

Avenger III: Gathering the Host

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Coreaux has overcome the curse of vampirism, and freed the forest of taint. But even at the peak of his power, can he persuade the king to support him? And will his dark powers finally become revealed? In the darkness of an oncoming storm, Coreaux looks to the North and East for aid …

Coreaux looked out over his lands: they stretched as far as his eye could see; yet he knew his crusade was getting nowhere. Seven years had passed since the mission had started, and since then he had been acclaimed throughout Bretonnia for his astounding military skills and prowess in war. Yet he knew he was getting nowhere.

The only land he had gained was simply wasteland: land that no one else wanted, and that had long held few visitors, and not even skaven infested. His army was too small for anything more. To the north, his lands in Bastonne were flourishing: day-by-day more merchants came, not put off by his proclamations (widely regarded as arrogance: he had received no ‘go ahead’ from the king) that it was now part of Mousillon. But to the south … he held a vast quantity of land, yet for all intents and purposes it was nothing. Geographically his small amount of lands in Bastonne was barely visible on a map, whereas this was a massive proportion of Mousillon: probably about a tenth in total.

But politically, it was nothing. No citizens apart from the odd wanderer. No economy. No enemies, no real conquests.

His army claimed it was the greatest achievement since Gilles le Breton cleansed Bretonnia, but he knew it was not so. Even the few battles he had fought would have failed but for his fighting ability.

To his warriors, it was a mighty conquest. To everyone else it was yet another insignificant attempt to cleanse Mousillon.

In short, the campaign was failing, and he could do nothing. The king had not given his support, choosing to remain neutral, and other dukes had looked the other way when he asked for aid. The duke of Bastonne had nearly started a war over his announcement about his lands now being part of Mousillon.

He smiled ruefully. Landuin had been like him: powerful in person but without the resources to fully cleanse Mousillon.

But, of course, the other dukes regarded that as folly. They scorned him for his love of growing things, rejected him because of his heritage.

He knew he had one solution: to ask for foreign help. Louencour would disapprove of course, but he didn’t care any more. So long as Louencour didn’t attack him, he was fine.

But that caused a bigger problem. To do so, he himself would need to leave as a diplomat … and he had no spare time to waste. He had no one he could trust at the moment: no one he could leave to continue the campaign. Which would mean he needed a trustworthy servant …

It was annoying. It meant he had to find someone trustworthy, deal with Louencour tactically, and then find willing allies. And to do one, he needed to do the other: each was vital, and needed to be done fast. And he had no time.

The door opened, and a guard poked his head through:

“My lord, there’s a messenger here to see you. He says it’s urgent. He’s from the king,” he proclaimed, and Coreaux sighed, and replied in a weary voice.

“Tell him he can see me now, then,” he ordered, and waited. He did not have to wait long: the herald impudently burst through the door, in a state best described as “righteous fury”. He spoke in his arrogant voice as if he owned the castle.

"This is madness! You have no knights! How can you hope to reclaim lands that are not yours with this rabble? This is an out—" Coreaux stood, dwarfing the fairly short man. His sword eased in its scabbard. He knew it was a declaration of war, yet he did not care: this was his hall, not Louencour's palace. When he spoke, his voice was quiet yet powerful.

"How dare you? You burst in here like some animal and speak to me like a piece of common filth. You may be allowed to speak so in your lord's halls, yet never here. Do not presume you are of a greater rank than me: for you are not. What is the message? Speak quickly."

The messenger swallowed, and looked nervous, but his voice was steady. "His majesty ordered me to persuade you not to continue this madness, and if not, declare your judgement, as he saw fit to entrust to me, and me alone. That was all."

"My greetings to your master. You speak of matters beyond your reckoning. Political currents are fine, and I do not expect you to understand why I spoke thus. But I am prepared: my forces are ready, and throughout the lands we are proclaimed as heroes equal to those from the days of legend."

"And the wise call you fools! My lord Coreaux: I would not abandon my king's aid so rashly. Do not act without thought. I know your host is weary: many have had to eat insects. Illness is rife. You are an extraordinary man, but you cannot contend with the combined might of the enemies of Bretonnia thus! I beg you, lord: do not throw away your life, for you may have a part in the war to come. We have not forsaken Mousillon, and we have not forgotten it. Do not believe otherwise, for you are making a massive mistake! If you go to war, you're all going to die!"

"I appreciate your concern, yet this is a matter of honour. My family were killed by foulness from this land, as were all my followers. Do you think I will let them die and not avenge their deaths?" Coreaux's knuckles were white on his sword hilt, his face pained by past memories.

