

Chapter 1

Nubine walked through the empty halls of her castle, feeling far more melancholic than she usually did. It was late at night, and save for a few guards up on the wall's of her castle nobody else was awake. She could not sleep. The memories of her long departed husband still continued to haunt her. But these were not the memories that she fondly used to recall. It was every regret she ever had, every bad decision, coming back to her in force. This weighed down on her, and no amount of herbal teas, long talks with the priests or hobbies could lift her sorrows.

Perhaps with age she was slowly going insane?

She was an elder. Having been a Baroness from the young age of seventeen winters she ruled her castle and surrounding lands for the past fifty winters. Her husband, Baron Plithin, died five winters before in a tragic accident during a hunt. Although they did have children none of them wished to remain in their home, travelling the world, living their primes, waiting for Nubine's eventual demise.

She loved her family so dearly, but it felt like to them she was an obstacle to her crown.

At least, that is what she thought now. Alone, surrounded by cold stone walls, and servants who were not truly her friends. Or were they?

Her thoughts fought with each other. Was she loved or hated? A friend or foe? A mother, or a filthy crone?

Through the many passages she found herself at her throne room. Normally filled with lesser nobles asking for an audience, and servants running back and forth. Now, the two thrones that stood empty, with the banners of her house hanging off the walls, and only two torches lit made it feel unwelcome. This was to be her fate, and she knew it.

How she longed for the old days... How she hated her life.

Nubine walked to her throne, next to the one that remained empty for so long. She stood by its side, looking to the empty hall and unable to hold them back any longer her tears began to pour along her cheeks as she pressed the hands against her face.

And only one other thing could feel her sadness.

The very next day, in another part of the land known as Armello, Leon, the last of his House, simply known as the Lion to most, was gazing at the rising sun from his office's balcony. He could hear the ruckus coming from the small town surrounding his castle's walls. Craftsmen preparing their stalls, peasants delivering their goods and Guardsmen trying to keep at least half-an-eye on order.

Leon was already in his middle-age. With a thick dark mane, dark brown eyes, and the general appearance of somebody who put as much effort into his looks as well as physique. A ragged mane

did not build confidence, or so his father used to say.

This land has known peace for decades. Even the wars that did erupt quickly ended. There was plenty in Armello for all, and none was strong enough to claim the whole land for himself. A permanent status quo, where all were happy with where they remained.

Even Leon's own concern was not that of the security of his land, or the well-being of his people, but his own lineage.

He was the last of his house. After him there would be no lion to claim his lands. His people come from a distant land, and his family, when they settled in Armello, was not large. There were no other lions in Armello, and none of the nobles from his homeland wished to send their daughters to such a distant land, far from the warm sands and bright sun.

It was Leon's duty to bury his father, the only other lion he could remember from his youth. With his departure the only contact he had with his own kind was through missives to his homeland.

His next in line would have to be somebody he chose personally, but whom?

"My Lord.", Leon heard his Steward, Ferdinand speak. Ferdinand was a swine, with as much love for gold as he had for food. His nose was as pink as his cheeks, lighter, for some reason, than the rest of his skin. Being bald, and taking personal offence to that, he ordered a magnificent white wig, which he wore constantly. Alas, it only made him look slightly more buffoonish.

"Yes, Ferdinand?" Leon asked, entering his office from the balcony which he used to survey his domain, or at least as far as his eyes could carry him.

The swine squeaked, his arms full of parchments. He waddled over to Leon's desk and cast upon it the accounts of his lands. Expenses, profits, taxes, sales. A vast sea of numbers which thankfully Ferdinand grasped with surprising ease.

"The Summer Festival is approaching! We must prepare the gold for it!" he squealed out. From the mess of sheets Ferdinand soon arranged them all into neat little piles in front of Leon who stood over the table and looked down upon the notes.

Soon after Ferdinand began his barrage. Unlike an incoming volley of arrows one could not hide from this by using a shield. Once Ferdinand began to speak he would not stop until he was finished. There was nothing that could halt his rhetoric. Those who would try would soon find their own words buried by the swine's insistent barrage.

