Rupert was an organized person. Almost certainly a result of his upbringing, his parents owned a bakery in **the capital**, where his father managed the money and his mother managed the baking. The shop’s books were immaculate, and each cake and tart was identical to the last. Rupert’s parents kept their lives consistent and predictable. They only had one child because his father had calculated the associated expenses and had determined one child to be the most efficient. Rupert’s father taught him to read, write, and do math, and while the neighbouring families struggled to divide income and time between five or six children apiece, Rupert grew up with two attentive parents and a sense of calm wellbeing.

His parents had been rather disappointed when he came of age and attempted to reject the mundanity of consistent and predictable bakery ownership by joining the army. But, as if his parents’ lessons had taken root in his soul, he had joined the city watch instead of the reserves. Keeping the King’s peace was the most consistent and predictable role in the army, where he still got to do something occasionally exciting. He purchased a humble straw-hatched house not far from his parents’ bakery. Though the house had room for a family, Rupert didn’t immediately pursue finding a wife. His mother was skeptical, warning him that men without wives invited the company of witches. But Rupert knew better than to consort with the supernatural, and it didn’t seem that he needed a wife. He kept his home neat, spent his excess coin carefully, and visited the bakery often. He would buy a small sweet, and when he had time, he would help his father with the books. His parents’ disappointment dissipated when they realized that their son made enough wages to be a regular customer. And within the ranks, Rupert’s ability to read, write, do math, and think logically set him ahead of his fellow soldiers. He was promoted to Captain within the first year.

Indeed, being the way he was, one of the things Rupert hated most of all was being late. He also hated being wet. Right now he was both.

The party of twenty-one was riding south. They should be riding west now, but they had been delayed at the Crooked. The old crossing was nothing more than several planks of wood roped together, though Commander Patrick Stogard, atop his grey warhorse, had made it over without difficulty. It creaked in a faint protest under the weight, but when the horse-drawn carriage bearing their supplies made it over as well, doubts of the crossing’s integrity were dispelled, and the remaining soldiers followed in single-file as the bridge creaked faintly. The difficulty arose halfway through the procession of men on horses, at which point the crossing had had quite enough. The horse, who had started off so confidently, broke through the planks and tumbled into the wide water-logged ditch.

Though uninjured, horse and rider had been spared a dignified crossing. That horse, and every horse thereafter, which regrettably included Rupert’s, had to be cajoled and forced into the steep ditch, through the waist-high water, and up the other side, slipping and sliding all the way. It was a miracle none of them had broken an ankle.

But it had been a disastrous delay. Of all the parties sent out, theirs had the furthest to ride, they had been assigned the village the very furthest from the capital, nestled away on the opposite side of the Witch’s Forest. And according to Commander Stogard, who received his orders directly from King Greyson, exact timing was essential for the raids’ success.

They were only just now turning west, and the sun had nearly set. They were trotting, unable to gallop out of fear of outpacing the supplies, but unable to walk out of fear of further delay and ruin. Regardless of the reasons why, the pace of their trot was being matched precisely by the swarms of sharpflies. It was the most uncomfortable feeling, having your trousers stick against your thighs as dozens of insects took advantage. But it was made worse knowing that they were late, and there wasn’t much to be done about it. He fingered the top of his axe, reaffirming its presence at his hip.

He had been surprised when Stogard had approached him for this mission, enticed by its secrecy, and then shocked when he learned its purpose. Both his grandfathers had died in the last war, during the battle at the Lionhead Hills. He had no love for witches, but at the same time, the witches he did encounter inside **the capital**’s walls didn’t stand out amongst the more obnoxious humans he had to deal with. It wasn’t supernatural women whose brawls had to be broken up outside of taverns, after all. But the King’s reasoning was sound. The kindest war was a short one. One massacre to prevent a hundred.