"No! I do not say that … I just believe this is not the best way to have vengeance. Join with us, do not make enemies of us." The herald swallowed. "You are a remarkable man, Coreaux of Mousillon. I remember you as a child: bright and joyful. Do not throw away that past. I was once your friend: yet I see nothing of that child in you. You are as hard as stone. Do not destroy yourself with a hunger for vengeance."

Coreaux blinked, and studied the man's face. It looked so different … worn by care. "Jean?" he asked quietly, and the man nodded. Coreaux looked sad, yet he did not greet him as an old friend: he stood motionless.

"It is good to see you. I could do with a friend in these dark times. Yet I will not abandon my quest: nay, I will continue for the sake of my family and those whom I loved. Instead, I ask you this: join me. Your family was lost too. I can see you have done well in society; will you not support my cause for the sake of an old friend. We will not lose, never, not if I have allies. Can you not persuade Louencour to help me?"

"I can try, but I will fail. I can aid you, but I have a mere hundred knights. Friend: I can do little."

"One hundred is as good as a million. I would rather have one loyal friend by my side than a thousand knights. Come, Jean: join me."

Jean hesitated, yet he was already persuaded. His voice held real emotion as it spoke. "For old times sake, I will ride alongside your forces. I would do no less. And by my sword, we shall ride together to free our land."

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The next days passed like lightning: Jean sent word to the king, and Coreaux bore the long hours without mental pain or hurt, for after seven years, he had a friend fighting alongside him.

But on the third day, bad tidings came: the king had officially declared him and Jean enemies of the crown. On the fourth, their force was more than decimated by a series of sudden skaven ambushes. But through this, Jean remained confident: more knights came day by day, and they steadily hacked a bloody path to Mousillon itself: if they could take the city, the land would be theirs.

On the fifth, Coreaux left to find aid: two of his problems were resolved, yet another presented itself: he had a lack of

troops, though more than enough food.

For three days Coreaux rode: only stopping to eat, and occasionally sleep. He had no time to waste. On the fourth, he reached his destination: the castle of the order of the Bear.

The horse's hooves were the only sound as Coreaux rode up to the castle entrance. The door slowly opened to admit him, the opener unseen. Coreaux dismounted, and looked around: no one was in sight. Still, it was worth a try.

He knocked on the large door of the keep, and waited. After five minutes a guard opened the large stone door, admitting Coreaux to a large decorative hall.

Coreaux had always thought the Empire a highly advanced civilisation, and past such roaring fires, yet somehow this massive hall with its touch of modernism was more Empire than anything.

A stout, grizzly figure approached him across the rug-covered floor. "Hail, brother knight. It is always good to hear from our Bretonnian brethren. What news from the South?"

Coreaux was surprised by the informality, yet he found it welcoming. "Lord Adreugh of Reikland, I come—"; he began, yet the bearded man butted in.

"We are all knights here. I know from whence you come. What do you want from us?"

"Aid. I am undertaking a mission to cleanse Mousillon, and will not rest until it is pure. I need help, and I thought I would consult my northern brethren."

"I am sorry, but we have none to give: we are hard pressed, and a small chapter as it is: I cannot help. The best I can give is provisions and a bed for the night."

That night Coreaux slept well: it had seemed like years since he had slept in a real bed, and suffered no nightmares, no dark horrors.

He was awoken by voices talking loudly: clearly the knights were readying for battle, or war. But against whom?

At the great hall, Adreugh welcomed Coreaux warmly. "Today, we leave for war and death," he explained. "A great orc horde has come to our lands, and we have not the means to stop them: we are equal in number, but they have great magic, and we do not have the favour of the gods as do you, friend. We will die, yet we will die honourably," he proclaimed, and the surrounding knights let out a great cheer: obviously they knew their fate, but would fight to the death for their leader.

Coreaux thought for a moment, then said to the grand master: "And if I could save you from death? Would you fight with me?"

The stout man considered, and then answered as though from a deep pit. "Yes, we would. More than that: we would all owe you a life-debt, and would die," he said, then looked Coreaux in his eyes, and spoke with a bitter tone, a tangible annoyance: "I would be willing to fight alongside you as brother if you could save us … but how? One man … against ten thousand orcs bolstered by their dark gods? That would be madness, had you the whole of the Empire behind you!"

"Madness?" Coreaux said, smiling slightly. "I am a Bretonnian! I will not see my friends die when I can save them."

"But … how?" Adreugh said, obviously not convinced.

