

The Battle of Oakenfall

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Foreword

This was a mad little trip I started because of NaNoWriMo. When I began work I thought I would reach the magical 50,000 words within the time frame, but that proved impossible. I did not want to leave my little novel unfinished and that is why you are not reading through this hastily written foreword. Even though the tale of the Armello Civil War is not yet fully told, plenty of ideas appeared in my head that I will have to materialize one way or another.

The original idea came from a tapestry idea I had, and that I concluded together with Purpleground02. Search for the Battle of Oakenfall tapestry some time if you wish to see the end result!

Even though I put a lot of work and effort into this novel it is still a work of fan-fiction. A lot of the characters, how they are presented and shown are either based on what little knowledge I have of the world of Armello or are based on my own imagination. After all, we can't have fan-fiction without fiction.

Enjoy this little piece of literary madness, and I hope you will come to see more of my work.

Cheers,

Aleksander "WriterX" Bielski

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 ago in a tragic accident during a hunt. Although they did have children none of them wished to remain in their home. They chose to travel the world, live their primes, and wait 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 her 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 Black-Mane, 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.

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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 Black-Mane to claim these 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 somewhere so distant, 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 offense to that, he ordered himself 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...

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This was not a meeting where Leon had to make a single decision, it was all Ferdinand's report. He could have 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 predecessors, 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 practicing 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 cleared a way through the thick crowd and 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

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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 grottoes. 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 looked with a stern gaze at all the younglings who were just starting their journeys toward 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

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packs, growing 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 practice 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 sinking 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 reasonable 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 organizing 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 Black-Mane 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 tidbits 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.

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

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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 apple trees, on either side of the plot, shrubbery and bushes to give it some life. Colorful 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 Queen Augustine of the Hare Kingdom, 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.

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The training continued. The pups aching from the bruises of relentless practice. 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."

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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 dreamed 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.

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"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 armor 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 armors, 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.

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"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 tumor 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."

Chapter 3

Scuttle's hideout turned almost overnight from a calm, empty den into a hive of activity. Spies and informants at times even forgot about secrecy and protocol to bring in more information, whether relevant, truthful or not. Ever since Nubine sent all those missives and after it was confirmed that she had a grand meeting with numerous questionable persons all the spy circles and rings in Armello were watching for even the slightest movement of troops through the land.

Priorities shifted almost immediately, and the higher-ups in the Rat Clan demanded that the exact aims and objectives of Nubine's little army were confirmed. "Little" perhaps just a week or two ago, but now Nubine's army was turning into a horde.

Yet somehow most of Armello was not informed of this. Only the Rat Clan appeared to be aware of this growing danger. Scuttle could have sworn that some messages were either not making it through, or they were scrambled or lost.

What he did know, for certain, was that Nubine had an army. What he did not know was who exactly was in it. Chaos in his ranks, and in the whole information network seemed to grow. Sometimes during a single day he would receive ten messages on the same topic, but all contradicting each other.

Scuttle suspected, though he had no proof, that somebody was deliberately spreading misinformation. But to create this degree of chaos could not have been the job of a single spy, it must have been at least a compromised spy ring. It wasn't just the spies though, it was the informants as well. After all his circle was responsible for Nubine, yet even though he was just a day away from Nubine's own castle he was completely blind.

If Nubine managed to somehow cause this Scuttle was impressed, but he also doubted the old ferret could be capable of such a feat, but if not her, then who?

As Scuttle looked through the papers, and with one ear open listened to yet another claim, another report, he could not help but realize he still did not know what was Nubine's ultimate plan. If you gather an army you go to war, but if your claim was that you wished all of Armello to be conquered by your own hand where exactly would you strike?

The moment she attacked anybody news would spread like wildfire, through refugees fleeing from raided farms and settlements. There was no possibility that a single army could achieve such a goal.

Another spy entered, another spy left. Scuttle looked longingly to the open bottle of berry wine right within his reach. It called to him, his Man-castle, his servants, and he so wished to be there as well. Right now he had a job to do. A job that was driving him insane, and even angry, but a job none the less.

Suddenly an informant, panting like a dog perhaps because he was one, ran in and brought most dire news.

The Summer Festival was well under way. From the balcony of his office the Lion looked to the happy visitors to his town and castle. Flowers were everywhere, decorations, dances, song and food. Everybody was dressed in their finery and the people were happy. The first day was the most important to all of the peasants, but many of his guests would not arrive until after the festival was over. It turns out that most nobles of this land do not like mingling with the “rabble”.

Leon was not alone on the balcony however. Ferdinand was with him. He too dressed for the occasion, with his prominent white wig present.

“My lord! I told you this would be the best festival yet!” he squealed with glee. Leon had a hard time gauging whether this was the case, but if Ferdinand felt that way and the people did too that was all that mattered.

“You out-did yourself Ferdinand. I would like to thank you for all your hard work.”

“Oh, but it is a pleasure, my lord! But, we must not forget about-”

“Yes, I did not forget. We will have a meeting with the high priest, be present at the blessing of the offerings and then visit the craftsmen's stalls.”

“And?” Ferdinand interjected.

“Yes, I will go change.” and the Lion turned to head back into his office. Heading through the door he went to his personal quarters where his formal robes awaited. Unlike the purple and gold that Leon preferred Ferdinand insisted on trying something different, gold and blue. The steward explained that blue, in the eyes of Armellian's is a far more noble color. And, apparently, it also matched the lion better, but Leon was no expert on fashion.

He removed his magnificent cloak, that was held by a chain and began changing into the new clothing.

It was about midday and a lot still remained to be done. Many of the attendees would not rest even during the night. The watch would certainly have its hands full with brawls and fights.

In the end the people deserved this. All their hard work now rewarded with a few days of respite.

As he finished dressing up and was about to put on a cloak that was specifically made for this day Ferdinand hammered on the door, shouting something.

Leon opened it and saw his Steward's face as pale as the wig he wore.

“B-banners! Black banners approaching!”

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Paul was sitting in one of the towers of the gatehouse, enjoying a quick snack that another guardsman brought him. A delicious sweet roll. The day has been calm so far. Gate duty usually was, since there was no threat of bandits or even wild beasts for the past year, if not longer.

Holding the sweet roll in one hand he took another large bite out of it. The beaver wagged his tail in glee when the sugary sweetness toyed with his taste buds. It batted against the chair he sat on, forgetting for a moment that somebody might hear him.

Something caught his attention though. He stopped himself from taking another bite and his ears perked up. Paul could swear he heard something. As he sat there in silence he seemed to hear it again, shouts. But they were not the shouts of happy peasants, they sounded angry. Was there a brawl happening right in front of the gate? They seemed a bit more distant than expected.

He rose up, sweet roll still in hand and he looked through an arrowslit facing the streets in the town. Everything seemed to be in order but he noticed a few people were pointing toward the gate, or something behind it? Paul turned around and headed to the other side of the tower, but before he even reached the arrow-slit he could see what was happening.

Looking through it he observed a horde of warriors, soldiers, charging toward the walls. The few people who were outside of the walls seemed to be running toward the gate in panic.

“Lock the gates!” the guardsman called! “Lock the gates!” he yelled again, throwing the sweet roll away and grabbing his spear that rested against the wall. He did not hear any answer, nor the familiar metallic clang of the portcullis dropping.

“Lock the damned gates!” Paul called yet again, as the horde was approaching. He could now see the banners they were holding, purple with a two-headed black bird. He was not familiar with that emblem, but the men holding them did not appear friendly, at all.

Still no answer.

He ran from his post to a lower section of the gatehouse, where the locking mechanism was.

“What is wrong with you! We are under attack!” he screamed as he ran down the stairs, thinking that maybe the other guards were asleep, or otherwise drunk.

“CLOSE THE-” and as he ran into the room, with all the chains and levers to close the gate he found a terrible sight. The guardsmen who were meant to operate the gate were dead, standing around them were black moles, clad in equally dark leather armour, longswords and sharp spades in their clawed hands.

One of them, the leader of the band of moles, smiled to the newly arrived victim.

“Surprise!” were the final words Paul ever heard when a mole snuck behind him and pierced his heart with his cruel dagger.

The lion returned to the balcony, over his formal robes he only had the time to strap on his

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breastplate and grab his blade. The first thing he noticed was the panic among the people below, and soon after the cause of the panic was apparent. The attackers were approaching and the gates were not closing. Sabotage, or worse.

“Open the castle gates, let the people in!” he roared with all of his might. Even the roars of the invaders were briefly drowned by his booming voice and the few guards who remained at their posts began to usher the flood of people seeking safety.

He roared again, “To arms! All men to arms! Defend yourselves!” and soon after he turned to face Ferdinand. “Gather as many men as you can and head to the castle gates, find the captain and inform him of the situation if he does not know yet. We must hold the castle at all costs.”

Without waiting for a response from Ferdinand the lion left his office and began his journey to the courtyard. If the whole town made it into the castle it would be tightly packed. As long as the castle's gates were sealed they would be safe, but what if the saboteurs were inside the castle as well?

Heading down to the courtyard he saw the faces of countless terrified people, some of them just starting to catch their breath while the others, as they ran in, screamed in panic while the sounds of battle rang out behind them.

“Hold the gates! Make way for the guard!” roared out Leon, as he pushed through the crowd to the gate. “Guardsmen! With me!”

