

[Prince Armis Tu El Kaligos]

Audition: The Strongest Audition in the Universe

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After the destruction of a supposedly invincible demon god which threatened to end the entire universe of the Last Empire, Armus didn't know what could possibly capture their attention next. For him, the universe was conquered. He assumed he'd have a lot of free time moving forward, to do anything he wanted. He was spared from this fate by a letter from another dimension.

Armus' brother was bent over a computer screen, his face nearly pressed against the monitor. The data had finished compiling a few minutes ago, so Armus knew it wouldn't be much longer before Hyke revealed the findings. Armus picked up the letter and bounced it in his hands. It appeared to all his senses as simple paper.

"Well, it's paper." Hyke said with the emotion of a deflating balloon.

Armus quietly looked at his brother until Hyke was forced to elaborate.

"That's all there is to it! It's paper, inside and out. I looked at the sample you scraped off a dozen times." The scientist put his head in his eyes, revealing the frayed ends of the white lab coat he was wearing.

"Then it's paper." Armus put a hand on Hyke's back "Somehow enchanted to be even lighter yet stronger than armor."

Hyke shook his head without removing his palms from his face.

"If there's an enchantment, it's better hidden than... than..."

"...Teralst during study time?" Armus offered.

Hyke snapped his fingers and pointed at Armus. He laughed and looked up with some color returning to his face.

"Well, I guess that's that then. Sorry I wasn't able to find anything."

Armius felt a sudden tug in his chest.

“Well now, let’s not give up so easily. We still haven’t opened this letter from another dimension. It is addressed to me after all.”

Hyke raised an eyebrow.

“Anything could happen if you do th...”

“Unless you need me to fight another demon god, I’m willing to take the risk.”

Hyke narrowed his eyes and put up air quotes.

“‘Risk’”

Armius smiled and put up his air quotes as well.

“‘Risk’”

Hyke sighed and waved his hand.

“Go ahead. I know we should probably do this in a safe location but, you’re... you know.”

“I sure do.” Armius picked up the letter with enough force that it would have ripped any normal paper. It was so light it was as if it wasn’t there, though most things felt that way to Armius. He stepped away from Hyke and flicked his wrist to channel more mana than every archmage of the Last Empire combined.

He erected a field of translucent energy strong enough to isolate all information but visual. Whatever happened when he opened this letter, Hyke would see it, but there was no way he could be hurt by it. He didn’t bother raising such a field for himself though. Just because he had infinite power, it didn’t mean he should waste mana or his time.

He tore it just as easily as if it was regular paper. Or indeed, regular armor. Inside was a letter, and no world ending explosion. He imagined that would make his brother feel very silly for going through a dozen tests. He read it over once, unable to stop the grin on his face. He dismissed the barrier and handed the letter to his skeptical brother. Hyke straightened out the paper and glanced over it, a smile growing on his face.

“Are we sure it’s not addressed to the wrong person?”

“I’d hate to meet the other person named Armius Tu El Kaligos. I feel he’d be suffering from some rather unfair comparisons.” Armius laughed and shook his head.

“They invited you of all people to a *fighting* tournament? Does fighting mean something different in their culture?”

“They got all the other words right. I don’t know why that one would be the only mistake.”

“Well, want to go?” Hyke offered. “Could be a nice vacation. Not like there’s anything left for you to fight here.”

“Mmm. Maybe. I’ll decide after my appointment.”

Hyke’s eyebrows went up.

“Oh right! That’s today. Thank goodness you didn’t go.” Hyke patted Armius on the back and threw the letter onto his desk.

“I’m sure you would have found some way to deal with it without me. It’s just an asteroid.” Armius waved and walked through the hallway out of Hyke’s laboratory, his footsteps making no noise on the shining metallic floor. He looked out the windows to one side of the corridor to see the starry vacuum of space. Armius felt his chest tighten at how small and empty it seemed, yet it still held his gaze.

He could see his solemn expression reflected in the transparent aluminium window still, so he tried to focus more on the stars. But as he reached the more crowded areas of the space-fortress, he could hear conversations stall when he was near. People avoided even his reflection’s gaze. Some bowed so low their hoods grazed the floor and their hats fell off. He could tell them to stop, but he could hear their hearts beat like drums already. They might burst out of their chests if he acknowledged them.