"Come nightfall, you will see. Yes, you will see the true might of the Bretonni."

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As Coreaux rode through the woods, Adreugh could not help but admire the way he rode: he was aware he was in the presence of a born rider: the horse obeyed the slightest of commands, and every idle flick of the reigns was a command to the stallion.

But one thing hung on his mind. "How?" he asked, the question rising to the forefront of his mind as he looked through the great forest. "How can you defeat a horde?"

"The strength of Bretonnia lies not in its might in arms: nay, that is merely one of its attributes. Our strength lays in our faith … the lady. She is our guardian, our saviour. Yet when she blessed me, she gave me not only protection and great skills, but great magic too: and it is that I will use to destroy them. Nothing can stand against pure magic and faith, save the darkest of evil."

"Then I wish you luck, friend, for it is a mighty host," Adreugh said as the forest thinned. Far away Coreaux could hear guttural cries, and roaring voices, chanting to dark gods. The battle had begun.

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The assembled host cried out in hunger and exhilaration as they heard the beat out a steady thud, thud rhythm. This was it: they were finally embarking on their "Waaagh".

But there was no enemy force. The orcs faltered, about to charge: the drums paused, and started out of timing: there were no enemy soldiers. They had come here for … orcs began to scrap, their pent-up energy resulting in an army-wide brawl.

And then, they paused, often in mid hit or thump: an enemy had been seen. For hundreds of knights had appeared out of the mists: on black chargers and wearing black helmets. As one, the orc mass surged forwards …

Coreaux smiled as he heard the bellows of rage, and spoke quietly to himself as he drew ever more power. "And so it begins."

Adreugh turned his horse, and waited. The knights did not form up: nor did they speak. They waited for the opportune moment.

The orcs had reached the river, and still Coreaux stood there. Nothing was happening …

But suddenly, a pillar of fire lanced down, incinerating tens of hundreds of orcs: yet then it was gone. In a flash many had died.

Another pillar materialized, and vanished: and another. But this was nothing: the orcs were too many to be bothered by such puny resistance. Ever they surged on.

The knights readied their lances, ready to die …

Coreaux frowned: he had not been ready for so many. But today they would see the true meaning of magic.

For his strength lay not in puny impressive displays: no, it lay in true magic. Dark magic.

He looked back, and could see the knights could not see behind a shimmering wall of mist. Good.

The orcs approached, coming ever nearer: and Coreaux readied himself. This tactic was evil, yet necessary. He hoped the Lady would forgive him for the wrong he would do this day.

The orcs continued their charge: they saw light shining off lances and shields through the mist: they could be no further than two hundred metres away. Their senses of crude cunning made them realize this would be easy: the enemy would lose in seconds.

But something was wrong … the air was growing hotter: it felt like mud. They looked around, moving slowly, confused by this sudden change of atmosphere: their movement was slow and sluggish: the strongest looked as though even they could not move any faster.

A hissing sound began from behind them … the orcs turned. At first there was just a noise … a slight hint of a red light. And then they saw something move: a hand, possibly?

Yes: certainly a hand. For amongst the corpses something was moving … the hand clawed its way out from the bodies … followed by an arm … a body … an orc. It was badly burnt, but it looked as though it was alive …

An orc went over to greet it, yet it grabbed the creature on the neck, and slowly began to strangle the greenskin, the beast choking before a great strength. The eyes snapped open, to show nothing but eyeballs: and the truth dawned. Zombies. Strong zombies.

Cioreaux was applying all his strength now: the zombies were beginning to rise faster, and stronger. They would not die.

But he could see the orcs milling around, hacking apart the creatures in groups. It was obvious that was not enough.

He smiled. His next move was cruel, but it was necessary.

As he felt a slight resistance to his magic, he unleashed his full might in rains of fire and death …

An observer would have seen nothing: all light was dimmed, as if the sun was gone. Then the fire hit: great flaming meteors that tore apart the ground with tremendous force; lightning striking with pinpoint accuracy tore through flesh and armour alike.

The shamans on the hill were the main targets: one by one they fell under the onslaught, releasing bursts of energy that only fuelled the spell.

And for every dead orc, there was another undead warrior …

One by one they fell, felled by blows of fire and lightning from above. Coreaux released the magic, and let the warriors crumble.

Adreugh rode up to Coreaux as the darkness cleared. He had seen little, but could now see the battlefield.

“That was quite some slaughter …” he began, but hastily stopped as Coreaux slipped from his saddle. “Are you …?” he asked, yet stopped abruptly: behind the knight, Adreugh could see an orc raising his axe. This seemed to be their warlord: he was far stronger and more powerful than any normal orc.