He had killed before, usually out of the necessity of self defense. The one time he had killed in anger had been when a tradesman had sold a fake healing potion to one of Rupert’s neighbours, who had given it to their ill son. Instead of healing, it poisoned him, and the boy suffocated on the white foam that bubbled past his lips. The fraud fled when Rupert tried to arrest him. Rupert’s fury propelled his tackle farther than he intended. The tradesman’s head hit the stone and he died as Rupert cursed him.

As time passed, Rupert realized that he had more regret for deaths he had caused out of necessity. None of them had deserved death the way the false tradesman had. But if Rupert felt any dismay at the mission he had been given now, one massacre to prevent a hundred, he kept it to himself.

Rupert saw the Commander take an hourglass from his pocket and study it. Though he couldn’t see it very well, he thought it looked nearly empty. The Commander put it away and announced curtly that the supply wagon should be emptied, and its supplies distributed amongst the soldiers instead. “The barrels are heavy,” he conceded, “and odd to hold. But we have to ride faster.”

The soldier driving the wagon, Corrin, grunted as he unloaded the barrels. Most of the soldiers here were archers, experienced ones, which meant they were old. At nineteen, Rupert was likely the youngest soldier here. So he volunteered to take the extra load. Together, Rupert and Corrin heaved it up onto his lap, and for a frightening moment he thought they had overshot their mark as the barrel tipped and threatened to drop. But he managed to grab a firm hold of the barrel’s far end, and pulled it onto his knees, at which point it was steady. His horse snorted in discomfort.

A few others volunteered as well, and soon they were cantering through the grass, the empty wagon quickly falling behind, Corrin riding with them. Rupert had to keep one arm wrapped around the barrel to keep it from shifting. He clenched his knees tight around his horse.

The sun set, but they had finally turned west. Soon the quarter moon became their only source of light. The Commander kept them riding hard. As they rode, there was a moment where Rupert thought that a cloud had parted over the moon, because everything seemed brighter. But the light was the wrong colour. It was yellow.

He twisted in his saddle, and saw far behind them, on the other side of the Crooked creek, an enormous blazing fire.

The Commander must have seen it too, because he shouted, “Don’t look back, don’t slow your horses. We stop when we reach the south village.”

Rupert’s eyes were wide. They had missed the deadline. He hoped that the exact timing demanded by the King was more of a preference than a necessity.

They rode along the perimeter of the forest and he could see brief glimpses of luminous mushrooms inside. He hated this, hated feeling as if he had forgotten something really important.

After what seemed like a half-an-hour, though it might have only been fifteen minutes, Stogard’s horse slowed to a trot, then a walk, then he stopped and dismounted. The other men followed suit. One of them relieved Rupert of his barrel of oil so he could step down as well.

They walked until they came within a hundred feet of the village. It wasn’t a large village, Rupert counted nine black shapes that he identified as huts against the not-quite-as-black horizon. Here was where a group of witches lived, outside of their forest, claiming farmland that had belonged to Renwans for centuries. Here they would be sleeping in their facsimile forests, the huts grown from trees. Had they just kept to their forest, none of these conflicts would have been necessary.

They all knew their assignments, Stogard had drilled them before they left. Every man had a role. Stogard reissued these orders now, silently, communicating only in hand gestures to the men gathered around him. Before he signaled them to depart, he whispered gravely, “Remember, spare none. Not even the children.”

They split into their teams. There were four barrels, and two men were assigned to each. Rupert and Corrin took one, pulled the cork from it’s top with the edge of a knife, and then carried it together so they were ten feet from the nearest hut.

The only witches Rupert had ever met were the ones he had seen **the capital**, the ones who mated with humans. These relationships were scorned and the resulting children shunned, but those witches were still civilized. The witches who lived amongst themselves, in and around the forest, were unknown. Surely they were just like the witches he knew, only… more. Images of feral women, wild and frightening, danced about his imagination, baring sharpened teeth at him.