In the chaos it was hard to tell at first who was friend from foe, but as the Lion passed through the gate with a handful of his guards that managed to follow him he could see the attackers. The invaders were heavily armed and armored, attacking anybody who stood in their way. They did not belong to a single group or house, but he could spot the black banners again, held by some of the troops.

Some of the distraught guardsmen were trying to hold a line, but they were badly outnumbered, at the point of breaking. Among the sounds of battle he could hear the pleas and begging of those wounded and innocent as they were being mercilessly killed. That drove him mad with anger.

With a loud roar, that briefly drowned out the sounds of battle, and shook the hearts of the attackers the lion joined the fray. With his sword and mighty paw he attacked with no mercy to offer to these brigands.

The twisted evil visages before him at first recoiled while the lion was cutting down any who dared approach him, but they soon realized how outnumbered he was, and with newfound bravery they tried to overwhelm Leon.

“Pull back with me! Hold the line!” the lion ordered, trying to retreat along the street toward the castle gate. As they moved slowly however it became apparent that the town was being swarmed. Leon could hear fighting to his left and right. If they remained here soon the enemy would come from the flanks, or rear.

“Run to the castle, I will hold them, GO!” the lion ordered. The Guard, exhausted and terrified of

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the onslaught obeyed. Soon the Lion found himself alone, trying to buy time for his guards.

“Kill! Kill the black mane! Bring me his head!” came a voice from the offenders. Though they tried to swarm him, even grip at his arms the lion cast them aside like ragdolls, cutting at the horde with his blade. There were simply too many. He held them back for a few moments, enough, he hoped, to give his men enough time to reach safety, and then after one final swipe of his blade against the shield of a heavily armored knave he turned tail and ran, as quickly as he could, toward the castle gate.

As he ran he could hear the bloodthirsty cheers of those behind him, giving chase. Running down the street, while his guardsmen, from the castle's walls, began to fire arrows upon his pursuers.

The lion passed through the gate's arch, and the portcullis slammed down behind him, followed by the quick rush of his men closing the wooden inner gate.

And as the lion was trying to catch his breath the destruction of his town continued, just beyond the wall.

All the survivors were brought inside the castle itself, to make as much room in the courtyard as possible. It was still hard to gauge how many of his men remained after the brief battle in the town, but if the walls held help would eventually arrive. There was plenty of food within the castle, a well with fresh water, and unless the besiegers mustered the strength to strike immediately Leon believed a lengthy siege was possible.

But the thought of saboteurs within the castle haunted him. He posted twice as many guards in those places he deemed critical. The captain of the guard went missing so he had to direct what remained of the guard himself. A few lesser nobles and knights who survived, albeit without their weapons and armour, were given what could be found. Even if Leon wanted to there was not enough weapons to arm every willing soul, he had to be selective.

What worried Leon the most was that despite being besieged there were no terms for surrender sent forth, no demands or expectations. Those who attacked him now waited like hyenas around his castle, waiting for the right time to burrow their fangs. They did not answer his summons either. And those flags, they were not of any lord or lady he recognized, from within or outside of Armello. The army was varied too, and Leon recognized some of the mercenaries now serving this unknown ruler.

Who was rich and powerful enough to gather such a host? And ultimately, what did they want of him?

He gazed from his balcony to the now ransacked town. Every house now occupied not by his people but by these savages. He dared not think what happened to those unfortunate enough to remain beyond the castle. But his helplessness made him angry as well.

There was no way to avenge the fallen, to take the fight back to these monsters. All he could do is wait, and hope for relief. But if he was to die he would die defending his people. That much he decided.

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A soft knock came to the door and Ferdinand, without permission, entered the office.

“My Lord?”

Leon did not look back, he was still taking in the scene before him.

“Ferdinand.” he said.

“How do you feel?” the swine asked.

Leon could tell him of the anger building up in him, the helplessness and a distant despair that was gripping at him, but if he showed even a bit of weakness it would spread like a fire through the rest of the defenders.

“I am fine.” was the only answer he gave.

“Everybody is still shaken, nobody knows... why this happened, or who attacked us... Do you...?”

“No.” was the simple answer the lion could give.

“My Lord, we cannot stay here.”

That statement surprised Leon a bit, and he turned his head around to look at Ferdinand, but it wasn't just Ferdinand standing in the room. Next to him stood a rat, dressed in the red of the Rat Clan, seemingly unarmed, but these rogues knew how to hide a knife.

The lion moved back into the office and leaned against his desk.

“What is he doing here? Did he come to admit to working for these beasts? Is he the one responsible for this tragedy?”

The rat raised his hands defensively.

“Hey now, we are on the same side here, same side of the wall at least.”

Leon normally did not accuse anybody without proof, but his mood from the entire situation was rather sour.

“Your kind are known for acts like this. Sabotage, assassination. Why did your clan work with these... monsters?!” the lion began to growl, and while Ferdinand seemed to quake at his lord's rage, even though it was not directed at him, the rat seemed completely untouched by it.

“We wouldn't work with them, not for any sum of gold. No no, this was somebody else's doing.”

“WHOSE?!” the lion roared out. It was very likely that both the castle's defenders and the besiegers heard the sudden outburst, but the rat, again, as if to annoy the lion merely rubbed one of his ears, as if he heard a brief, deafening bang.

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“Well, if you really must know, it was the Moles. Dug up right into your gatehouse, killed off your guards and kept the door wide open for the rest of your guests. Granted, they did not have the time to find a way into your castle, yet, but it's a matter of time.”

“The Moles? You want me to believe that somebody managed to make them their ally? They listen to no one, they follow their own rules, and they wage their own wars. If you do not want your skull crushed by my paw for this nonsense then tell me who is leading this army.”

Yet still, despite the ever growing threats the rat remained relaxed.

“It was Baroness Nubine.”

The room fell completely silent.

“Baroness Nubine... The Baroness Nubine?” Leon asked, as if just being told that the grass is in fact purple, not green.

The rat nodded, and Leon simply rubbed his forehead with one of his massive paws.

“In any other circumstance I would had thought that a bad joke, but right now I feel like you are insulting me, and Nubine. She would had never done something like this, and you are confirming my suspicions.”

“Now listen.” the rat suddenly interjected. “We could not believe it at first either, and you have no reason to believe me, but Nubine is responsible for all of this. For the past weeks something has been happening to her, we do not know what. And suddenly she calls for everybody and anybody of ill-repute who has ever walked this world, and asks them over for a glass of wine and to bend their knee.”

The Lion still looked suspiciously at the rat, as any sane man would.

“You did not tell me why.”

“Nobody knows that, not me, not the rat clan, not anybody. Only Nubine herself seems to know of her own plans, and I doubt we will have the chance to ask her.”

The lion folded his arms.

“Even so, we can wait here till the other lords and ladies of Armello react to this unjust act. Moles or not it would take them days to breach the walls, weeks. We can remain here, and we will survive.”

“I am afraid no help is coming.”

The rat's words sounded even less believable.

“Let me guess, everybody is on Nubine's side? And we are the last castle to stand against her?”

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“Not exactly.” came the rat's response. “She is moving against everybody, and nobody is prepared for it. Even if somebody hears of your plight they will not be able to help you.”

“That's impossible.” came the lion's response.

“So we all thought, but here we have a living example of a single ferret taking control of one of the largest and most dangerous forces in the world, and she desires all of Armello.”

“But you just said that you did not know what Nubine wanted.” the Lion noted.

“That is what she claimed, but if she truly wanted to conquer your land would she not had taken it, instead of destroying it? Whatever Nubine's true intentions they are not for our good.”

Leon could not trust this rat. For all he knew he was toying with him, trying to bring his guard down. Perhaps as they spoke his “friends” were clearing a way for the besiegers. Then he remembered about Ferdinand also standing in the room, and he turned his gaze to the swine.

“Do you trust him?” came the lion's simple question.

“N-no my Lord, not exactly, but he is right about one thing, the people outside these walls want us dead. We must escape and seek help, where possible.”

“Escape? Escape how? We cannot break through this siege, and I doubt anybody could sneak out of the castle. Besides, I refuse to abandon my people.”

“What's left of them.” came the grim words of the rat, which made the lion's face turn into a hate filled snarl directed at the rodent. “Now, don't get me wrong. Dying is all noble and stuff, but it won't get you anything. If you want to save what is left of your people and land you must live, and to live you must leave. And before you ask, I got into this castle, and I can get you out as well.”

“I refuse.” spoke the Lion. “I will not leave this castle and its defenders. I have already failed in protecting so many, I would live in shame if I ran away like a rat.”

“You wound me.” said the rat, sarcastically. “But now is not the time for being all virtuous and holy. There is a tunnel, leading from your dungeon to an exit in a nearby forest. We can leave the castle unnoticed and head back to the lands of the rat clan. From there we can offer some meaningful resistance.”

“And why would the rat clan aid me?”

“Well, I figure a living ally is better than a dead one, and against Nubine we need every self-righteous knucklehead we can find.”

This time Leon seemed to ignore the insult, scratching his mane, thinking.

“This is what we will do.” the Lion began to speak. “We will use the tunnel to escape, but not just us, everybody in the castle.”

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The rat looked at the lion, a bit perplexed.

