

We fucked up a couple more Amarinthian encampments before returning to Garrison Arackus. They were weak. Not that a lot of people could come close to standing toe to toe with me. Apparently, because Kaoru was advancing her armies past the Amarinth-Jinwa border, the sultan's forces were being stretched thin to deal with two fronts.

I was wondering why these camps were pinching as many resources as possible and packing their bags. It took a couple of broken noses and bruised egos to find out they were pulling away to fight Kaoru.

When we got back to Arackus, an important-looking group looked to have arrived before us in front of the keep.

"Lady Micchi! Lady Loraine!" Kain pushed past the group, decked out in some fancy new digs. Shining silver armor, a lion's head helmet, and a silly red cape which were probably all enchanted.

"Look at you. Someone's all dolled up." I grinned, clasping his gauntleted hand.

"My father insisted I wear our ancestral regalia into battle. By the way, I've been informed of Lord Byron's betrayal and how you handled him. Thanks to you, Arackus is in better shape than it has been in years. I'm impressed!" he exclaimed.

"What brings you out here, Prince Kain? Shouldn't you be back in Cynderace where it's safe?" Loraine asked worriedly.

"As the one put in charge of moving the war along, I can't just stay in the capital. Lady Micchi and Lady Yui have taught me the importance of taking charge on the front lines. Which is why I've come to deliver new orders: we will begin our march into Amarinth to join Empress Kaoru in battle, beginning with an assault on their forward encampments!"

I rubbed the back of my head, trying to figure out a way to break it to Princey-boy.

Ultimately, Loraine and I gave Kain the long story short after sitting him down in the keep. He fell out of his seat twice listening to us.

"I can't believe it... If it had been anyone else, they would have been tried for insubordination... Or wait, maybe the fault lies with me for not being able to rein you in?" Kain lamented with his face down on the table.

"Hey, chin up. You were gonna give us the order to attack anyway. Everything worked out," I said.

"That's not the point— Argh, what's the use?" He sighed, then hollered for Ethel and Roma to fill his glass to the top with wine. "Well, the biggest news here is Lady Loraine's intention to ascend the Oasis Throne. That rash act turned out well for our war efforts. You demonstrated that many are split down the middle regarding who should rule. We may not need to fight through all of Amarinth to reach the capital, Kajar. The question is, are you sure this is what you want?"

"My father is dead because of the Sultan. It was his fault I ended up as a slave to orcs for many years. He proceeded to poison my precious Micchi and Kawa, destroy my second home in Cynderace, and dare to try and kidnap me. As Micchi would say, let's fuck him up!" Loraine passionately exclaimed.

A smirk flashed across my face.

"That's my girl. You heard her, Kain. We doing this or what?" I asked.

"I share Lady Loraine's sentiments, and I suppose she will be a more fruitful ally in the UKD than Sultan Yusef. In that case, we shall march towards Ash'tar post haste to join the empress' assault!" Kain raised his cup to toast.

The maids filled mine and Loraine's cups. Together, we toasted and chugged it all down before putting our assault into motion.

Marching through Amarith was tough. The whole damn place was a desert after all, and Scoth's armies weren't suited for it. Literally. A lot of them wore thick armor like full suits of plate or coats called gambeson. I was sweating like hell in just my jacket.

We left Scoth behind, and the forts were replaced by new commanders that could be trusted. Ethel and Roma stayed behind at Arackus to take care of Daisy. Bogart followed us into Amarith to continue repairing equipment for the army. As for Anya and Yui, they were given orders to siege other strategic locations in Amarith. If things went well, we would all converge on Kajar for the final battle.

Until then, Hurai and Thelesia returned to Anya's command. I got to keep Pino around.

"What's got you all fidgety, squirt?" I steered Kawa closer to talk to him.

"Whenever I think about Empress Kaoru, my stomach feels queasy in a floaty kind of way..." Pino mumbled.

"Brother, I dunno what to tell you. Think you're in love with her or something."

"Ehh? But she's betrothed to two royalties already! There's no way Empress Kaoru has room in her heart for more," he said, pressing his index fingers together.

"Pino... I don't think that's going to be a problem for her."

The sun suddenly got a lot brighter and hotter. Or maybe it was just my imagination. Even Kain was having a hard time with the stifling heat. It took Loraine and some of the spellcasters in our forces to cast cold magic to make it somewhat bearable.

