

Chapter 42: Primal Embrace

The Tiger, The Falcon, and The Snake

His middle and index finger held together tightly as he curled them forward with two quick motions. A smear of black flashed past his right as he sat with silent focus upon his black steed. The entrails of his black cloak flapped with the wind, and he drew his bow to the skies. He focused like that of a falcon through the sole eye hole on the right side of his mask. The mask was split in half by two jarringly different designs: the plainness of the mask on the right, and flowing patterns on the left. He eyed his stealthily dashing accomplice as he navigated the woodland, whilst also keeping attention at an ox-insignia flagged outpost in the distant, grassy plains.

A burly man stood atop the frontmost tower of the outpost. His face resembled that of a lion with his luxurious orange beard circling his face up to the similarly pigmented hair on his head. His face was rather rough, but his cheeks were rosy and fairly plump as if having endured the wrath of wasps. In comparison to him, the other men scouting or keeping watch about the outpost were lanky sticks. Still, they all wore similar attire; primitive old rags and leather as if they had just begun to exit ancient history. All but one who was dressed in a bear coat, with the animal's head functioning as a hood. The horseback archer released his bow, and the arrow soared skyward through the canopy without piercing even a single leaf. It arched over the plains, releasing a trail of thick smog before planting itself into the center of the beastly outpost. The smoke was a deep gray as dark as a thundering sky. Twas when his accomplice rushed from the bushes into the field.

Black wrappings masked his face from the nose downward, but his blond hair shimmered beneath the sun. He resembled an eerie phantom of dreams as his flashing movement made the tattered and torn ends of his dark cloak wave in the wind until he plunged into the dark smoke, no longer to be seen. "Enemy, enemy!" a powerful voice

cried. “Enem—” his words cut short to a watery crunch. From the expanding gloom plume, a bell tolled, and the roars of man rose with it. Metals clashed, spires of Shadow magic erupted into the skies one after the other, and the outpost inevitably submitted to the torment. The horseman drew his bow once more. “On my shot.”

Two rings with dark droplets at their centers manifested; one above the outpost’s debris, and a second behind the tallest man. He was engulfed by a great dark coat with gold, unbuttoned pins exposing a white undershirt. The upper attire came down to heavy black pants of a sort of leather-like material, and black boots. His head was covered by a black hood and dark mask that had merely three vertical, rectangular slits at its front for breath, bestowing him a skull-like appearance. His second arrow soared with a barely noticeable glow at its center. As it touched the out-most perimeter of the smog, the battling blond man leapt away to the support of his gloved hands, and an explosion spurred. “Now.”

The towering figure focused his hands on the distant dark magic circle, and a downpour of black liquid showered the flames, transforming them into ravenous black fire. Their screams and woes filled the air, but to their mercy it was short. “Close it.”

The casting ring at his rear withered away, and the energy stabilizing him went with it. The dark downpour ceased, and the towering figure fell into the grass. “Good work,” the horse rider said. Once their fuel had met an end, the black flames quickly vanquished, revealing nothing but skeletons and some metal pieces behind in the rubble... Except for two. The lion of a man sought to push himself onto his feet, getting no more than a raise of the chin off the dirt. The bones of his jaw were completely exposed, along with the right half his torso, crossing down to his left leg where the same fate was suffered. The animal-attired one, however, appeared untouched, but unquestionably shaken by the attack. “Wotan! By Wotan!” The orange lion chanted. “By Wotan, carry my soul, Butoreiga!”

Rise

He grasped the back of his leader's leg and a purple energy streamed up into the beast-cloak's body. "By Wotan, the Beast Cloaks will ever-prosper!" he roared in a final breath.

"Your legacy will be eternal, Gorgundr!" Butoreiga mourned in a chant. "For my men! For The Lionized Warden, Gorgundr! By Wotan!"

His beasthood stepped forward to the blond haired attacker, twirling a hatchet in one hand, and small wooden shield in the other.

"He's not down?" the tall one stood from the ground amongst the trees.

"We can chill here and enjoy the show. If Jack needs help, I'll step in. I informed you of your role before we came out here, Zolton. Chill out; you've already done good."

Avar descended from his horse and patted its side gently with two strokes, beckoning it to rest in a low position. He kicked back against its ribs and removed his mask and hood. He readjusted his eyepatch and took a breath. "That stuffy thing... If we were in a hotter place I don't think I could do it," he joked, though it was hard to decipher given his cold, monotone tongue. "You don't need to keep that on either, Zolton. I don't sense anyone nearby besides you and those two over there. We won't be seen."