And thus Leon listened, and nodded. The costs involved in decorating the town, the additional pay for the guard, to have a higher presence during the festival. Expected profits from merchants coming to pilfer their trade. Costs of the feast and entertainment. Lists of guests, those wanted and undesirable. New robes for Leon, because even though the old one's were still in good condition he absolutely NEEDED new ones for this year's festival...

This was not a meeting where Leon had to make a single decision, it was all Ferdinand's report. He could had allowed his Steward to have a free hand and be certain that he would not fail. It was the

Swine's own demand that the Lion knew of his doings and plans, it was part of his work ethic.

After a few pauses to catch his breath, and a few glasses of wine to help loosen his chords, Ferdinand finally concluded, as he did every year, that this Festival would be better than last year's.

Having finished this meeting Leon decided to walk through the courtyard of his castle, pass by his garden and enter the town. Almost like shadows, without a word, a handful of his men began to follow him. There never seemed a need to have guards by his side, he was, after all, a lion. Yet, much like in Ferdinand's case, Leon's guardsmen, and especially his knights, had very strong views of where their duties lay. Protecting their Lord was at the very top of their priorities.

Whether this need came from adoration, or the decades of rule by his predecessor, Leon did not know. But his men, and the people over which he ruled loved him. While he doubted that he was a great ruler word of mouth was that Leon was just and fair. As he was often seen training and practising with the blade few doubted that he would shy away from protecting his land.

Even as he walked through the busy streets of his town, and the people greeted him and cheered his name he felt a sense of pride. This was his land, his people. They relied on him, and he would not fail them.

As he entered the main square he found it as busy as it has always been. The heart of his town, the people were at times so preoccupied with their trades here that they paid their own Lord no heed. This did not bother the Lion at all, as he was coming here for a different reason than buying trinkets or crafts.

The guards making a way through the thick crowd, Leon came ever closer to his destination, the Sun and Moon Chapel.

Where Leon came from the Sun was both cruel and kind, while the Moon was a guide of sorts. It was the Sun that had the power to both kill and give life. In the dry planes it could dry up all the water, allowing all life to wither and die, but it could also bring life. The Moon, and its sons and daughters, the stars, guided those who walked the plains, while offering cool cover from the Sun.

The closest analogy that Leon could think of is "Father Sun" and "Mother Moon". A stern yet rewarding father, and a kind and guiding mother.

In Armello the Sun and Moon were different. Here the Moon could bite, it was a time of rest and respite, but also a time of grave danger. Everybody looked to the Sun though. It was the benevolent one, the one that kept the night and darkness away. It almost seemed that to the people of Armello the Sun meant life, while the Moon was death.

Still, both had to be respected, and Leon tried to come to the Chapel as often as he could, to pay his respects to these two powerful entities.

With his guards remaining outside Leon passed through the entrance arch and into the main room of the chapel. With numerous benches for the faithful to be seated there was a single altar behind which two decorative glass panes could be seen. One showing the Sun, the other the Moon.

All around the chapel one could spot the creative interpretations of both the Sun and Moon that the priests could think of. One especially noticeable glass pane showed one of Leon's ancestors, whose bright mane looked like the sun. Said ancestor, whose name Leon could not recall, was surrounded by his people, all giving praise to him. The protector from the Moon.

It always seemed strange to Leon that the Moon was not respected as much. The other side of the chapel seemed to show the Moon as a hare, or rat, running through the fields, sneaking into peoples' houses, and at times bringing misfortune.

Knowing well who has entered his chapel the high priest, an older fox wearing plain brown robes, came from his room to greet the lion.

"Praise the Sun and Moon that you come to us again, my Lord."

"I would not miss an opportunity to pay my respects." Leon responded approaching the altar. He knelt on one knee, but with his impressive physique he still loomed over the altar. As he silently prayed the priest moved along the chapel, lighting the candles on each pillar along the hall.