"Whew..." Kain took off his helmet and wiped the sweat from his face. "It should be winter across Dysentia, but is it just me or did Ash'tar get a lot hotter this time around?"

"That's what you get for wearing armor out to a desert," I taunted.

As we got closer to Ash'tar, another army had set up outside. A bellowing horn sounded in the distance.

Several riders galloped toward us, holding the battle standard of the full moon with a cherry blossom tree against a black backdrop. We recognized them right away as Jinwan soldiers. It was Mingba and Yunlee who led the group.

"Yo, big guy. Been a while," I greeted him and the little ninja girl.

Mingba nodded. "It appears we shall fight on the same side this time. Allow us to bring you to Empress Kaoru."

Kain ordered the army to stay put while we entered the Jinwan camp. It was mostly made of hastily-raised tents. People were hiding inside and lying around in whatever shade they could find.

There weren't any walls or battlements, let alone many able-bodied, to defend against an attack if it happened. Kind of shortsighted of Kaoru if you asked me. We were eventually led to an area walled off by cloth, bearing the same symbol as their battle standard, but included with them were a number of flags with slightly different deviations.

Sitting inside at the very center like a shogun was Bishamonten. Kaoru. She was dressed in red, gold, and black armor that could only be described as a karuta, similar to a samurai with all the small interconnected tiles and rectangular plates to form a suit. Her helmet sat on the ground. She was covered in sweat as attendants fed her water and fanned her with magic.

"Empress! Are you okay?" Pino worriedly ran over to Kaoru.

"Prince Kain, Micchi." Kaoru nodded to each of us, then offered a small smile to Pino to reassure him. "My apologies that I can't give a proper welcome to the Prince of Scoth, but we're a little incapacitated at the moment."

"The heat's fucking your people up and a fight hasn't even started yet. What's going on?" I asked.

She pointed a finger to the sky. "It's magic. Emir Owyn is trying to cook us alive with fire magic rather than an outright attack. We've been fighting against the heat for weeks now. Most of my troops are suffering from heatstroke. I can't so much as mount an attack anymore."

"That's not good," Kain began. "If we do not take Ash'tar soon, then my forces will fall victim to the same ploy."

So, all this heat was magic.

"I thought we got our own magic to deal with shit like this? What about fire resistance buffs?" I asked.

The prince shook his head. "It will protect us from being hurt by magical fire, but the ambient heat is what's suffocating us."

Bogart raised a hand. "I'd like to voice my opinion that this heat isn't so bad."

Everyone blinked incredulously at her.

I glanced over to Loraine. She was holding and comforting Kawa with cold magic, who was panting with her tongue rolled out. If even an elemental wolf was getting bogged down by this damn heat, that wasn't a good sign.

"How come you didn't hit the city sooner? You got enough firepower alone to take it," I said.

"There is a magical barrier around Ash'tar. I might have broken it much sooner had I known, but this heat has sapped my strength away. It pains me to ask— Micchi, I need your help to fight this battle," Kaoru pleaded.

"Bishamonten's begging me for help? Ain't that a sight? I refuse."

"What?!" everyone exclaimed.

When I walked up to Kaoru, her guards tensed up and the cooling magic in their hands turned to violent energies pointed my way. She waved them off, and they obeyed as ordered.

"You can't even stand. Get the fuck on your feet and ask me again," I growled.

Kaoru clenched Kamigoroshi, which was staked into the ground, to push herself up. Her legs were shaking and on the verge of buckling. When Pino tried to give her a shoulder to lean on, she shrugged him off.

"Micchi, will you help me?" she asked again.

"Nope." I smirked to the surprise of everyone and especially Kaoru, then turned around to face my group. "I just wanted to hear her beg. But we're gonna take this city anyway. Why? Because it don't belong to the sultan. Ash'tar, Amarith— it belongs to Sultana Loraine. So, what say we kick our old friend Owyn down a peg, yeah?"

Kaoru chuckled behind me. Good to know she still had a sense of humor.

Kain and Kaoru gathered everyone who was able to fight under the extreme heat. There weren't very many. A lot of them crumpled from heatstroke just walking to the edge of the camp. The human soldier in front of me teetered back and forth. He suddenly fell backwards onto me.

"Alright, I'm starting to doubt whether you chumps are cut out for this shit." I sighed, tossing him out of the marching line.