The rookie breathed with a tossing of the mask and a pull down of the hood. He dropped on a tree's bark to a rest, and merely viewed the tumult.

Butoreiga hurled his hatchet through a rushing stream of shadow from Jack. As the darkness split, he coursed through with an earth-shaking bash from his shield. With his right elbow defending against the blow, Jack returned with a spinning back heel into the

beast leader's skull. Butoreiga rolled through the dirt and ash, but stabilized himself with the driving of his hatchet into soil. "Grace!" he called.

His armaments embraced a brilliant golden light, and he stood. "Gorgundr!" he clashed his luminant hatchet and shield together. "The Beast Cloaks' Will! Gorgundr's Blessing! By the power of Wotan!" He hurled his shield skyward and clutched his hatchet until his hands leaked. His shield spun airborne, keeping itself afloat – and he charged his opponent. He swung the hatchet across the boxer's face, just missing the edge of his nose as Jack leaned back at an extremely uncomfortable angle. Jack recoiled with a right jab, but the swift Butoreiga ducked his arm, and retaliated by driving the hatchet onto the bones of his head.

"Holy shit, Avar!"

Avar remained at rest against his black steed. He glanced at Zolton, giving a silencing stare, then returned his attention to the fight. "You need to relax."

Butoreiga's shield spun into a dazzling light, hurling golden sparks about the field. The luminant specks stormed the field, and shredded through Jack's uniform. The boxer wiped blood from the wound of the beast leader's hatchet as his already worn uniform became evermore tattered. His fist aimed to the sky, he pumped it and cried, "You're so damn annoying!"

Brain Damage

From the ground up, the smog of Shadow Magic crept up the right half of Jack's body, engulfing his right arm up to his ear on the same side. His right eye became a hazy white streak within the void as if the light of an angler in the abyss, and he alas focused a glare upon Butoreiga. The primal warrior appeared taken aback, but he held his resolve. "The Beast Cloak kin are eternal!" he chanted as he pulled down a golden spear from the ever-spinning luminant shield.

Jack rushed by an eruption of shadow, just missing Butoreiga as he ducked and returned by spearing into Jack's guts. "Shower!" Butoreiga called. The shield downpoured a blitz of shining shrapnel onto the shadow warrior, carving many red wounds upon his white skin. At the current moment, his dark attire barely held onto him any longer. Butoreiga held him up with the spear to observe his hunt. Finally, he planted the bleeding man into the ground beneath the shield. "Vanquish!" the leader announced. The shield then crashed into Jack's chest and spun with frightening speeds, spitting up smoke as friction worked against his very skin. In the end, his drive was unshaken.

With a fist, Jack slammed it into the soil, spurring harrowingly vibrant, black energy cracks into the ground. The cracks in the earth expelled continuous spurts of shadow energy, destabilizing the Butoreiga's footing for a second, and that was more than enough for the Shadow Fighter. In an instant from his defeated position, Jack flipped over Butoreiga, grabbed the man by the sides of his head, and used his rotating motion to hurl him far through the plains. As the bear-coat man endured the soar through the air, he spun and drove his spear into the ground to bring back his balance. Just as his eyes came back up, a void fist drove dead into his cheek, and he wailed with agony. "My temple, Wotan?!" he cried, finding an eye much too familiar to him rolling in the dirt. The animal-attired warrior steeled himself, and held out his spear. "Beckon!"

Vacuuming streams ripped Jack inward. Instead of finding himself in a panic, he shattered the energy weapon with a shadow-infused shockwave from his fist. In the dark tumult, he repurposed Butoreiga's forceful pull as acceleration, and launched a clean strike of the fist straight into his chest cavity. Butoreiga's back bubbled and swelled as the strike caused his bones and organs to shift out of place, but not quite out of their meaty entrapment. "Dance!" Jack spat, and his black boxing gloves shredded into threads as he unleashed a dazing assault of punches and jabs upon him. His strikes were so quick with such rapid rate, Butoreiga was kept afloat the ground. Amidst the attack, Jack grabbed the one-eyed man by the throat, and flung him over onto the ground

where he continued his monstrous beating. Butoreiga's throat bubbled and expanded as chunks of his internal organs were forced through his esophagus.

Avar crossed his arms during his spectation of the show, while Zolton nearly fell forward from the weight of his jaw hanging slack. The trees around them shook with the vibrations emitting from the bloodlusted Jack's gruesome beatdown. Some even began to lose their leaves. The squelches upset Zolton's guts, whilst Avar continued to study, as if closely watching for something in specific. Soon, the rate of Jack's attacks began to slow dramatically, but it continued nonetheless. Avar stood at this sign, and gently rubbed his horse behind the ear. The animal soon arose upright, and he swiftly fixed himself on its back. "You want to come?" Avar asked.

