Talfar mages used various magics to destroy or swat away huge numbers of arrows, but most still got through. The projectiles thrown by the Legion trebuchets, however, caused a lot more damage, with stones and chunks of ice exploding in the air and peppering the Talfar ranks with shrapnel, or stones wrapped in spells bursting in great torrents of flame.

The Talfar infantry fell in the hundreds, but it wasn't enough. Many of those that fell could simply stand back up and keep moving, as they were young fit mages. The arrows that fell into the ranks of the peasants were more effective, but there were so many levies that even those that were killed were swiftly replaced.

Leon targeted one of the leaders of the advancing battalions, a fifth-tier warrior in dark blue mail and black leather. Leon's arrow, augmented with a sheet of spell paper tied around the shaft, pierced through a gap in the warrior's armor near his shoulder, and before the warrior could react, he burst into bright white flame.

Along the entire line, Leon could see a few similar sights, with other mages using spells to make their arrow fire just a little more deadly, mostly involving actual fire. He saw one warrior get hit with an arrow only for the ground beneath him to erupt and impale him on a massive spike, raising him into the air for the entire Talfar army to see.

The peasants began to slow down, but the Talfar infantry kept moving in disciplined, orderly lines despite their casualties. After the initial volley, the Legion archers along the walls began to fire at will, as firing in volleys would make it too easy for Talfar mages to block the arrow fire. Still, arrows fell upon the advancing Talfar battalions thick enough to kill or injure in droves.

Leon, too, kept firing, with his white-fire spells instantly killing almost everyone he shot.

When the front ranks of the Talfar army reached within five hundred feet of the walls, they began to shoot back, but to little effect. The battlements were tall and thick, and the angle that the few Talfar archers were firing at was particularly disadvantageous.

At four hundred feet, the Talfar lines were wracked with fiery explosions, but they still kept marching forward.

At three hundred feet, a long line of stone spikes burst from the ground to impale hundreds and create a long line of thin spiky barricades that impeded the Talfar advance. However, the Talfar mages were ready for this, and in less than five minutes most of the spikes had been rendered into gravel beneath the feet of the Talfar infantry.

At two hundred feet, the Talfar lines tightened up to protect each other from the withering Legion arrow fire.

At one hundred feet, hundreds of peasants ran through the professional infantry carrying huge ramps and ladders. They tried to approach the wall to set up their siege equipment and allow the regular infantry to assault the walls in earnest, but they ran into a pocket of magically compressed air in front of the wall, bouncing back like they had run into a giant pillow.

It would take a great deal of effort to get past that enchantment for mortal or first-tier peasants, but the same couldn't be said for the siege towers. These great lumbering beasts slowly rolled along behind Talfar's front battalions, and no matter how many arrows were shot into them, they kept coming. The peasants moving them were killed by the dozen, but the Talfar Warrior-Captains made sure that there were always more to replace them.

And then an explosion ripped through a Legion company near Leon's gatehouse. The wall shuddered, but little damage was done to it; the thirty Legion soldiers caught in the blast, however, were killed almost to a man, leaving the rest of the company to stare at the hole in their line where their friends had just been.

Leon blinked in confusion and momentary shock and fear. He frantically searched for a sign of what had just happened, for who or what had created that explosion, but there didn't seem to be any strong mages near the wall.

"GET DOWN!" the Tribune on the gatehouse roof roared, and his soldiers ducked behind the battlements, with Leon, Alix, and Anzu right behind them.

Something big impacted the gatehouse, then immediately exploded in a massive pillar of fire.

"Fucking hells!" Alix uncontrollably screamed as the roar of the explosion pressed down on her ears and a wave of heat washed over everyone on the gatehouse roof.

Leon managed to keep relatively calm, but he had to grab Anzu and hold the griffin tight against him so that Anzu wouldn't lose his mind and start attacking everyone he could see out of panic.

When the fire died down, Leon released the terrified Anzu and glanced around the roof. Most of the soldiers were fine, but a few were treating burns. The strong wards around the gatehouse did their job and protected them, for the most part.

"They're breaking out their own trebuchets!" the Tribune shouted, explaining what had happened. The Talfar army had finally reached for their own siege engines now that the Legion was too preoccupied with the infantry at the foot of the wall to shoot back at their bigger weapons.

Leon stuck his head between the merlons of the battlements and searched for the offending trebuchet, assuming that he'd simply missed it when they were wheeled out due to being too preoccupied with the Talfar infantry closer to the wall. However, he couldn't see any trebuchets or other siege weapons of the like that hit the gatehouse and nearby section of wall.

And then three more explosions hit the first wall in quick succession, killing scores of Legion soldiers. Two more trebuchet shots hit the ground in front of the wall, exploding harmlessly between the wall and the Talfar infantry.

"Shit! They're keeping their trebuchets in the smoke!" a nearby Centurion shouted.

Leon grimaced. If the Talfar army kept their siege weapons hidden in the smoke of Constantine's burning fort, then they couldn't be attacked. They would have to have spotters, but Leon couldn't attack them, either, as finding the spotters in a mass of two hundred thousand Talfar soldiers would be an exercise in futility.

“Get back up! Get back to shooting!” the Tribune bellowed, urging his soldiers to keep up the pressure on the Talfar infantry who weren’t going to stop for the Legion to regain its bearings. Leon, too, snapped back to the task at hand. He couldn’t do anything about the trebuchets, so he would have to trust in the defensive wards of the gatehouse and focus on what he could do, that being to shoot the Talfar infantry as they continued to advance.

But he quickly realized that the infantry wasn’t the primary problem; a Talfar siege tower was advancing straight toward the gatehouse, and it had already closed to within five hundred feet.