But Adreugh was a trained knight, and would not let his friend and saviour submit to such a fate. He stepped forwards, taking the blow on his shield, and adopted the attack position.

The orc was a trained warrior from birth, yet Adreugh was a knight who had killed many an orc in his time. The blows he parried were strong, yet he parried them nonetheless: it was that or die at the hands of his opponent. Adrenalin rushed

through his veins, as he realized his opponent was more skilled and powerful than him, yet he continued, the adrenalin coursing through him giving him the strength to fight on …

Grockar was annoyed: the magicks of his enemy had ripped apart the sky. He had known fear for the first time in his life then, and hoped he would never do so again. But he had escaped: fought his way past the undead, reached the hill. And there he had seen the puny enemy and the one that had attempted to kill him: a mortal man. A Bretonnian. He had tried to kill him … but now he was being attacked.

The awful ‘gloopiness’ had left him, but now he was denied prey! He wanted to kill this human. His head really gonged from the light and bangs, but he would finish this fight, and win, and then take his revenge …

It seemed the orc’s attacks had increased in power, but Adreugh knew this was but a portion of his adversary’s strength: he felt like a plaything: a mouse in the hands of a cat desperately trying to survive.

But he knew he still had a chance. His armour was dented, yet it would protect him from blows. But he was loath to use its advantage: what if it failed him? But he had one chance … to take the risk … to rely on his steel covering for guardianship …

Grockar spotted the flaw in his foe’s defence and did not falter: he dived forwards, and knocked his foe backwards, caving in his stomach armour, and knocking him aside with all the force of a charging rhinoceros …

Adreugh was prepared for the move, and swung back up lightly, bringing his shield down upon the orc’s head. The sharp metal edge cracked the beast’s forehead, and the next sword blow slashed open his stomach, and innards poured out, half-liquid black blood covering the creature’s armour.

Weary, Adreugh turned away to see to Coreaux, turning his back distastefully on the dying orc. But it seemed the orc warboss was not finished. In a flying leap he landed on Adreugh’s back, knocking him to the ground. The strong hands, bereft of weaponry, slowly began to strangle the armoured knight …

Even as a steel dagger tore through the chest tendons of the beast, the strangling did not stop: even in death his grip was strong.

And staring at the sky above, Adreugh coughed one last time, and fell to the floor, victorious …

Coreaux’s eyes slowly opened, and he stood. He felt empty: drained. He had used almost all his power; nearly died. As he looked around, an armoured figure approached, and saluted the Duke.

“The hosts of the order of the Red Flame are yours to command, lord,” he said, obviously awed at the extent of the destruction. “We owe you a life-debt, and we shall hold true to that. Our knights shall serve you to whatever end.”

“Then ready your steeds. For tomorrow we ride, to Mousillon and victory!”

“Arborkh, sire of Arkhor, is dead. Ask any scholar: though they will pretend to know little, they whisper of him, and his fatal end.

“Or so it has seemed for countless decades; the king himself is said to flinch before saying his name, and the Fay Enchantress will refuse to speak of him.

“But recently, as rumour spread of lights in Mousillon’s majestic and foreboding castle, it is said he has been seen again. He appears as a shadow, mere mist gained form: fire provided life. They say he is the true Black Knight: that Mallobaude is lost, a mere tool of another, greater power. And they say he has become the Black Knight.

“For while Mousillon exists, there has always been a Black Knight. Some say he is similar to the Green Knight of ancient legends, yet such is mere speculation: no, it is what he represents that is important. In battle he is skilled, yet no more so than any Lord of Bretonnia, but he is the darker side of Mousillon, and appears when its threat grows.

“But he will never leave, this sinister figurehead of blackness. He can be killed, yet it is said that then the slayer must become the Knight, or that another will appear. For he is ever a mortal man, at the fore of the dark forces: a mortal with powers to raise the whole of the dark to arms.

“Even giants and dragons fear him for what he represents, and none who have seen him have ever lived.

“Yet now he has been seen again, in the form of Arborkh: and not skulking in shadow. No … he rides with Coreaux of Mousillon, Lady’s Avenger. What this shows few can say, but they also claim that the only man living who holds the truth about this dark figure is Arkhor of Mousillon, thrice-betrayed scum of darkness …”

The scholar finished talking, and looked up at the King, his eyes questioning. He bowed low as the King gave no reply: clearly reading in those deep eyes that Louencour did not want disturbances.