Soldiers in the King’s army were trained with an odd code of honor. When defending the King’s law, they were to follow classic ideas of chivalry. But the King’s laws were placed above all else. Since the function of the King’s laws were to protect the innocent, there was never much conflict for Rupert. One rule in the code was to announce any intentions to inflict violence. Once again, this was more of a help than a hinderance to city guards. Most criminals would stop and come quietly once informed that failure to do so would lead to discomfort.

This mission fell sharply outside of these moral codes. Given King Gideon’s focus on peace, he had never imagined the King’s law would demand the ambush of (arguably) innocents. But, he reminded himself, the imperative remained the King’s orders. A conflicted soldier was worse than useless to his country. Rupert hardened himself. He was a soldier first.

He held his breath as best he could, fearing it would give him away. They couldn’t risk detection before the ambush was ready. He focused on the task at hand, and once he and Corrin had moved past the closest hut, he let his lungs a taste of air.

They walked along the quarter circle, taking each step slowly. Corrin supported the bulk while Rupert tipped it gently, carefully and conservatively distributing the dangerous liquid. There could be no gaps in the perimeter the four teams were forming, each team had to connect with the next. They reached the end of their quarter circle and waited a short time for another team to reach them. Wordlessly, they poured oil onto the same spot of grass. Then, with their reserves, Corrin and Rupert traced the path backwards again, soaking the ground even further. They were quicker this time, and soon rejoined the party.

The archers had their bows readied but not drawn. Stogard stood at the front and nodded to Corrin’s thumbs-up. Together, they waited for the other barrel teams to rejoin. When they were all gathered together, Stogard knelt down and drew a stick of flint and a striking rock from his pocket.

Rupert drew a deep breath, forcing calm, as he took the axe from his belt. He stared into the center of the village and imagined the scene that would soon be. He imagined the panicked, scrambling herd of creatures running this way and that, realizing too late that they were surrounded, as they were stuck with volleys of arrows. When the archers ran out of arrows, he would enter the fray, swinging his axe, laying to rest those who remained. He was trying not to imagine the bodies of little children when out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the archers draw back their arrows.

In this instant Rupert realized that, regardless of the King’s orders, he wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he killed children. But there wasn’t time to process this.

The world exploded in a sudden roar of fire. Where Stogard had struck, the flame erupted and raced around the circle they had traced until it reached the other side. Inside the horseshoe, the dark shapes of the huts were illuminated with harsh, red light. The village, all eight huts, were ablaze.

Rupert shook his head, momentarily distracted. Eight huts? He thought he had counted nine.

There was no immediate reaction from the village, no voices stirring from sleep.

Twenty-one soldiers waited as the fire caught on the grass and began to creep towards the huts. The light was harsh, and the fire cast flickering shadows. They waited another minute. Had the fire not been there, the village would have seem perfectly undisturbed. Stogard turned around. “Something’s wrong,” he said quietly.

He was right. The witches should have been screaming by now. But the fire crackled greedily, and no one cared.

Rupert found himself hoping, treasonously, that the witches simply weren’t home tonight.

Then, for the third time that night, the lighting changed.

The fire at the top of the horseshoe was spreading, but quicker than was natural. It scurried towards the soldiers, looped around and behind them, and then rejoined the other end.

It happened within a moment, quicker than Rupert could inhale. Where they had stood as hunters waiting to ambush their prey, they now stood as… well, he wasn’t quite sure what they were now. But he felt a terrible fear. The shape of the fire now resembled an hourglass, and they were sitting in the bottom.

Then something moved. Inside the village, a dark thing was emerging from behind a hut. Blinded from the fire around him, he couldn’t make out any details aside from its shape. It was enormous. Twice the height of a man, and vast, its proportions were distinctly inhuman. Its arms were too long, its torso too wide. Rupert would have expected it to lumber as it moved. But the thing stepped forward quickly.