“What? But... Hold on now.”

“No, you listen. I will not leave anybody behind, if I can help it. We will attempt our escape during the night, that way nobody will notice the lack of guards on the walls. After we reach safety we will decide what to do from there.” and with a stern gaze he looked to the rat, making it clear that no negotiation is possible.

The rat only shrugged at response.

“Right. I am to keep you alive, not safe. How much time do you need?”

“We will leave tonight. I will inform everybody and we will wait in the dungeons. From there, to freedom.”

The dungeon of Leon's castle was, for once, full of people. The rat was moving away some stones that were so masterfully fit into the wall that they did not appear to be dislodged at all. Behind the fake wall was a relatively tall and wide tunnel, at least for most. To the massive lion it proved a bit of a challenge to fit through. Yet, one by one, all the hopeful survivors followed Leon, his rat guide and Ferdinand.

The tunnel was dark, and the few torches that were brought for the march only provided a bit of light.

They walked in silence, only the sounds of their steps, the occasional cough from the dust and dirt in the tunnel, and grunting of the lion, as he could not stand upright, accompanied them.

Everything was going according to plan, thus far.

“How long is the tunnel?” Leon finally asked.

“Well, we are passing the whole length of the town and castle, out of a guard's eye-sight, so it will be a while.”

“Was it used... often?”

“As often as it had to. Not like you had anything interesting to sneak out.”

Suddenly the rat stopped, his ears perking up. He looked from one side of the tunnel to the other and slowly drew his blade. There was a sudden air of unease.

“Moon's bite... I forgot... they can hear us... We must hurry!”

But, it was too late. From the walls of the small tunnel came the ambushers. The moles, snarled and growled as they leapt at whoever was closest, screaming vile insults and curses while they tried to

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stab or bite their victims.

Panic spread through the tunnel, the people tried to protect each other as best they could, but with so many defenseless their bodies soon clogged the tunnels, and those who could fight could not run past the lion. Leon knew that and he grabbed the rat in front of him, and Ferdinand who was right behind him. With both of them in his arms he charged forth like a bull, trying to clear an escape for those behind him.

How long did the lion run? He could not tell, and the rat was too shocked and surprised to truly react.

At the exit from the tunnel the Lion burst through, wooden splinters flying left and right as the trapdoor was destroyed by Leon's charge.

Dazed, but still very well aware of what was happening the lion dropped his two companions and looked back to the tunnel hopefully.

The rat recovering from what just happened motioned to the lion.

“Wait here, you won't be able to help much anyway.” and he went back into the tunnel. Long, painful moments passed, the sounds of distant unfair battle echoed through the tunnel. His mane was grey from the dirt, his clothes ripped, bruises and wounds along his fur. Ferdinand was only slightly better off, but his wig, miraculously remained on his head.

As the noise died down the first of the group left the tunnel. Mainly guardsmen and a handful of knights, with dark, solemn expressions, their tabards and weapons covered in blood, and an even smaller group of other survivors soon followed.

The rat, himself left last and he looked to the Lion with an equally glum expression.

“This is everybody. We must go, they know we escaped.”

The sun began to rise slowly over the horizon. What remained of the survivors of the previous night followed the once-proud lion. Only the rat seemed to be somewhat better off, but it might had been due to the bottle of wine he drank along the way. It did not seem to slow him down, but he did not become any more talkative either.

Finally after hours of a slow march Ferdinand asked.

“Where do we go now?”

The lion spoke, his voice broken by sadness and defeat.

“To Oakenfall. We must warn them of what is to come.”

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Nubine walked through Leon's little castle garden, looking over the the carefully tended plants, and the still empty marble slabs that never had the opportunity to become decorated.

She looked upon all of this with indifference, her whole visit to the town, the castle left her with a feeling of disdain and apathy. How could she had once thought so greatly of the lion, who turned tail and ran like a rat?

As she contemplated over this she could hear somebody approaching, and she turned to look to a pale wolf, one of his eyes covered by an eye patch. He bowed his head in respect and spoke briefly.

“We lost the trail, the lion escaped.”

Nubine was somewhat angered by these news. She hoped for a quick victory, and that was granted to her. Total victory escaped her grasp. This matter would not be put to rest until the lion was dead, and he joined his people in the ruins of this castle.

Yet, at the same time, the war had to continue, she could not afford too many delays.

“Send out search parties. Start with villages closest to the castle. The moment they find the lion I am to be informed.”

The pale wolf bowed again, and then asked.

“And the castle?”

Nubine waved her hand.

“This? Burn it to the ground. Let no stone remain upright, may this place become a black mark upon the earth.”

The wolf bowed and walked off, starting to bark out orders to a group of soldiers nearby.

The mirror told her, yes it did, that if she is to be truly victorious the lion had to fall. Not a single golden or black mane could remain in Armello if her reign was truly to begin.

She gathered the greatest force this land has ever seen, and she found many allies who would further aid her in her ambitions. New orders had to be sent, the plans had to move forward. There was no time to waste.

There was so little time.

As she turned around to walk toward the castle's gate and beyond the town walls, to discuss with her commanders what was to happen next her soldiers ran past, holding torches and oil.

Soon the town and the lion's great castle was in flames. His garden turning to ash. All the wooden walls and stone structures collapsing. The fire would last for days, until all that was left was a lifeless husk, much like the lion's will, completely extinguished of life.

Chapter 4

The trek took days, much longer than expected. But with the survivors tired, some of them wounded, and their spirits all but gone, they moved at a pace that their bodies allowed.

Reaching the outskirts of the village of Oakenfall they first saw the fields of grain before them. Still growing strong, not yet harvested, the survivors used the roads leading to the village, and that is when the first hounds of Oakenfall spotted them. They ceased their work to observe their lord, at the head of a battered group slowly make their way to the village center.

Young pups alerted everybody of the incoming guests and all left their houses to watch the once proud lion lumber on to meet with the village elder.

They found him in front of his hut, with two armed guards by his side. While the guards seemed concerned the older dog did not. This Retriever was an old friend of Leon's father, a dog who fought by his side till his age called for retirement from active service. The knight was known as Sir Edward of the Oak. He was given the lands surrounding Oakenfall as a gift, and since then he performed his new duties to the letter.

But now, this ancient hound, looked to Leon and knew the rest was over.

“My Lord. What has happened?” asked the knight. Though age took away some of his energy his voice was as strong as when he was a pup. Perhaps working the fields kept him in good shape.

The lion approached the dog, who bowed respectfully to the black mane, but Leon's voice lacked the same power it once had.

“We were attacked. The castle is lost, and this is all that remains.”

The hound looked to the disheveled group and then back to the Lion.

“My Lord, we will get food, water and blankets for your men. Tomorrow I will send scouts to see the state of your castle and-

“There is no need. It is lost, all is lost.” spoke the Lion. Even as the two discussed the villagers of Oakenfall brought out what they could for the poor souls. All but the rat, who seemed content.

The Lion explained what happened. Of Nubine's attack, of the massive host that took first the town, and then assaulted them in the tunnel. All the while Leon's voice was cracking. Even he, such a majestic and powerful creature, could not hold back the despair any longer.

That came to a sudden end when the hound, despite being smaller, slapped his liege across the face.

“Get ahold of yourself! What would your father think.” growled the old knight. “You are a black mane and you will act like one, or by the moon and sun I will whip you back into shape.”

Edward turned to one of the guards, leaving the lion dumbfounded “Get whatever these people

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need. Rally every man from the village who can hold a blade. We shall host a meeting at sun down. And you.” he turned to look at Leon, who did not see a sterner face since his cub years, when his father scolded him for scratching up his bed cushions. “We will talk once you get some rest.”

With that Edward went back into his hut.

There was work to be done.

Ferdinand sat in one of the huts, eating a loaf of bread, dipping it in some broth. The stress of the past few days has finally began to ease off and his appetite returned. Only now he realised how starved he was, but at the same time he was still deeply shaken. The loss of his home, and so many of his friends occupied his thoughts. Would he ever be able to return? He hoped so, but first they would have to take back what was lost.

The swine jumped up in shock when he heard a loud grunt coming from under his table, and after a bit of an effort the rat spy appeared, holding an empty bottle in one hand, and rubbing his head with the other.

“Is this... still Oakenfall? Or did the wine take me off somewhere nicer?”

“We are where we were, Scuttle.” answered the steward.

That did not please the rat, who sat down next to Ferdinand, the stench of alcohol hard to ignore. He let out a deep sigh and looked down at the table.

“This is a mess, a big royal mess.”

Ferdinand chose not to engage Scuttle, who clearly needed to ramble his heart out.

“One day you are in a cozy den, tending to things like always, and suddenly you have to run for your life, fight bloody moles, and now babysit a dumb lion. I just want to go home... and sleep all of this through.”

The swine still chose to say nothing, and thankfully he did not have to, as into the hut came the lion. He looked down to the drunk rat and began to speak.

“We are staying.”

The rat at first mumbled something, then his head raised up and he asked, “What?”

“We are staying, here in Oakenfall.”

“You mean, like, figuratively, for like a day or two more.”

“No, we are staying here.”

The rat threw the bottle he held, but as there were two or three lions standing before him he hit only

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the wall as he began to shout.