When the door closed behind the librarian, the assembled dukes closed in, talking at once, a rabble worthy of the streets of Bordeleaux.

“My Lord, I—”

“Foolishness, your majesty, this—”

“How dare—”

But the King was used to this. He raised his hand, and the host fell silent. When he spoke, it was in a thoughtful voice.

“I know what you all would say: most of you. Yet I would be interested to hear your take on the matter, Duc Adalhard,” he stated, his purpose cryptic yet clearly with good reason: the burly duke of Lyonesse had remained silent so far. But now he stood, and looked at the assembled throng of knights, dukes and barons.

“I am as willing as any of you to disregard such claims: more willing, even. Yet I cannot, for in my heart I know it would be a base lie.

“I cannot disguise that I know of this figure: for in my youth I saw him, once or twice. I was brought up to the South of Lyonesse, where dark Mousillon once held claim. When I roamed the fields as a Knight Errant and a questing knight, occasionally I would see a dark figure, a knight stood on the horizon watching the south.

“And it seemed to me he held an aura of power, such as is held by our gracious king,” he said, inclining his head to Louencour. “Throughout my reign such sightings have been reported, becoming ever more frequent, until now I believe they come daily. Always the same: a pale-faced knight with a closed helm and armour so dark it is nearly black.

“And so I accept his existence. Yet why should we concern ourselves with such matters?” he asked, finishing his short speech. The King did not reply, yet let the assorted barons speak one by one.

“That is proof enough. He is evil, perhaps. Yet what can we do? How? How can we stop him, this “Black Knight”?”

“We need to deal with him. How can we let such a creature roam free, unchecked?”

“This is folly … he is no more danger than ever: Mousillon is not on the rise, and I believe he is a minor

problem: our main concern is Coreaux.”

“I am given to believe he does exist, this Arborkh. Yet what matter is he of ours? He is evil, sure enough, yet if he helps reclaim Mousillon, then we can deal with him later,” one stated, and looked at Louencour, awaiting a reply. There was a short pause, and then the king spoke:

“Because he is a figurehead of evil. If we could capture him, then it is possible the crusade against Mousillon can be stopped: for we know Coreaux intends to do good, yet he creates evil. Can we let that rest: no, we cannot. And what can we do? Kill him and await another Black Knight to arise among our ranks? No … it seems we must capture him. I have heard your views, and now know all I need to. My mind is set. Leave now, and prepare yourself for a long day tomorrow …”

Jean, watching from a tower, could see a cloud of dust approaching. Good. That would be Coreaux and his knights. So it had been successful. And they needed new recruits …

Over the last few days, disaster after disaster had struck: food had been run out of; town after town had resisted their approach.

He had conquered a sizeable portion of the map, but that was only recently: a dark knight known as “Mariak” had helped, and as an inspirational leader, he had managed to capture many towns: the crusade had gained momentum.

And with the newfound knights, victory was certain. Except for one thing: the king had declared his mission pending: Louencour claimed he would give support, but only if there was an official inspection of the force first. To Jean, long-standing friend of the king, it sounded like yet another of his old master’s tricks: it was Louencour’s style to perform one action under a false pretence that was part true.

Such deeds were not knightly, yet had helped Bretonnia in the past, and did not actually undermine the code of chivalry.

But what did the detestable man want? Surely he did not think there was a traitor among Coreaux’s ranks? They were all dedicated to the idea of freeing Mousillon, as was Mariak … no … surely Mariak was not a traitor?

Jean hurried downstairs quickly. He did not pause for any reason: he needed to talk to Mariak, and urgently.

As he got nearer to the foot of the staircase, he heard voices … raised voices. He gasped, recovering his breath, and hurried on …

Too fast. He slipped and fell, dropping his banner in the process. His armour dug into his body, yet Jean was glad of it: without the armour he would be dead for sure.

As he tumbled in a tight ball down the stairs, he tried to listen to the voices: but to no avail: all he could hear was the noise of his armour smashing against the stone steps. Suddenly he experienced a brief jolt: a longer step … was he near the bottom?

Still falling, he began to unravel himself …

The last he saw before darkness descended was the stone steps coming closer at great speed to his head.

Mariak laughed, a cold heartless cackle. He looked the king’s messenger in the eye, and smiled faintly: he could read fear there.

“So you have found me at last. And … you want me to ‘come quietly’? I think not.”