With that the Lion's thoughts slowly drifted away. He felt calm and happy, thanking both the Sun and Moon for his good fortunes. He murmured lowly, not expecting an answer in return, but knowing that his words were listened to.

Armello, this land, was truly blessed.

Greymane was not in the mood, he rarely was. Being asked to take part in hunts, skirmishes or even listening to the boring tales of skalds was one thing, but teaching the pups how to fight was a new low.

He was a warrior, veteran of numerous battles. He fought the Boars at the peaks of their mountain homes, and the Moles in their underground grottos. There was no foe he was afraid to face, and no challenge he would not undertake, but this, this was unjust punishment in his eyes.

As cool winds swept over the training grounds he gazed with a stern gaze at all the younglings who were just starting their journeys to becoming the clan's pride. Right now they were a deep thorn in his backside. He rose up yet again when he saw one of the pups hold his training stick with a bad grip, corrected it, much to the pup's surprise and sat back down again.

Whether a princeling, or low-born at this time they were all equally bad.

The simplest tasks, the easiest techniques, were far beyond their comprehension. This is not what he was accustomed to at all. This was not the fate he wished for. Dying in battle to a Hare's fork was preferable.

But there was no war. No battles to fight. Many of his clansmen enjoyed the peace, rested with their packs, grew older and fat. Greymane begged his chief for any task, no matter how simple, but he did not expect to be given the lowliest of jobs.

Peace never lasts, Greymane knew this. Sooner or later something was bound to happen. Maybe even within his own clan, a spat between two elderly wolves, or younger warriors wishing to prove their mettle. But until such a time that his lance was needed Greymane would remain here, and wait.

Growing ever more irritated with the faulty practise of his subordinate pups he rose up for the final time.

"Right," he growled out "It's time to teach you how to stand in a bloody row..."

Scuttle was not his real name, but he embraced the title wholeheartedly. How did he earn it? He always knew when to abandon the symbolical ship, before any danger reached him. Being a scout, and occasional spy this was an essential skill. After all, if you manage to find a way into a well defended castle it is only sensible that you find a way out. Especially if things go awry.

Thankfully Scuttle was not locked up in a dungeon, hiding in a high-born lady's closet, or holding his breath in the depths of some moat while the guards searched for him.

No, Scuttle had other duties than those in the field. He was organising his information. Scuttle had his own spy circle, in the service of the Rat Clan of course. His responsibilities extended over a relatively small area of Armello, encompassing, mainly, the lands of Leon and Baroness Nubine, as well as many other local villages.

Every piece gathered by his informants had to be classified and sorted away. More important or key information sent back to the Clan, and sometimes the Clan would send back requests to look for specific titbits about something it deemed to be important.

The only shortcoming of this system was the speed at which messengers could deliver the information. While the chance of interception was small it sometimes took days for a response.

This did not bother Scuttle too much at this point. There was almost naught happening in the realm, at least on the surface. From the safety of his den, which was the back-room of a warehouse used to store lumber right in the middle of the lion's town, Scuttle looked over most recent reports.

The Baroness was apparently falling ill, though the cause and exact illness were unknown. The Lion's coffers were doing well, and preparations for the Summer Festival were well under way. News from other circles pointed to the same peace-time lull.

Even the cults were suspiciously quiet.

Some have now made it a fad to gather "relics" of the Wyld. Whether real or fake, a whole market has grown of people providing them. Of course what is and is-not Wyld has been raised many times by suspicious buyers. The Bear Clan though is far from impressed. All smugglers that were caught by them have been dealt with harshly, and it's not exactly easy to dress up a ferret, rat or fox to look like a bear.

There was also news from the Hare workshops, but only rumours. Apparently a new weapon was

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being developed. It was kept under such secrecy however, more scrutinizing than normally, that it drove the Spymasters mad with intrigue.

Orders from the clan were as follows:

"Continue observation of Lion and Ferret.

Note any special outgoing shipments to the Hares.

Do not spill berry wine on the reports again."

The last point struck Scuttle's heart deep. He would never abandon his passion for berry wine.