“I did not come through all this just to see you get killed by your own idiocy, you stupid overgrown cat. We are going back to the rat clan, and there you will sit in a corner and wait till you are asked to help!”

In his rampage of obscenities that followed Ferdinand's own eyebrows arched, as Scuttle insulted everything that was, once was or would had been of some association to the lion. Most sailors would had long ago fainted.

After a while the barrage ceased, and Scuttle, heaving and gasping for air glared at the lion.

“We stay, you go.” said Leon, and he produced a folded parchment, setting it in front of Scuttle.

The rat looked with bewilderment first at the letter, then the lion.

“What is this?”

“A formal request for an alliance between my house and the Rat Clan. You will deliver it to your clan, while I will rally and gather my army here, at Oakenfall, and fight Nubine's army.”

“You are a fool.”

“No, no I am not.”

Edward stood over a table upon which the map of Leon's realm was drawn. He studied it and placed a number of wooden pegs all over it. The hound was now dressed in his old armor There was no need for that, as no battle was about to begin, but if others saw you prepared they would follow your example.

Based on what he learned from the survivors Nubine's army was indeed large, and they could had easily overwhelmed an unprepared castle, but after that initial strike it seemed unlikely they could follow this up.

The larger the army the more supplies it needs, and if the town was indeed razed, or some of it at least, then Nubine had no true way of resupplying her force. Not only that but even the most charismatic leader would have to take into account that internal divisions, that could lead to his or her own force fighting itself.

It was a matter of time until starvation or frustration would lead to a collapse. However, if Nubine was indeed smart she would split her army, so that each splinter could feed itself, from raiding and looting. They would be weaker when divided, but still formidable, and with a chance of reforming themselves into one massive blob.

There was only two ways of winning this war quickly, getting rid of Nubine or forcing her army to collapse on itself. Both seemed unlikely right now, and even if Nubine was killed there would still be a lot of rowdy folks out and about, and they would continue to be a threat.

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Edward produced a single blue wooden peg and placed it where Oakenfall was on the map, sighing to himself.

“It's a start.”

A faint knock came from the entrance to Edward's planning room, though before that it was simply a study. Filled with books, trophies and maps they all reminded him of his old life. An old life that came screaming back.

Through the doorway came the lion, for the first time in days his armour was removed, to reveal the dirty and ripped tunic that was underneath, what remained of his once formal attire. At a glance he appeared to be better off, his mane was clean, he had the time to rest and feed. The hound could still sense his liege's sadness, and the intent was to change that.

“My Lord,” began Edward, “I have gathered as many able men as possible. Aside from a few trained militia the majority are as yet untrained, but given a bit of time we will be ready to fight Nubine.”

The lion lumbered over to the map. It was rather dauntingly filled with a lot of black pegs, and only a single blue one decorated it. Edward could hear Leon's deep sigh, but not letting off the attack the hound continued.

“We are working on turning as many tools into weapons as we can. The Scythes will be used like spears, we are making shields out of spare wood, and every knife and axe will be used as well. We are a bit short on armor but we will make do with what we can.”

There was a barely audible rumble of acknowledgment coming from the lion.

“My best guess is that even if the enemy comes it will not be their whole force. Figure what we will face here will be smaller than what you faced before. We have a fighting chance.”

But this time, the lion did not respond, he only stood over the table and stared at the single blue peg. The old hound looked up to Leon.

“You faced your first defeat, but do not let it destroy you.”

“But everything is destroyed, ruined, gone.” spoke the lion.

“No, it is not. You live, and when we deal with Nubine we will rebuild.”

“Rebuild what?”

The hound felt a bit frustrated at his liege's defeatism, so he caught the lion's arms, lead him to a chair and sat him down, and Leon did not offer any resistance.

“Listen to me, and listen well. When I still served under your father we faced many foes and dangers that I wish I had not. Talon led his barbarian horde, rampaging throughout Armello. Bandits

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and raiders from beyond, looking for those too weak to defend themselves. Even rogues and rebels were not too uncommon. But when we lost a battle we rallied and struck back. We fought until the war was won. You are losing your perspective, Leon. You cannot treat this one failure as your whole world. When somebody punches you in the gut, you don't keel over and cry on the floor, you punch them back.”

Despite his encouragements Leon did not seem that much livelier, so a change of tactic was in order.

Edward walked to his desk, producing a stack of parchments, and grabbing a quill with a small ink pot. He then stood before Leon and tried to press them into his hand.

“What are these for?” the lion eventually asked.

“You will do your damned duty, Leon, and petition the other rulers for aid. Tell them what Nubine has done to you and your lands, and warn them that she will do the same to them. Tell them that unless we all stand united this pox will ruin Armello. Convince them that even though you were defeated you are ready to fight on. Like your father did, and just as his ancestors did. This land belongs to you Leon, and you should pray to the Sun, Moon and Wyld that none are foolish enough to try and take it away from you.”

Once the lion held the fine writing appliances the hound stood back and began walking out of the room.

“They are to be ready by sundown, tomorrow morning I am sending the rat, and my men, to deliver those letters. Think of every potential ally and write to him. We will not let Armello be taken like this, not on your watch, Leon.”

Begrudgingly Scuttle left Oakenfall, letter in hand, and together with him a number of other hounds also set out to deliver their own messages. Time was of the essence, as there was no telling how soon the enemy would reach Oakenfall.

Leon over the days felt a lot more inspired. The retrievers of Oakenfall showed such resoluteness and dedication that he was truly surprised. Just two days before he was ready to give up, but Edward made sure that did not happen.

The old hound was now training the peasants as best he could, together with anybody else who had a remote idea of how to swing a blade or thrust with a spear. Plans for further fortifications around the village were prepared, walls and even a watchtower.

Oakenfall, a quiet farming village, was slowly turning into a fortress, or at least a shoddily put together fort.

With enough time to make himself presentable again the Lion would aid in all of these efforts, and the hounds seeing their liege hard at work were inspired to work even harder. Even Ferdinand found plenty of work for himself, reorganizing the pantries, sorting through all the weapons and armour the village had. From a Steward the swine turned into a Quartermaster, though the two jobs seemed

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very alike in every way.

And while Oakenfall prepared for this uneven war the messengers did their best to deliver their missives.

War truly has begun.

Greymane was drilling the pups further. While they could hardly be called warriors yet at least they were far better off than before. Thane, who became the “leader” of the pack was made responsible for the success and failure of all group exercises. Though the punishments for failure were at time severe the young pup's resolve did not falter one bit. This both surprised and pleased Greymane, and at least this one pup would grow up to be a proud wolf.

At the same time winter seemed to approach sooner than expected. Cold rain was pouring down in the training field, turning it into a bog. Since no practice was possible Greymane organized mock duels between different pups.

While many of the pups used the opportunity to rest from the overwhelming drill to Greymane it was a chance to observe how much each pup has learned. The runts of the pack would be given a chance to improve, or they would have more demanding tasks to see if there is some hidden potential in them after all.

The mock duels were held in a larger hut, that was part of the training fields. Here, surrounded by lit torches and a fire in the centre of the room to keep warm, the whole group now remained.

Greymane stood near where the duels were happening, to announce the winner and choose new pups to fight. All of them seemed enthusiastic about it.

But as the fights went on another, older wolf entered the hut. This mountain of a wolf, with fur completely grey from age, was known as “Gnash”, though his full title was “He Who Gnashes on Stones”.

“What's the occasion Gnash?” asked Greymane. And sure enough Gnash, living up to his namesake, rumbled a low rumble, that sounded like an avalanche of boulders.

“Not good. Pale one was seen.” Greymane's eyes went wide.

“The Pale-One? Where?”

Gnash, taking his time looked over the duelling pups. He sounded, was the size of and at times was slow like a rock.

“Lion's lands. Mrrf. Leading army.”

“An Army?”

Gnash did not feel the need to elaborate, but Greymane knew what this meant. Surely enough

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trouble would come to the wolf lands, unless they acted first.

“When do we depart?” asked Greymane.

The Pale-One was not a mere nuisance. He was a true danger to the stability of the wolf clan. This was not about the honour or glory of war, this was about stopping a grave danger.

“We wait.” answered Gnash. This seemed to frustrate Greymane.

“Wait?! Of course the elders want to wait. Talk with the clans, discuss. This is no time for talks. This is the time for action! This is the time for-” and Gnash rested his massive hand on Greymane's shoulder, shaking his head.

“You are right...” But after a while Gnash spoke again.

“Meeting, with Lion. He ask for help.”

“Against the Pale-One?”

A low rumble came from Gnash. Either he did not know, or he did not want to tell.

Gnash only motioned to the fighting pups and looked to Greymane, an actual look of concern in his eyes.

“Teach them quick, time is short. It is not their time to meet their ancestors.”

“Pfeh, as if I would bring this lot anywhere near battle. Worry not Gnash, they will be perfectly safe here.”

Ellen looked to the letter her mother sent. It was brief and to the point, and she was already on her way to the meeting. Escorted by her guards, with a massive umbrella held over her head as rain was pouring down around her. She read the letter again as she was reaching a massive tent, setup in the center of the field.

It was surrounded by many knights and warriors, but mainly by those of the wolf and rat clan. Three banners were flying over the camp, and Ellen did note the Bears chose not to arrive at all. Not unheard of.