Rupert took an involuntary step back, and noticed he wasn’t the only one who had done so. The archers, nervous now and given such an easy target, loosed their arrows all at once. They were practiced marksmen, each arrow found its mark, and for a moment the creature slowed, then stopped. It looked down as if to take stock of its injuries. The soldiers watched expectantly, and Rupert imagined the great beast succumbing and keeling over.

Instead it began to shudder, convulsing like a child poisoned. The smell of wet earth wafted over Rupert. He watched, horrified, while arrows dropped from where they had stuck and landed on the grass like a spring shower. It’s shuddering ceased, and before the archers had knocked their next arrows, it moved into their circle of fire and became visible.

A fantastic, horrifying beast, more forest than witch, stood before them. The fists that hung below its knees were clenched tight around a long staff with sharpened ends. Its arms were coated in a thick shell of pale bone. Sharp elbows reminded him of a grasshopper’s legs. Rupert’s eyes travelled up along its shoulders. Like its arms and legs, its chest was naturally armoured with interlocking plates of bone. Large sections of hair had fallen out of its scalp, replaced instead with dense clusters of mushrooms, pulsating and poisonous looking. But its face was a witch’s face, all proud angles and haughty eyes. Its eyes were black. They looked furious.

Rupert heard Corrin beside him let out a little moan of terror.

The monster raised its weapon high in the air. The staff spun deftly in its long fingers, before it was thrust forwards into the chests of three soldiers who had been already standing in a neat line. They were killed instantly, their bodies launched off into the distance as the beast spun the staff round again. Rupert stared slack jawed. The monster had thrown three full-grown men as easily as he would have thrown a shovel of dirt.

Commander Stogard sprang into action and rolled deftly to the side. Rupert saw him pull a shortsword from his belt and felt a brief surge of warm admiration for his superior. The warmth dispelled when the monster kicked Stogard and launched him fifteen feet backwards into the flames, at which point Rupert heard him die more than saw it. The screaming, the silence, the sizzling.

\*\*note: hearing the snapping/shattering of ribs

Panic found root in him. He didn’t know how to fight this thing. A cool head was useless without a plan. He couldn’t fight a monster like this, even Stogard hadn’t stood a chance. So, he ran away, putting as much distance between himself and the rampaging monster as possible. This took him to the edge of the fire. He looked for an opening in the blaze but could find no parting. The wall of flames was at least five feet thick. He would burn alive if he tried to break through.

He turned back around in time to see Corrin take a swing of the monster’s staff full in the face, which removed his head and sent it flying. The headless body buckled grotesquely.

From the edge of the fire Rupert watched the monster pick off the rest of his companions. Brave men, talented soldiers, perished like mice, until Rupert looked around and realized that he was the last one left alive.

Then the monster came for him. It moved slower now. Rupert thought that this was not out of exhaustion, but assuredness that there was no hurry.

He collapsed to his knees. “Please,” he begged, breathlessly, unaware that he had been crying. “Please don’t kill me, please, I was ordered to come here, it wasn’t my idea…”

Its voice was the snapping of branches during a windstorm. “Spare no one,” it growled. “Not even the children.”

Then Rupert’s chest collapsed as the monster speared him through the heart.

-snout

-bat wings

-big teeth

-mice scurrying around

-mushroom head

-bat nose

-webbed hands, fingers (would this make sense for non-aquatic beings?)

-double eyelids

-horns

-owl beak

-owl neck

-bushes with fireflies

-many eyes

-falcon face

-antlers

-tails (squirrel, lizard)

-pincers

-stingers

-scorpion tails

-hooves

-quadripeds

-snail eyes

-shells

-six legs, like ants

-

-staff not bow, spear?

-build suspense more

~~-moral questioning, make us care about Rupert~~

-simplify horeshoe/fire thing, maybe just have them go in

-arrows against sumac have to do something

-metaphor to explain how easily she throws grown men

-crushing scene, she can’t step on someone. Replace with a kick to the fire.

-is no one freaking out like Rupert?

-stop mentioning the eight huts all the time

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