Chapter 2

Days, weeks passed and Nubine was not leaving her chambers. She began to feel ill, so much so that numerous alchemists, herbalists and physicians attempted to find the cause for her ailment and failed. Nobody knew what was happening to the Baroness, though she knew what they were thinking.

"She is Old."

Old, weak, at the end of her life. Any day soon her children would arrive to say their farewells, and they would bury her in a hole in the ground to be forgotten forever more. Another put to rest, another whose time has come. An end of a chapter. It was now that she asked herself about what she achieved in her life, how will she be remembered. But the looming thoughts of her regrets and failures overshadowed anything that might had granted her an ounce of joy or pride.

She was a failure. Another noble who would only be recalled as a side-note on meetings, and in all records. Nubine the Incapable. Nubine the Old.

The spiral in which she found herself sucked her deeper and deeper toward oblivion.

Nubine lay in her bed, alone, looking up to the ceiling with a blank stare.

"This is how it ends." she thought to herself, and she slowly closed her eyes hoping that they would not open again.

Suddenly, a soft and barely audible whisper came to her ear. Her eyes opened and she looked around, but in the dimly lit room she could not see anybody.

"Hello?" she asked, unsure if she actually heard somebody speak, or perhaps it was just the wind.

No, she could clearly hear a whisper. It appeared to be calling her, but from where? With renewed strength she rose up from her bed and moved toward what she thought was the source of the sound. A mirror, one that has hanged in this bedroom since the very first day she came to this castle. It did not seem in any way special. A wooden frame, with simple cut-ins, making it look like an oval cog.

She stood right in front of it, looking at her own reflection. The whispers were growing louder, but while many would had already called for help, or fled from this strange event Nubine's ear slowly approached the surface of the mirror.

She listened to the whispers only she could hear, massaging her mind, bringing her a sense of calm she did not have in what seemed like ages.

"Tell me more..." she whispered back into the mirror, and it was very happy to oblige.

While most of the time Leon did not have the time for private deliberations once in a while there

was this surprising period of calm. When his presence was not required, and none needed an audience with him. It was during times like these that Leon would walk through his castle's gardens. Unlike in more prestigious or larger castles where gardens would sprawl within the cast wall's Leon had to content himself with what he had, a quarter of the courtyard, out of the way of stampeding men and carriages.

This garden, though small was his own idea. His predecessors never saw the need for something of the sort. To Leon, outside of the many other tasks he often had to undertake, and prepare for, this was his personal choice.

While he wasn't a gardener he had a vision for this small paradise of his. He successfully managed to grow lush and dense grass, surrounded by the cold stones that were laid out throughout the courtyard. Two apples trees, on either side of the plot, shrubbery and bushes to give it some life. Colourful flowers, that could endure the occasional lack of sun, when the walls would block its rays. A single small birdbath, which he often considered his "Grand Fountain", four empty marble slabs. These would act as the bases for the statues he ordered. Statues of the once-great lions of his house. At least those that he could fit.

He recalled once visiting the Hare Queen, and walking through her own plantarium. Enclosed in a glass building, filled with all manner of exotic and strange life. How could anybody bare to sit in a permanently moist and hot jungle was beyond him. Part of the joy of having a garden, after all, was sitting in it, when a soft breeze would blow through your mane. When birds would settle their homes upon the branches of your trees. In so many ways tending to a garden, even a small one, was like tending to a kingdom. Your subjects depended on you to keep them safe from pests and invaders, while also fed and healthy. In return they offered you their bounty, whatever that would had been.

Leon contemplated this deeper, as he leaned against one of the still empty marble slabs, looking over his miniature "kingdom". He wasn't a gardener, no, but what little he could do or help with to make this come to life he did. The thought that he would not put a single paw to making this a reality terrified him. Much to the perplexed gaze of his subjects he dug the holes for the apple trees, rolled in wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of fresh earth and even knelt on his knees to prune out the occasional weed.

This garden was his personal pride and joy.

One day, Leon was certain, he would move this garden elsewhere, where it could truly grow. Not within the castle's walls, but perhaps somewhere within the town?