Empty Mind

It took the initiate some time to fully comprehend the words being spoken to him, even if they were simple. This side of the man was much unknown to him. "Da hell I look like? Oh – yeah. Sure... but shit man..."

"Are you afraid?" Avar inquired with a short smile.

A nervous chuckle left Zolton. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't."

"You're right to be. You don't want to be in Jack's way when he's riled up like this. He's slowing down now, though, so it's safer to get close to him now." Avar led with his horse into the open field with Zolton close behind. He moved his steed with caution, and Zolton matched the slow pace. "Avar, I have a question about the execution regarding the plan here."

"Ask away."

"If you were going to have Jack jump out of the way of the explosion, why even have him enter before we set it off? Couldn't we have just waited until after?"

“After my first arrow, they would have searched for me specifically. With Jack drawing attention, they likely assumed he was the one to fire the first shot, thus keeping all their attention on him and having the second arrow come in unnoticed.”

“That does make more sense... What if he didn’t get out in time?”

“I wouldn’t have crafted the plan if I were not at least strongly confident in his abilities. Jack is fast on his feet, as you can tell. If he did not escape in time, he’d most likely survive the flames even with whatever your magic is. I can’t be totally sure about the levels of damage he may have suffered. Whatever that liquid is, it’s devastating with heat. Those people burned straight to the bones in a blink.”

“Yeah... they did...”

While he did not turn even an eye to him, he heard the change in inflection. “Do you feel bad for them?”

“Not as much as you think, only enough for the mere fact they are human.”

“Strange. We specifically went after a wanted criminal group this time since you’re raddled by hurting ‘good’ people, and you’re still unsatisfied. It’s very hard to please you.”

“No, I mean...”

“I’m playing with you. You can be a softy, I don’t mind it as long as you disavow that gentleness when the call for a cold heart is heard.”

They pulled a fair distance near Jack. He was kneeled in the blood and entrails of what was once a body, and the remainder of his uniform glistened in the sunlight given its fresh liquid coating. “Are you alright, Jack?” Avar called out to his friend. He remained there for a moment in silence, unmoving. His blond hair was now drenched red, along with a good portion of his face. Finally his lips moved to the construction of a response, though a brief one. “Y–yeah. I’m fine.”

“The vampire wanted the Beast Cloak Leader’s heart but I’m guessing that it is no longer intact,” Avar scanned the expanse of blood and splattered organs. “If we can even find it.”

“S–sorry. Kazuman would’ve been able to do this more smoothly...” Jack’s voice quivered with sorrowful reminiscence.

“My friend, you were fantastic in your performance and execution. Don’t beat yourself up,” Avar dug into his cloak and pulled out a small wooden whistle. He placed it between his lips, covered his steed’s ears, and blew into it. Its sound was weak and flimsy, but one blow was enough for him to put it away.

Jack looked over to Zolton with worry and anxiousness in his eyes. “Hey, were you watching?”

“Uh, hell yeah? That shit was crazy. I was scared shitless for you but this one over here told me to chill my ass out. Now I’m scared shitless *of* you,” Zolton laughed. “I definitely did not expect you to have... *that* in you.”

“It’s just a thing that my–my brain started doing a long time ago. Sorry”

Zolton raised his eyebrow. “Are you planning to attack me?”

“What? No! Why do you think that?”

“Well, what are you apologizing for then?”

“I just... wasn’t ready for you to see me do that yet. I hope you didn’t lose respect for me as an instructor.”

Zolton grimaced with confusion. “Lose respect? It was a gruesome sight but losing respect is definitely not what happened here. I’ll make sure not to annoy you as much from now on!”

“Are y’all gonna pay each other galleons for all that sucking off you’re doing?” Avar returned with a black sack in hand. A red liquid seeped and dripped from its bottom as he held it up. He also had a second black horse at his side, though this one’s snout and neck hairs were white. The animal also had an empty wagon in tow. “I found what I think is the heart, but only half of it. There are also bone fragments in it. The vampire will have to make do. Good work everyone.”

Avar moved to attach the left side of the wagon to his horse and beckoned over Zolton with a finger to aid. It seemed rather useless to have Zolton attempt to aid considering he mostly watched as the man did most of the work. If anything he just got in the way and made the process slower. Soon enough, both horses were attached to the wagon, Zolton took himself into it, and Jack sat on white-nosed horse to aid in guiding away from the scene of battle.