“My Dear Ellen,

Forgive me for not giving you the time to prepare for this but our presence is required. Leon Black-Mane informed us of his dire circumstance and called for our aid. As I found out all the other great clans received similar missives but I do not know their stance on the issue.

Find out what you can, but remember that we are not to be involved, no matter how brutish or sly the wolf and rat will be. This is not our conflict, and the lives of our people should matter more than winning a war that is not our own.

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Please return soon, as we must see to our own defences if Nubine is so foolish as to strike against us.

Be safe,

Augustine II
Queen of the Rabbit Dens”

The Rabbit clan for decades has strived to keep out of any political turmoil in Armello. War was never of any interest to them, as it brought nothing but misery. But, almost ironically, the craftsmen of the rabbit clan were known for their quality and ingenuity. Though they did not fight a single war they watched, and observed, creating and designing new and deadlier weapons of war. While others used them the Rabbit Clan benefited from the growing connections among lords and nobles to further their own agenda.

And that was the insatiable hunger of knowledge. To venture where none other has, and to learn things long thought forgotten or yet undiscovered.

Through peace prosperity, in war misery.

That is not to say in times of trouble people did not seek the aid of the rabbit clan. After all were they not the greatest, most powerful of all the clans? But every time they would decline. It was never their war, and they would steer clear of it.

As they would, this time.

And they always will.

With those final inspiring thoughts Ellen entered the tent. The others were already waiting for her.

Chapter 5

The tent was spacious, but with almost no furniture to sit on. Within the tent were four smaller banners, for the bear, wolf, rat and rabbit clans respectively. The wolf and rat representatives were already in a hushed discussion with each other, and as Ellen expected they ceased their talk when she entered.

“Gentlemen” spoke the rabbit princess.

“Lady Ellen.” answered the rat, though the wolf did not seem in a talkative stance, they rarely were.

The three of them gathered closer and the meeting of the clans could begin proper.

“We have come here to speak of this conflict between Leon Black-mane and Baroness Nubine?” Ellen asked, innocently enough.

“I am afraid it is not that simple, or small.” spoke the rat representative. His hands were held behind his back as he spoke, trying to keep an appearance of somebody relaxed. The wolf on the other hand did not hide the urgency in his voice.

“Nubine has gathered many of our enemies and her intent is not just Black-Mane lands, she is aiming higher.” finally spoke the wolf.

“Is that so?” Ellen continued her little game.

“We seem to have some proof of that, that is if the esteemed Rabbit Clan would ever trust our word.” now added the Rat.

Ellen smiled at that politely, “We never had the reason to doubt your words before, only the methods.”

The case was presented and Ellen was somewhat surprised at the tones of both the rat and wolf. They were genuinely concerned for this war. It is very likely that the two of them already decided to act against Nubine together, which meant they were not here to discuss the war as such, but to drag the rabbit clan into it.

And surely enough the discussion from the known facts slowly moved to the theoretical. The threat Nubine and her army posed, how it could, or should be dealt with. Ellen remained largely silent, listening to what the others said. It felt less like a political discussion and more like a war room, an environment she felt completely alien in.

As the “talks” went on she continually recalled her mother's written words, no matter how the case is presented, or how persuasive the rat or wolf will be the rabbits are not to be involved. Even if Nubine was foolish enough to strike against them she would face very stiff and strong opposition. It was likely that, if need be, Nubine's whole army could be bought and turned against their leader in an instant.

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The rats always looked for an underhanded way to win, while the wolves always sought head-on conflict. What good would come from any of this? None.

There was however one concession that Ellen was prepared to make, and it seemed perfectly plausible. The Rabbit Clan would not trade with Nubine. If the Baroness did become as unstable as they claimed then giving her better weapons and armor could mean more losses if she did choose to attack Ellen's homeland.

Though the talks of war went on she did also note something else. The Wolf and Rat were not ready to aid the Lion as much as it would had first appeared. Sending two armies to him, just so that a fallen lord could survive a day longer seemed like a waste of men, even to Ellen. But an understanding seemed to be reached that small token forces would be sent, if only to reassure the Lion that they were ready to aid him.

But, naturally, as the Rat and Wolf turned to Ellen, asking her for help in this war she of course answered as she was instructed to.

“I am sorry, but the Rabbit Clan sees no reason to interfere in a conflict that does not involve us directly. We can offer material aid, as long as due compensation is offered, but we cannot be involved in any other way. However, as you have raised legitimate concerns we will not be offering any forms of exchange to Baroness Nubine, or those allied to her.”

“Yet.” suddenly blurted out the wolf.

“Excuse me?” asked Ellen.

“You are not involved in it, yet, but you will be.” he growled out. It did not sound like a threat, but neither could something like that be taken seriously. Nubine was not foolish enough to strike at the rabbits, nobody was.

With the meet coming to an end messengers were sent out. Men would be needed in Oakenfall. The few, the brave, the expendable. Why waste the good stock on a lost battle?

Chapter 6

In one of the castles of the Rat Barons, from which the clan controlled most of its legitimate gains, Scuttle was having some quality rest and relaxation. Having delivered the Lion's letter he was given a few days to recover, especially when it became clear how much the rat has gone through.

And this pantry was well stocked. Wines made from different fruits took up one entire wall, from the floor all the way to the ceiling. Cheese that slowly grew to have a finer, richer taste. Collections of other exotics foods and spices. This was the life, if only Scuttle could live here, perhaps he could empty out one of the huge ale casks and make himself a home there.

But why hurry, when you have so much time to yourself? That is why Scuttle opted for an older vintage of berry wine, imported from the deep forests of the Bear Clan, and the smelliest and moldiest cheese he could not name but knew was delicious. Perhaps Scuttle had a preference for smelly foods, or perhaps it was in fact the mark of a true connoisseur. Whatever the case, the rat spy would feast not till he was content but until his heart exploded with happiness.

“Enjoying yourself a bit too much perhaps?” he heard the voice of his current benefactor. Scuttle, did not hear him approach, which was not all too surprising. After all not any rat could become one of the Barons, only the best.

Scuttle, and his collection of foods and drinks was seated a table that was specifically prepared for him, so as to not make a mess on the floor. For the first time in weeks did Scuttle actually hold in his hand a fork to eat the carefully cut slices of cheese. He was in the process of grinding one such slice in his mouth when the Baron spoke.

“No at all. There is still plenty room for improvement.” answered Scuttle, after the cheese has finally passed on. “If I knew that such luxuries awaited me I would be putting far more effort into my work.”

“Or you would drink it all off.” said the Baron. Dressed in the richest fineries one could imagine he approached Scuttle's table and looked over the selection of bottles and cheeses currently decorating it.

“I don't have a problem.” Scuttle seemed to underline, as he took a sip from a goblet, the wine toying with his tongue, teasing him with its taste.

“Of course you don't.” said the Baron. “Well, in fact you do.”

“Please, if I wanted to listen to somebody reprimanding me I'd visit my mother.”

“That's not the problem.”

“Then what is?” Scuttle's interest seemed to rise, just barely. It was hard for it do so, when surrounded by a sea of wine, and landmass of cheese.

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“You are being sent back to Oakenfall.”

Scuttle narrowed his eyes, and in his mind he began to think over every conceivable thing he might had done to insult one of the higher-ups, and this time nothing came up.

“Any particular reason why?” the rat spy asked.

“You see, the Lion, in all his wisdom, asked us for help, and we intend to send a group of our men to aid him, as any good ally would. And since you already know him personally the elders figured you are perfect for the job of-”

“What if I decline?”

“Not an option.”

“What if I drink myself into a mindless stupor?”

“You will be transported in a wheelbarrow.”

“What if by some freak accident I somehow end up breaking both of my legs, arms and get a cold at the same time?”

The baron sighed. “Our moats are deeper.”

Though Scuttle knew he had no real option of getting out of such an order it was, at the very least, worth a try. The spy tapped his fingers together, and looked to the half-empty bottle of wine near him.

“Right then, how many men will be coming with me, and to what end?”

“It is quiet simple. The lion must believe we are on his side. By sending you, with some scouts, he will be inclined to trust us. Until such a time however that we know of Nubine's next target we are keeping most of our strength hidden. If, by some chance, the lion will be attacked at Oakenfall by a force you cannot hope to defeat you know what to do.”

“Of course.” said Scuttle, impaling a piece of cheese upon the tips of his fork. “Any news at all about Nubine? Her actions?”

“None at all. The network is silent. You are one of the few who is still responding, and certainly alive.”

“You think the other circles have been killed?”

“We cannot be certain until we check, and that will take time. For now you should be focused on Oakenfall. You will set out first thing in the morning, your men will be waiting.”

“Speaking of which, we might still need that wheelbarrow.” added Scuttle as the Baron was about to

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leave the cellar, the spy taking another hefty swing from the still opened bottle of wine.

Gnash was hungry, Gnash was cold. Gnash hated being the messenger. There were younger, faster wolves.

Gnash did not truly care, but he was, as of late, in deep thought. A lot has been happening, a lot of bad things. Now the elders wanted to send wolves to aid the Lion, but they did not want to send Gnash. Gnash was too important, too strong. They would send younger wolves, with less experience. Gnash would have to wait.

Gnash did not want to wait.