"Plese, treat my soldiers with more dignity." Kain groaned.

We rode to the barrier and was surprised by how fucking massive it was. The damn thing contained the entire city in a shimmering bubble. Just on the other side were an army of dark elven and beastling soldiers, not looking like they were suffering from the same sweltering heat at all.

"This is the barrier," Kaoru began. "It—"

"ORAA!" I ignited Sacchan and smashed the barrier, but a powerful blast of magic erupted back and sent me flying.

"...reflects magic," she added.

"Micchi!" Loraine and Kawa rushed up to help me up from a smoking pile of rubble.

"Why the fuck didn't you open with that?" I snarled at Kaoru, but she responded by rolling her eyes at me.

The soldiers on the other side started pointing and laughing. I returned to the barrier and pounded a fist on it. Ripples spread across the shimmering surface. It wasn't like any barrier I came across before.

"Champion of Lannarkis, ha!"

"Better scurry back to your camp!"

One side of my face started twitching.

"Micchi, it *only* appears to reflect magic," Loraine said after a second of studying it.

"Just magic, huh? Alright, how about this... oraaa!" I headbutted the barrier, causing even larger ripples than before. The difference this time was I didn't get sent flying.

A large Amarithian beastling walked right up to the barrier in front of me and stuck his tongue out.

"Tch... Anya could break this thing in a single hit... Kain, buff me up!"

"Of course!" Kain cast a couple of spells on me that raised my physical strength.

With both hands braced against the barrier, I reared back for another headbutt and—

*Crash!*

My head went through it like paper. The barrier shattered entirely, and I knocked the beastling in front of me through the city. Amarithian soldiers and Ash'tar guards who were making fun of us went slack-jawed. Color drained from their faces and laughter simmered down to squeaks.

"Yo, punks. I'm about to fuck you up so bad your parents won't recognize you anymore," I said, igniting Sacchan into an inferno to reflect my fury.

"Attack! Into the city!" Kain roared.

We ran down Ash'tar like it was nothing. Especially with Kaoru leading the vengeful charge. Ash'tar's forces were so convinced their barrier wouldn't be breached, that it left them complacent— and complacency fucked you worse than a beatdown.

Two forces met at a wide avenue just outside of the emir's mansion. The Amarinthian force was a helluva lot bigger than ours, but Kaoru and I more than evened the numbers.

However, we didn't advance any further and stepped aside for Loraine to say her piece.

"I am Loraine Arselios, daughter of Laeeq Arselios and niece of Sultan Yusef Arselios. Lay down your arms, surrender, and bring Owyn Medir to us. No harm will come to you. His and the sultan's life isn't worth yours, but your lives are worth something to me. Sultan Yusef has sided with demons. There is no future with the likes of him and those monsters. As Sultana, I will free us from those shackles and return to the UKD. Refuse and you can take it up with these two."

Their eyes snapped to me and Kaoru. They gulped hard. After a few seconds, a group of noble dark elves distinguishable by their extravagant clothing and jewelry— some I remember who met with Owyn back then— dragged Owyn out into the open. He hit the ground on all fours, still in his sleeping gown.

"W-We surrender! We offer you the emir in exchange for our lives!" the leader of the nobility exclaimed.

Loraine nodded to me.

"Point out someone who's fiercely loyal to Sultan Yusef, and you get to go free," I said.

The nobles immediately pointed to each other. Not one person *wasn't* pointing at someone, and they realized too late they'd been had.

"Loyalty is a rare commodity among them it seems." Kaoru scoffed.

"I mean, hey. Gotta love when they sell themselves out. Round those fuckers up and throw them into the Lannarkis Ring. I'll deal with 'em later!" I shouted.

Their very own guards apprehended the dark elven lords and nobles, dragging them away crying and begging.

"We meet again, Owyn Medir," Loraine said, looming over the disgraced emir.

"For all that I've done... I humbly beg your forgiveness! If you will be so merciful as to grant me a second— nay, a third chance, I shall swear fealty to you until the end of days, m-m... my sultana!" Owyn grinded his forehead into the dirt.

"I accept." She kneeled down next to him, and Owyn lifted his head with relief and elation. "Now you will need to beg Micchi for forgiveness, and she's not as forgiving as I am."

Owyn's smile flipped into a horrified frown.

I picked him up by the collar and growled. "What say we get reacquainted in the ring, yeah?"