But as Leon rested, and his mind drifted he was soon brought back to the realm of duties and responsibilities.

"My Lord!" squeaked out Ferdinand, as he approached the lion. "The tailor is here! It is time to take your measurements!"

And with that the lion had to depart once more.

The training continued. The pups aching from the bruises of relentless practise. The chill in the air grew ever stronger, but winter was still two seasons away. Greymane was no seer or wise-wolf to explain this abnormality, but he was a warrior, and to him fighting in the cold built character. He could tell exhaustion was gripping the pups, but he had to push them. The more they strained and pushed against their limits the better off they would be.

Between the clatter of sticks, and the occasional yelp as one pup managed to out-swat the other, Greymane could hear the distant call of battles and wars from the past. How he longed for them, how he wished to relive them, how he-

"I challenge you, Greymane!"

His thoughts were suddenly disturbed. He gazed from the pups before him to his left. That was not the call of another great wolf, or even an usurper to his many titles. It was not an outsider who has heard of his legends and wished to do battle.

Greymane tilted his head and gazed upon one of the pups, that now stood before him, with wooden stick in hand. They wolf seemed determined and ready to do battle, but Greymane did not seem impressed.

"Get back to your sparring partner and continue." he growled out. He was not about to get up for some pup.

Yet the resolve of the young wolf was not put out by Greymane's demand.

"I challenge you Greymane!" the young wolf repeated. There was no doubt about his determined stance.

The old wolf was becoming annoyed, and he took his own training baton and rose up. He did not want to fight, he decided the pup had to be taught a lesson. He brought up his arm and was about to strike at the insolent young one.

The baton went down, Greymane aiming at the top of the pup's head, to discipline rather than to harm. What Greymane did not expect was that the pup would not only stand aside and parry his attack, but also riposte. Suddenly the old wolf found the tip of the pup's training stick poking at the side of his throat.

This came as a total and complete surprise. How could he be beaten by a pup? When did this one learn to fight at all? All he saw was children whacking each other with sticks.

The old wolf's eyes narrowed as he gazed at the young pupil.

"Your name?" Greymane asked, and the pup moved the stick away from his master's throat.

"Thane." he answered.

"Well then, Thane, you just earned yourself some special treatment."

Scuttle was not drinking, not at all. He was only feeling a bit drowsy after all the wine he had drunk. Laying on the desk, upon which were numerous still unread reports, and other paperwork still waiting to be filled out, Scuttle used a pile of them for a pillow.

He dreamed of mountains of gold, from which stream of sweet red berry wine poured down, with trees made of bread and cheese. And at the foot of one of the gold mountains, and near the lake, no, sea of wine was his mansion. Mansion or castle? Man-castle.

For a moment he dreamt it was made of sweets and cookies, but that seemed a bit too unrealistic. He turned his head around, and pressed his cheek against his paper-pillow, imagining every single individual room and its contents, not forgetting about all the beautiful servants who would so keenly serve him.

As his imagination was still choosing appropriate outfits for every single one of them there came a loud banging at the door. Still stuck in dream-land he only mumbled out something incomprehensible and the door swung open with a loud bang, though Scuttle did not give a tail's tip whether it was one of his men, or the whole city guard about to arrest him.

"Scuttle!" came the familiar nagging voice of one of his spies. "Scuttle wake up I have important news!"

The spymaster only mumbled another response, lifted his hand and waved for the spy to continue on. Aware that his master was out of commission, but not having the option of pouring a bucket of water over his head he did the next best thing. He forced Scuttle to work.

"Read this!" the spy said, and being forced to finally break off from his dream, Scuttle slowly opened his eyes.

The world spun around in a circle, making it difficult to focus on the finely written letter. Slowly, methodically his eyes scanned the contents of the parchment, and as they reached the end of the missive his eyes opened slightly wider. His gaze then moved to the top of the page, then back down again and he slowly rose up to sit in his finicky chair.