As he lumbered through the harsh snowfall, the sort none have before seen this early in the summer, the sharp wind, and freezing snow did not seem to bother him at all. It even seemed that, having given up on trying to slow the wolf they allowed him to pass.

Gnash the boulder rarely moved for anything or anybody else.

Arriving at the Greymane's training hut he hammered like a battering ram against the wooden door, and it was swiftly opened, by a wide eyed pup, who must had at first thought some manner of monster demanded entry.

Not saying a word Gnash moved past the pup, and everybody within the hut watched the wolf covered from top to bottom in snow, like some manner of Yeti. Once the warmth of the hut melted the snow that stuck to Gnash's fur everybody but Greymane was relieved that there was no real threat.

Greymane said something but Gnash ignored it. He moved to his old companion and stood in front of him for a brief moment.

“We go.” Gnash finally spoke.

“To where?”

“Oakenfall. We help the lion fight Nubine.” Gnash then looked to the pups gathered in the hut. “They ready?”

Greymane began giving his answer, it was longer than Gnash would had wanted so the giant waited for the other wolf to finish his speech and then said, “Good enough.”

What Greymane tried to say, and what Gnash did not hear at the slightest, was the suggestion that the Pups were not ready yet, too young, too inexperienced. But as Gnash clearly made his opinion stated it was now up to Greymane to decide what to do.

“Right. Gather any weapons and armor you can use and can carry. Supplies, equipment. The lot. If you do not know what to take I will tell you. But don't expect to see any fighting. Even if one of you lot died I'd lose both of my ears to your angry mothers.”

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Edward could be seen polishing his helm in front of his hut. This strange helm, its front stylized to be a dog's face, was intended to both instill fear and provide some degree of protection. Making it was not simple or cheap, but the comfort it provided, and the way it guarded his muzzle made sure he left with fewer scars than he otherwise would had.

The messengers were gone for a week now. Things seemed to have settled down. They were lucky.

No force belonging to Nubine was spotted. Some news of other villages and towns being raided were heard but there was little Leon or Edward could have done. They had to prepare, as best they could, for the upcoming battles.

Oakenfall was fortified with a palisade, extending on all sides of the village. A lone watchtower was also built, atop of one of the houses, to provide a good view of the surrounding area. Considering the limited resources and manpower it was a miracle they achieved this much. With most of the village exhausted after such rapid construction it was difficult to train them in the use of their weapons.

Time, is what they needed, but it was quickly running out.

Thankfully Ferdinand kept everything in tight order. Every piece of grain was accounted for, a communal kitchen organized, and the swine even took the time to give every single hound some manner of role. This did not go without some hostile remarks and teeth grinding but in the end the only thing keeping Oakenfall together was Leon.

Without the lion's presence, his help and renewed vigor this village would have been abandoned, even if Edward did try to hold it together.

Every army needs a leader, but Leon was more than just large feline with a sharp mind, warm heart and brute strength. He was a symbol. One look at the son of Black-Mane and you could feel pride and bravery beyond measure. Leon's ancestors built a legend around their kind, and it still continued to this day.

But a symbol was only half a battle. A glorious banner in the middle of a field will not defeat an opposing army alone.

Edward heard orders being barked out, but not of one of his own men but by somebody much, much younger. He soon saw a small group of pups walking down the street, armed with sticks and trying to march in cohesion. The slightly older pup at the front was trying to keep a steady rhythm of barks but his younger companions had a hard time keeping up with the demand. Slowly they came to stand before Edward and the small company attempted to turn to face him, with their arms present.

It was one of the cutest sights Edward has seen in a long while.

“We are ready to fight!” exclaimed the leader, standing at his best attention. His friends tried to put up equally stoic expressions, but they did not exactly make the cut.

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Edward, however, nodded approvingly and stood up.

“Very good. Your readiness is noted, but right now we have no need for more fighting men. You should aid Ferdinand in the warehouse however.”

“But that's boring!” exclaimed one of the younger pups.

“Oh? I believe he is arranging our weaponry now. Don't you want to see what old Fred is fixing up in his workshop?” Fred, one of the few skilled metalworkers and craftsmen in the village was known for being rather inventive, even if his ideas did not only work. Still, they were always entertaining to see.

And that is what sold the pups, who ran off to the warehouse, or the largest hut that was repurposed into that role leaving Edward alone again, to tend to his armor.

The day was passing slowly, and calmly. As the sun began to set and Edward knew that it was almost time for the night's feasting he looked to the Watchtower and still saw Leon standing at its very top.

Always watching, always looking for any sign of danger. This time, Edward thought, the lion did not want to be surprised, he did not want to fail again.

“Oakenfall? Are you certain?”

“That's what the letter said. Should we inform Nubine?”

“No. I won't share the glory for killing the lion with anybody else. Prepare the men to march. We have a cat to kill, and a village to sack.”

“As you wish.”

Chapter 7

First came the handful of rats, clad in their light leathers, with swords and bows, Scuttle at their head. Later came the wolves, but in two groups. The first one was a handful of young wolves, better armed and prepared than the peasants of Oakenfall, but still too few. The second group consisted of two older wolves and a sizable group of pups.

Leon was not certain whether to thank his allies for the aid they sent, or ask them what manner of mockery this was. These reinforcements were hardly enough to deal with Nubine, or take back his lands. Worse yet the two groups of wolves seemed to get into an argument as soon as they arrived. Though their internal issues were resolved there remained an air of unease.

Still, a war council was called. Gathered in Edward's hut, standing around the map of Leon's lands was Leon Black-Mane, Edward of the Oak, Scuttle the Rat, Gnash and Greymane of the Wolves.

The facts were collected, and numbers settled upon on. Leon's current army was composed, primarily, of the Peasants of Oakenfall and a number of his personal knights, nobles and some experienced Oakenfall militia. All the wolves and rats sent, including the wolf pups, barely made up a tenth of the force. For all ends and purposes Leon's army was not sufficiently equipped or prepared to engage Nubine in any capacity, but steps had to be taken.

“While we cannot fight Nubine yet, we should aim at gathering as much help as possible, from the other towns, villages, lords.” spoke Edward. “Surely by now the news of Nubine's actions have spread and many would be willing to join our banner.

“Or they would be quaking in fear, too afraid to act against somebody who could easily snuff them out.” countered Scuttle.

“Fear.” came the sole, dismissive word from Gnash, like a low rumble.

“We could try and look for any survivors from those villages that Nubine sacked, and gather them here.” then offered Edward.

“More mouths to feed, and who knows how many of them could fight.” this time countered Greymane.

“We could always cut our losses and move somewhere safer, more secure.” was Scuttle's offer.

“No retreat.” was in turn Gnash's answer.

“We are not retreating, we are merely-” Scuttle began to speak, but he was cut off by Gnash's powerful rumble.

“No retreat.”

“Well, if we cannot find more help, and we cannot leave-” came Edward's words, this time cut off by Scuttle.

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“No no, we can leave. Just some of us would stay behind it seems.”

Gnash gave a rumble of approval.

The discussion lead to nowhere. No decision could be reached. The knight tried to reason with the Rat who would prefer to run, and the wolves who would charge head first into Nubine's army. No manner of arguments spoke through to all of those gathered, and the small and feeble force seemed more disjointed than it at first appeared.

Leon, however, remained silent. He watched, and he listened. When they shouted, or whispered, when they threatened and argued, he listened. The lion listened where others chose to only talk.

After all the final word would be his, not theirs.

“This is what will be done.” finally the lion spoke.

Everybody else fell silent, almost forgetting that the massive feline was present with them in the room. In the heat of their arguments even such an imposing figure was hidden by the storm of insults hurled at each other.

“Regardless of whether we remain here or move elsewhere we must bring as many as we can to our side. Supplies will be an issue but if we keep Oakenfall safe we will have at least enough food to make it through the winter. Wherever we go food may be scarce, fields ruined. We cannot afford to march so far and pray that Nubine does not catch us off guard.”

After a while the lion continued, “It is a risk, staying here, but our choices are limited. We must pray to the Sun and Moon for good fortune and that we will live to see the end of all this.”

At those final words one of Scuttle's scouts ran through the doors. He did not knock, he did not greet those gathered. He spoke briefly, and quickly. The enemy was approaching and battle was to be had this day.

There was still time to gather the defenders, and to form a defensive plan. So as to not alert the attackers the rally call was made by word of mouth, rather than horn. It took much longer but it seemed successful.

“Get the young, old and those unable to fight deeper into the village.” spoke Edward to some of his men.

With equal urgency the two wolves spoke with the rest of their pack, and there seemed to be a brief argument between one of the wolf pups and his elders.

Out of all those previously present Scuttle appeared to be the most worried, or stressed. Spies do not really have battlefield experience, that is not their purview.

What was learned was that a mercenary band, with a small attachment of Nubine's infantry was

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marching on Oakenfall. Armored and heavily armed, experienced and deadly. Among them their likely leader was spotted, with a massive plume sticking out of his helm. Nubine's own infantry was lighter, mainly archers, and they did not seem too happy at all.

It was not Nubine's army, but the threat could not be ignored, nor was it, in fact, small.

The village was not fully fortified, and there was not enough time to flee, at least not without leaving all of the food behind.