Before he realized what he was doing, he had cast a protection spell around himself and already began teleportation. Even when he noticed, he didn’t stop. Space may have been small, cold and empty but it would still be an improvement. His vision was filled with light, and then he was on top of hard, rocky ground surrounded by stars on all sides. Dead ahead of him was the space fortress he had just been in, the palace of his father and it was steadily growing to take up more of his field of view. He sat down and crossed his legs, the fortress sitting right above his toes visually.

His vision focused and zoomed as he scanned through the windows. Few of the courtiers and servants spared the oncoming asteroid more than a glance.

“Maybe they forgot, just like Hyke.” he spoke into the void of space

Why would they remember? A new shipment of meat had more impact on their lives than this asteroid, even if it could tear right through the space station like cheap paper. He patted the ground beneath him, leaving a hand-shaped print in the rocky surface.

“Sorry friend. This is your big day, isn’t it? What were the odds of you being this big, this fast, and heading right for an orbital palace so self assured it didn’t even bother to adjust its position to avoid you. You must be so excited to do the one thing you’ve been blessed with.”

The rock’s silence spoke volumes.

“Oh I feel that. But trust me, people being scared of you gets old real fast. You’re a lot better off not even being noticed. So tell me. Would you rather be destroyed or turned around?”

The rock was paralyzed with indecision.

“Dealer’s choice then?”

Armius juggled a sphere of energy between his two hands, before dismissing it and drawing his sword. He slowly stood and raised his weapon with the tip facing the asteroid beneath him. After it was shattered he’d need to create a few thousands bolts of energy to vaporize the remains and stop any incidental damage to the space station.

“Then again.” He looked over his shoulder at the space station.

“I could let you do your thing. How do you think they would react to that?” He waved his hands in the air ““Oh I don’t know why Father! It was like the asteroid sapped my energy! I couldn’t stop it.’ You’d be the most famous rock of all time! The rock that defeated Armius when even his fated enemy could not.”

Armius laughed and laughed, letting his full, powerful voice out. It shook the asteroid beneath his feat despite the vibrations being dampened in space. It was nice to not have to whisper for once.

“They’d probably be so scared they’d throw all the luxuries of the Last Empire at my feet. Maybe hire a talented actress to pretend to love me, as much as she truly fears me.” He wiped a laughter-induced tear from his eye.

He sheathed Crownoath and leapt off the asteroid. The force of the jump instantly turned the massive rock around and sent it flying into unpopulated space.

“Good luck finding a nice place to do your thing, friend. Thanks for the talk.” Armius waved goodbye, then he snapped his fingers and the letter teleported from Hyke’s desk into his hand. He took a comically deep breath for being in the darkness of space, then mouthed the words that would release him, at least for a time.

‘I accept’

He barely had time to take in the view of the beach and the sounds of the ocean waves in front of him before he was under attack. Though undetectable to his magical senses, he felt instantly suppressed by an invisible force that would have immobilized even the best warriors of the Last Empire, and crushed flat everyone else. He drew his sword with a comically slow motion compared to his usual speed and mentally cast a detection charm, but the range only extended a few meters away before beings stopped.

“So they’re at least that far away and probably planning to pick me off from a distance.”

As he tried to cast the same isolation field spell he had used in his brother’s laboratory not fifteen minutes ago, he felt it sputter and fail. The field manifested around him, but was a mere shadow of

its former strength. He looked around frantically, but saw only the sand, the sea and a nearby city. Every sea bird was a potential threat and every mound of sand could be hiding an enemy.

“Well? Come on out! I won’t be dropping my guard so we may as well finish this now.”

The beach’s silence spoke volumes.

“Well that’s plan A down. I’d go for plan B, but first I need to think of one.” Armius looked up the stairs to the city. If they summoned him close to the city but outside it, it stood to reason they didn’t want a fight in there for one reason or another. That was a good enough reason to make it happen. With a ponderously slow wrist movement, he changed the barrier to form a hallway of force fields that encapsulated the stairs.

As he started walking up them, leaving the beach behind, he began to appreciate the depths of the curse he was under. He felt blind, deaf, numb and almost invalidically weak. If Teralst fought him like this, his brother would easily win. He wondered if Teralst would enjoy that before shaking the thought loose from his brain. He had the strength to climb these stairs but was still working with a fraction of his power.