"How recent is this?" Scuttle finally managed to ask. His brain was working at a slower pace than usual, but he could still bring together facts and information. "Are you certain she wrote this?"

"I asked our informant numerous times, apparently she did." the spy replied.

Scuttle scratched his chin and tilted his head sideways.

"Do we know why? I do not recall any bandits in her lands, and even then this seems an unorthodox choice."

"No Scuttle, nobody knows, but this is not the only letter she sent out."

Scuttle's head tilted to the other side now.

"And how many did she?"

The spy produced a rolled up parchment and handed it to Scuttle. The spymaster unfurled it and began looking down a long list of not only mercenary bands, but also troublemakers, warlords, brigands and far, far worse that have ever graced Armello's lands.

"To all of them."

The hall fell eerily silent as Nubine entered. Unlike in the past when it was visited by nobles from throughout Armello and beyond now it was filled with people you would not wish to remain alone with, under any circumstances.

Mercenaries answered Nubine's call most eagerly. Those to whom sweet promises of pay, riches and fame appealed to the most, but they were not the only ones. Men of even fewer scruples, those normally shunned by the civilized people of Armello also attended.

Normally seeing so many different types of characters in a single room would lead to a battle of its own, but there appeared to be only one thing keeping them in order, Baroness Nubine.

Over the course of a few weeks she has miraculously recovered from her illness and found a new direction for herself. What that direction was nobody could begin to guess, not even those invited to this meeting.

She walked from the hall's entrance to her throne, that of her dead husband gone. She sat now in the centre, sole ruler of her domain and she looked to those gathered in her hall.

Her guards, all ferrets, donning their most impressive armour still looked like small morsels compared to the predators that stood before them, and this difference showed. Unlike their confident Baroness, they quaked in their armours, looking anywhere but at these dangerous men.

After a lengthy moment of silence Nubine spoke, her voice filled with confidence, unparalleled strength and pride.

"I thank you for arriving at such short notice, time, as you know is something I have little of." she chuckled, but her laugh was cold, unwelcome, and none other would join its hollow echo in the hall.

"You may have asked yourselves why I invited all of you here, but perhaps I should ask all of you why you chose to answer my summons. To all these questions I have an answer."

One of Nubine's servants walked in, the shy ferret stood behind the throne, holding something in her hands. She remained quiet.

"My friends, we are here for a momentous occasion, something that was bound to happen, sooner or later. A celebration we could say. Just as the day passes for the moon to rise so too this is a turning point in Armello's history."

Nubine paused for a moment and she brought her goblet up above her head.

"A toast, to the future, and those who shall bring it screaming and kicking through the door of the past!" again, the eerie silence which filled the hall, remained. It almost seemed like Nubine was an actor in her own play, while everybody else was a spectator, knowing their place.

With her goblet empty another servant took a step forward and refilled it.

"My friends. Those in power, the clans, the old order, they stand between us and greatness. They are the rot that kills this land from within, a tumour that has been allowed to grow with no care. An infection that started at the tip of one's pinky finger and crawled all the way to his heart. We are the cure."

Nubine motioned to the servant holding the bundle in her arms and she came forward, now standing next to her Baroness. She then unfurled the bundle, revealing a banner, or flag. A black double-headed bird, a predator, against a purple background.

"This is our sign, this is our call. The call of all those who have been forever prey, who have been driven out, as outcasts. Together we will be a wildfire, purging the land of all disease. Together we will destroy the old order, and everything it stood for."

Nubine rose up from her seat and yelled.

"From this day on, we are no longer weak, we are no longer prey. This land and all its people belong to us. Armello is ours. And we shall destroy everything that stands in our way!"

A few voices rose up in cheer, but it seemed most were not captured by Nubine's speech.

"For those who join me, riches, fame and power await. But for those that wish to stop us only the cold touch of the grave shall remain."

Though still eerily quiet, save for a few supporters, the hall continued to watch and listen.

"But what are words without action? Let me prove to you my intentions, how true they are to my words. Gather your men, rally your forces, for very soon, under this very banner we will march together and take the first step toward our victory."