“My Lord.” spoke Edward as he approached Leon. “We stand ready and await your orders.” the others gathered and looked to the lion, looking to his expectantly. Leon, much like Scuttle, did not have actual experience of war, only knowledge of it. What he knew however was the temperament of the badgers, and if Nubine's ferrets were not willing to throw their lives away perhaps a quick route was possible.

“Edward, Greymane, we will stand opposite Nubine's force. I will be with my knights in the centre. Edward with his men will keep the front strong. Greymane, you and your companion will have to hold the flanks. We must make sure that the Badgers do not overwhelm us, because they will surely try to. The peasants will aid us with their spears.” Scuttle noticed his name was mentioned, and maybe he would be given the illustrious role of “not doing anything important”, but it was not to be.

“Scuttle, your task will be the most important. You must strike the enemy from the flank and rear. Cause panic and havoc, but leave them enough room to flee. We must make them think that there is more of us than they realize.”

“I do not have enough scouts to accomplish tha-”

“Take as many of the peasants as you need to see the job through.”

Scuttle's fur still stood on its end. He was not used to this, he was not used to it at all.

Edward looked briefly to Greymane's weapon of choice, a long, cumbersome lance.

“You sure you want to use that, right now?” asked the Knight.

“Don't knock it till you've tried it.” came the wolf's response. Though how something so unpractical could be used in battle only Greymane knew.

With the orders given all took their positions.

The Badgers trudged on, they did not seem to be in too much of a hurry. Behind them, in a much more messy column followed the lighter troops Nubine granted them to aid in pacifying the local towns and villages. Capturing one of the messengers carrying a response to Oakenfall was a blessing for now it would be their chance, their opportunity to shine before the Baroness.

Destroying Black-Mane castle was not a challenge at all, and fortunately neither would this be. Passing through the woods that surrounded Oakenfall the captain of the force could spot the

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windmill and watchtower of Oakenfall. From afar he could already see some manner of fortifications, but not a single living soul in sight.

Hidden by the woodland the only thing that separated them now were the grain fields. Once those were traversed Oakenfall would submit.

“Shouldn't we wait till night, or morning?” asked the captain's second in command.

“No need. We are facing a village, maybe a handful of knights or some manner of militia. They stand no chance. Besides the sooner we bring the lion's head to Nubine the sooner we will be rewarded.”

“Looks a bit too calm though, don't you think?”

“Must be a gathering somewhere. All the better for us, we will strike when they are least prepared.”

“I don't like this.”

The captain narrowed his eyes at his second in command.

“That's why I am in charge here, not you. We do this quick and easy. No need to overthink the killing of a few harmless peasants.”

The grain would also hide their advance, and there did not seem to be anybody on the watchtower to spot them either. Truly pathetic.

“What do we do about the archers?” the second in command asked.

“Keep them here. Won't be able to help us much anyway. Get a few of them to watch our flanks and we'll be good. Don't expect much of a fight anyhow.”

The column formed rows. The heavily clad badgers took the centre, and marched forth like a menacing block of steel. The ferrets on the flanks looked wearily, trying to see anything past the grain. But at the height of the season it was impossible to see anything through the dense growth and the only thing guiding them was the massive windmill, sticking out from above the grain.

Then came an ominous roar from the village and the Badgers froze momentarily, as did the ferrets.

“For Armello and Oakenfall! Charge!”

The palisade had no gates so Leon's force poured out from the village forming a largely disorganized blob before the grain fields. Orders were shouted and the blob turned into a slightly more organized mob.

They knew where the enemy was but due to the grain the exact numbers were unknown. This could be to their advantage since neither side knows which one is the larger, and with the wolves at the fronts and rats behind the foe there could be plenty of chaos to be had.

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Enough, hopefully, to make the badgers break and flee.

Once all were assembled Leon lifted up his blade and roared out his warcry. The charge has begun.

Edward could hear the ear piercing howling of the wolves on either side of him. If they were deafening to him then he hoped the badgers in front of them heard them as well, and took heed. Charging through a grain field was not difficult but bothersome, and since you could not really tell how close the enemy was it was near impossible to gauge when to prepare yourself to parry or attack. Not mentioning those who stood behind him. That is the price one paid for shock value.

Now clad in his armor, and his two-handed sword in both paws the knight of the Oak was at the fore of his trained militia, and he could hear the cheers and barks of the rest of his people. The spirits were high, and hopefully they would remain such once they came face to face with the enemy.

The grain stalks and leafs batted against his helm as he ran, his weapon on the ready, his vision strained. The noise of so many feet beating on the ground reminded him of past battles. War has not changed at all.

Finally, from between the grain, he saw the stocky forms of the badgers before him. He prepared to make a thrust and even before he could see his enemy's face he attacked. The blade cut the air, as its tip met the Badger's armor. A loud "Oof" could be heard when the blade met chainmail, and failed to cause a wound. Yet the badger was dazed and in pain, he did not anticipate an attack, so Edward followed the first strike with another. Drawing his blade back he grabbed it with one of his hands and swung, the pommel of his sword connecting with the poor Badger's nose, exposed, and fragile.

The Badger fell back, grabbing his nose, screaming in pain, curses thrown at the knight the hound who suddenly found himself amidst the enemy sought his next target.

Gnash when asked at Oakenfall where he left his weapon only grunted. When he showed his fists most thought he was joking, but Gnash did not understand humor. His raw strength and endurance were his weapons. Gnash was not foolish however, and his arms were covered in heavy metal plates, turning them into not only his weapons but also his shields. His body, though large, was also covered in whatever armor would fit him at the time, but due to his nature it rarely lasted.

The first Badger who saw the giant thought the unarmed wolf would be an easy target, and he swung his axe straight at Gnash's chest. In an act that would make any weapon master look in disbelief Gnash did not reflect the axe or step away from it, he caught it. The plates and cushioning on his arms stopping any harm, and his raw weight and strength making the impact from the axe bearably noticeable. There was no time for fancy showmanship however and a follow-up punch made the Badger not only lose his weapon but also his consciousness.

Casting the axe away Gnash looked to the wolves around him. There were more attackers than wolves, they were getting overwhelmed already. Yet although the badgers tried to envelop them, the much smaller ferrest seemed to panic at the presence of the wolves and dared not approach.

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Seeing this fear he knew what had to be done. He howled out, something he seldom did, and any who heard it would have thought an avalanche was coming down, a rain of boulders falling from the sides of mountains. This was Gnash's warcry and no man or force would stop this boulder from flattening all that stood before him.

Panic and fear. Scuttle knew these words very well. Not personally of course, but he heard stories of them. As he observed from the woods, watching the ferret archers and handful of Badgers hear but be unable to see the battle every howl and roar seemed to cause unease in the faint ferret hearts.

This would be no challenge at all, unless the ferrets were braver than they first appeared.

He gave the signal to his scouts, watching each one notch an arrow and prepare to fire. He then looked the hounds that accompanied him, hunters from the village. They looked to Scuttle's hand gestures but could not understand them at all.

The rat spy sighed and explained, "Shoot at the closest thing on my signal."

They were ready and they watched. Then the signal came and the arrows were let loose. Arrows rarely killed on impact, but the sound of them passing overhead, or into unprepared ranks could cause an unwelcome stir.

A few of the ferrets yelped, though the Badgers present did not seem nearly as shaken. They began to bark out orders, though they could not tell where the attack was coming from.

Another salvo and Scuttle's group was discovered.

"Blades out, charge." said Scuttle briefly. With a much less noticeable warcry Scuttle's group charged out of the woods. The Badgers were not impressed but the Ferrets, strained and hearing the cries of their wounded clearly had enough.

"Wolves! Wolves coming from the woods! Save yourselves!" came the cries from the ferrets as they fled. The Badgers tried to rally them back into order but failed, and now they found themselves outnumbered. Short and quick work.

A few fell, a few ran away.

"Now, to the main show." remarked Scuttle, as he looked to the thinning grain fields.

The fields were becoming sparse. As the grain was stomped on, cut down and crushed by the wounded and dead the situation was becoming clearer to both the attackers and defenders.

Leon, finding himself in the midst of the battle realised that they were being overwhelmed, not just due to greater enemy numbers, but also their quality. Some of the Badgers broke off from the battle

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and ran straight toward the defenseless village. The battle had to be over, here, and now.

He tried to catch sight of the leader of the badgers, looking from one Badger's helm to another, until a lonely plume was spotted in the midst of the heavily armored force. He was too far to reach with his blade, and there were too few to make a push with him. Everything rested on this one chance.

The Lion pressed forward, at the Badgers before him. In a tight rank it seemed impossible to get past, but this battle has gone past the point of chivalry. As one of the badgers swung his mace at the lion the feline caught his arm and with all his might lifted the startled badger up, and like a club swung him at his own companions.

It was an equally comic and terrifying sight when the Lion used his enemies as a weapon, but the brief window was closing. The second rank, looking dazzled, prepared for an attack, but the Lion did not strike, instead he moved in the midst of them. So close was the lion, and so careless his advance that for a scant moment the Badgers did not know what to do. Right in the middle of them was a lion, pushing their tight ranks aside, forcing them apart.

Leon's own men, seeing their leader's suicidal charge tried to reach him, but the gap that was briefly created was now sealed.