“My lord Arborkh, this is—”

"From my point of view, this is sense: I am not afraid to kill … you are. No, I do not doubt your skill or resolve. I doubt that a proud warrior will willingly become the Black Knight, a dread figurehead of cursed Mousillon … ah?" The messenger's expression changed, though it looked more like surprise than anything. He began to speak; yet Arborkh interrupted him again.

"I don’t—"

"Ah … I see. Your dear king has not thought fit to tell a ‘trusted advisor’. Still, perhaps it is for the better." The knight hissed, and struck with his dark blade. Barin, the messenger, was surprised when his blade parried the thrust: he had expected a vampire, yet this was clearly simply a mortal, and not a particularly skilled one.

The fight, however, was still in favour of the dark knight. The figure rested his blade on Barin's throat. "You tried to kill me … and for that, you must die …"

The blade flickered towards Barin's throat, and he tried not to flinch: he would not die a coward.

It was at this moment Jean smashed out from the spiral staircase and into Arborkh's chest, still unaware of what was happening around him …

The noise stopped: the reverberating sound halted. Jean had reached the bottom. Arborkh was lying on the floor beneath the knight of Mousillon, groaning in agony: would he finally die now, millennia since his birth?

Jean moved slightly, and Mariak tried to escape, yet failed: Jean was crushing him, and preventing movement. He struggled harder, but still failed …

Barin stood from where he had been knocked to the floor, covered in dust. His eyes were filled with an unspoken malice as he headed towards the two fallen knights …

Blood trickled down Jean's face, forming a dark red streak. The knight flinched as it dripped onto his battered breastplate, and his eyes opened, focusing upon the approaching herald.

Barin struck home, his blade pointing straight at Jean's chest …

And hit Mariak. The Black Knight shuddered, and fell to the floor, groaning in agony. Barin smiled: this was an easy victory.

But something happened he had not anticipated … Jean awoke. Behind the nobleman, he stood, gripping his long sword with bloodstained hands. He staggered towards his foe, eyes gleaming with malice.

"You betrayed me!" he hissed, and stabbed Arborkh in the chest: clearly he had not fully understood the situation. The next blow removed the cursed warrior's head, and Jean smiled. A devilish evil light shone in his eyes as he picked up the head, still dripping with dark blood, and turned to face Barin, who cowered.

Jean took a step forwards, smiling as the ambassador's eyes began to reveal fear.

He felt powerful … filled with purpose. This wretch had betrayed him … betrayed Mousillon. He saw it now. Not one betrayer … two … they must have been working together against him. They deserved death …

But his wounds were too great: he could feel strength leaving him. Cold water seemed to engulf him as he took another step, and Barin's fearful pleading seemed as though it came from far away.

Jean fell at the ambassador's feet. But the herald did not kill him: that would be dishonourable and cowardly. Barin frowned, and spat on Jean's face. "That was for the king, and Bretonnia," he hissed, and began to tie up the fallen knight's limbs.

But paused: he could hear a sound. Marching feet … hooves. An army. Coreaux had returned …

The ambassador dashed towards the stables in desperation, looking over his shoulder in fear.

His horse stood there peacefully, looking puzzled at his master's rush. Barin did not hesitate, and leapt onto the beast's bare back, frowning behind him at his scene of ‘triumph’. He scowled.

“Mousillon will never be yours Coreaux, for it is not yours to possess …”

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The knight slashed through the brambles, looking behind him in desperation to escape his hunter. The … thing … was gaining on him, he was sure. His crest was ruffled, his armour dented and his helm lost, yet he did not care: it was after him.

He had not even seen what it was yet, but he knew it was bad. He ran on hastily, tripping and stumbling, until he came to a clearing: where now? Every entrance looked just as thorny, except for one …

The entrance shifted, and the knight began to turn, until an aristocratic voice rang out. “Why the rush, master knight?”

A figure stepped into the light. He wore old-fashioned nobleman’s clothes, like those often found in the Empire. His pale face looked arrogant, yet friendly. The knight felt a sudden urge to warn him.

“You must hurry away! A beast! It pursued me! I—“ The man interrupted.

“Yet I have been here days, and seen nothing. Are you sure you are not hallucinating? Come here,” he commanded, and the knight’s legs automatically obeyed. The man looked down at the knight, a strange pity in his eyes, and grabbed his shoulders. The knight felt angry, yet did not resist, even as he was forced to bare his neck. His limbs seemed to have failed him, and he could not move.

He saw a strange hunger in his attacker’s eyes as he prepared to bite. The vampire whispered a word so quietly it could barely be heard. “I’m sorry …” he said, and bit into his victim’s neck …