The badgers snarled and growled at the lion in their midst, but neither of them could strike with ease, and when they did try the lion pushed them away. This, however did not last. Finally Leon felt a blade slide across his chestplate, then an axe grazed against his leg. He roared madly, attacking every badger within reach, but still trying to reach that magnificent plume in the crowd. As he received more wounds the pain was becoming unbearable, but the lion pushed with all his might until finally he saw the badger captain standing before him, proudly, and so sure of his victory. Lifting up his mace the captain roared out in victory.

“It's over for you!” and the mace came in with a wide swing to try and hit the side of the lion's head. But even as the badgers surrounding him attacked, and the pain was becoming unbearable Leon gripped the badger's mace arm and held it locked, then immediately thrusting his blade forward right at his foe's neck.

The size of the blade, and the lack of protection around the captain's neck, allowed the blade to cleave the badger's head right off. The badger's right next to the lion and the now dead captain froze in shock, but the lion was too weak to flee from the mob surrounding him, or fight much longer.

As a loud hiss and rumble came from the badgers, ready to rip the lion apart a defiant cry came from the ranks of Oakenfall.

“Till your last blood, slay them all!” and thanks to the chaos the lion stirred the peasants of Oakenfall managed to reach him, jumping, biting and attacking every badger around the lion. Edward at their head, he swung his blade at the ferocious badgers, to try and keep them at bay, while his men swarmed around their liege.

Frustration rose as the badgers tried to kill the slayer of their leader, but the desperate and near suicidal defense finally broke their spirit. The battle might had been won but their leader was dead, and with nobody to push them onward the badgers now joined the fleeing ferrets.

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“Fallback! Retreat!” came the calls from the Badgers, soon followed by the furious barks of the hounds of Oakenfall and the howls of wolves.

But the battle was not yet over.

Badgers entered the village while the battle was still ongoing. There was nobody to stop them and so they began to rampage through the huts and houses, looking for loot. Surprisingly they did not find any occupants, until they reached the center of the village. There, one of the huts seemed to be fortified more so than the others, and barricaded. Naturally the temptation was too great to resist and the Badgers began clearing the furniture away from the entrance.

What they did not expect to see was a band of dog and wolf pups, somewhat armed and armored, standing on the other side of the door. Further into the hut there were elder hounds, holding any weapon their feeble strength allowed.

The badger at the head of the group looked to the pups and growled menacingly, “Such easy pickings...”

“None of you will pass through this doorway.” spoke one of the wolf pups. Wearing just leather armor and using a short blade and buckler for defense he did not seem like much of a threat.

“Oh yeah? We'll see!” and the badger swung his axe down at the brave pup. What he did not expect, and what surprised the badger's companions was that the pup dodged the attack flawlessly and then struck back, his blade thrust into the badger's neck, then drawn back before it buried itself too deep.

“My name is Thane and none of you shall pass.”

A loud and furious gurgle came from the Badger as he tried to swing with his axe again but his life was ebbing away quickly, and he soon lay on the floor, gasping for air he could not catch.

The badgers now attacked in force. This was no longer about “Easy Pickings”, this was about slaying the runts for their daring.

The badgers were larger, stronger and better armed and armored, but the doorway made it hard to advance in greater number, especially with how stocky the badgers were. The pups used this fully to their advantage. Each time a badger would try to force his way through sharp sticks and spears would be thrust at their legs, rocks thrown at their snouts, to disorient, cripple and confuse.

But the bravery of the younglings and luck could not overcome sheer brutality. Pushing madly forth the badgers made their way through the entrance, snarling and growling as now they were on the offensive.

The pups did what they could, the elders joining the fray. It did not last. One cannot hope to defend so many against such ruthless opponents.

But as death was creeping toward the hut, as the pups were wounded, as the elders breathed their

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last there came one of the most feral growls those gathered have ever heard in their lives.

“Woah- Get back! Get back! Out of th-” and the badgers, tightly packed at the doorway, soon discovered why Greymane used his lance, and what a charge of an angry wolf could do to an even armored opponent.

And he was not alone, out of all the unlikely heroes of this battle Ferdinand joined the old wolf. Armed with hammer in one hand and shield in the other the Swine, for the first time in weeks, took off his wig and wore an old cooking pot instead. Furiously bashing at the Badgers who were too distracted by the wolf to notice the much smaller opponent.

Found in a deadlock the badgers could not go into the hut, or leave it.

None of them left alive.

In the fields of grain, once full of life, lay the dead. The laments and cries of mothers, the tears of fathers, the ailing of siblings, the sobbing of children. All those gathered looked in disbelief. They wished that this day had never come, that it could be undone. But the fields of the dead would never cease to be.

Elsewhere, those wounded were tended to. Some would soon join the fields, others would live to see the sun. Silent prayer and hopes.

In a single room, upon a table that was turned into a bed, lay Leon Black-Mane. His breathing shallow, his eyes closed. The lion's heart faintly beating as there was so little blood left to keep him alive. But he lived, and he saved so many more from a terrible fate. Nobody knew when he would awake, nobody knew when he would stand again. The day was not over yet.

Gathered in the war room stood four people. All exhausted, tired, grim. They were discussing an issue most dire, something none of them would had dared of even think before. But the enemy has showed them, through their acts of this dark day, what they were capable of.

A proposition made, a show of hands, a vote. Decisions reached.

“All prisoners are to be executed for their acts against the people of Armello. Their crimes cannot be pardoned and no mercy will be given.” spoke Edward.

And all in the room nodded in agreeance.

“I will see it through. Go rest and in the morning we will decide what to do next.”

The howls of wolves could then be heard, as they cried to the moon to guide their dead. Among them only Thane did not howl, he looked to the moon, staring at its face, as if it were somebody he knew, and hated.

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“My brother killed this day.”

“Has he now?”

No answer came.

Lady Ellen was returning home. The trek was long and she longed for rest. As she and her escort reached the gates of the capitol, with its marble walls and towers proudly presenting the wealth and power of the Rabbit Clan she found the gate already open. It was dark and she could hardly see further than a few steps ahead, even with torches held high.

Suddenly came loud steps and the clanking of armor. Somebody was running toward her group. Her guards stood to attention, Halberds on the ready but it was merely one of the gate guards. His shouts were not clear and as he stopped he heaved for air.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked Lady Ellen. The guard spoke quickly.

“The Queen, your mother, she was killed.”

Ellen's heart stopped.

“Killed? Who killed her? What happened? Where is my father?”

“An assassin. We do not know who is responsible, but please, you must listen.”

Ellen's head was spinning, she had to go to the castle. She had to find out what was happening. She tried to move past her guards and to the gate but the guard grabbed ahold of her.

“I beg you! Listen to me!”

“Let go of me!” Ellen demanded and she began to struggle. Her guards immediately joined in and tried to push the guards aside.

Then came a sharp pain to Ellen's shoulder. She gazed down and looked at a bolt stuck through her arm. Her gasp of pain quickly died out as her vision became blurry. All she could hear was, “Assassin! Assassin!”.

As she fell something grabbed her.

Something held her hand.

Running.

Shouting.

Darkness.

Chapter 8

“I should stop you, and end this madness.” spoke the pale-wolf in Nubine's tent. Save for her throne upon which she sat there was nothing else present. No other furniture, no food, no riches. Just her, and the throne.

“My dear, it is too late for that now.” answered Nubine. Despite having not slept a single night since the war began she did not seem to tire. “Whatever you do now cannot stop what I have already set in motion.”

“What is it you want?” asked the pale wolf. He looked directly into the dead eyes of the ferret before him, and she answered.

“I am paving the way for my children. So many children.” the wolf seemed to not react to that at all, and he asked something else.

“What are you?”

“Fate.”

“You think highly of yourself.”

Nubine chuckled and looked to the wolf.

“Is it not your time? Why do you linger here when you know what must be done?” A chill wind swept into the tent.

The wolf did not answer and he left without another word. Lonely snowflakes began to fall from the sky. As the ghost passed through the rows of tents, filled with brigands, murderers and worse, he seemed lost in thought.

“They always think so highly of themselves, don't they?” said Nubine to nobody in particular. “Always trying to make it all about themselves. But they are wrong. The world is too large to notice a little white wolf, or a large black lion, or the dying gasp of a queen. It is all part of something greater, of course. Their hatred, their pride, their dreams. And yet they always ignore what is at the end, what will inevitably come.”

There once again came no answer from anybody in the tent.

Then into the tent came a massive boar. With numerous scars on his snout and arms, black fur and a gaze that was filled with hatred. Hatred for wolves. He looked to the ferret and spoke lowly.

“You called for me, Baroness?”

“Why, I believe I had. It is time for you to set all scores straight. Take what and who you need and claim back what was lost by your people so long ago.”

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Something akin to a smile appeared on the boar's face.

“And Talon...” Nubine added, as the beastlord was about to leave the tent.

“If you see the Pale-One do send him my regards.”

By Order of the Council,

Due to the murder of our Queen Augustine II and her heir Princess Ellen the Council in all its power grants Lord Edward the title of King Regent of the Rabbit Kingdom. Until such a time that a true heir will be found he shall serve in her place.

Furthermore, the Council in all its wisdom decided that these murders shall not remain unanswered. On this day we declare open hostility upon Baroness Nubine and all who side with her. Peace shall be restored to Armello by the grace of King Edward and his Council under the banner of our Kingdom. We will not cease until their deaths are avenged.

Long Live the King