He ignored the side entrance, wanting to get to the main city as fast as possible. As he crested the hill he saw a red gate marked with a fiery bird, and two red and black clad guards standing in front of the gate, both women. Their eyes were hidden, but when they saw his expression both of them grew concerned.

“Aren you alright, sir?”

Armius didn’t know how to respond to that question.

“Do you need help?” The other one asked.

The Prince didn’t know. Was this what needing help felt like?

“I’ve been cursed.” He said, but so quietly the noise barely reached his own ears.

The dark haired guard approached him quickly, but stayed outside the range of his drawn blade. If she was an enemy he was pretty sure he could move faster than her and take her out before she summoned any magic.

“What did you say, sir?” She asked, the expression on her face something he had never seen directed at him before.

“I’ve been cursed!” He shouted before realizing he had, but the woman didn’t recoil and her eardrums didn’t burst.

“What’s the point of weakening my voice too?”

The dark haired guard looked back to her white haired associate, who tapped her visor and shrugged.

"Sir, we can see auras. There's no curse on you."

He felt his muscles tense, but he didn't move. He just looked between the two of them, trying to gauge whether or not they were enemies after all. Armius knew all too well that expressions could hide true intent very easily. During the stalemate, the white haired guardswoman clasped her hands together and bowed her head.

"Really?" The dark haired one asked.

"Shut up. We get one a day and I'm going to use it on whatever I want."

"You were supposed to wish me a nice dinner with no calories. You owe me." The dark haired one crossed her arms and sighed.

Armius thought about using the moment to run away, or start the fight himself, but instead he waited along with them. He couldn't ever remember running from a fight, or starting one when he didn't have to, and didn't like that his panic was making him act that way. This thought steadied him, but he refused to sheath the sword.

"Well, how could I refuse such a kind-hearted wish from one of my adorable friends." A singsong voice sounded next to the gate.

"Glory to Inari!" Both the guards spoke in unison and stood at attention, but were followed by a dainty giggle from a figure stepping out of the gate. Her hair was wine colored, while her dress was mostly black with gold highlights. Her shoes rang with the sound of bells as she crossed her legs, one in front of the other, to walk towards him. She had another new expression on her face. Not the concern of the guards, but bemusement as plain as the smile on her face.

"Now now, no need for all that." She giggled again, in a way that almost seemed to serve as punctuation to her sentences.

"You must be Armius, the *Strongest Man in the Universe!* I heard you were coming today."

Armius blinked, relaxing his sword arm just a bit.

"And who are you?"

"Just a citizen who likes to help the newcomers from time to time. You can call me Chifu" She grinned, as if defying him to point out how the guards reacted when she arrived.

Armius wouldn't give her the pleasure.

"I was invited for a tournament, but I've been attacked since the moment I arrived. Not very sportsmanlike."

She put a hand on the side of her face and made an expression of exaggerated concern. She was still getting closer to him, and the sound of the bells wormed into the back of his mind as she did.

“Oh no! Who would dare attack the Strongest Man in the Universe? Tell me who and I’ll report them to the authorities right away.” She placed her fist on top of her open palm for emphasis.

“What do you know?” He asked through a frown.

She made a little ‘who, me?’ gesture as if scientifically designed to create anger in those it was directed at.

“Well, it’s just, you’re the *Strongest Man in the Universe*. But you’re not exactly in your Universe, right? The air is a bit thin, isn’t it?” She was well within reach of Crownoath by now, but she wasn’t even looking at him anymore.

Her gaze shifted to the sky, and he naturally followed it. The air seemed thick and hard to breathe if anything, but he knew that was just his lungs weakening alongside everything else. If there was one thing thin about the air, it would have to be...

“There’s no magic here.”

Chifu’s eyes went wide and she doubled over and laughed in a violent fit, steadying herself on his shoulder. Once again he was at the edge of his experience, feeling a primal need to stab her and run but having never even considered something like that before, he was frozen.

“Oh there’s quite a bit of magic here, but compared to your universe I guess it must seem that way. Your spoiled, pampered little universe.”

Armius finally sheathed his sword and stared down at the manically laughing woman.

“So I’m just a fish on land, then?” He said, remembering pulling a train-sized fish out of the water and giving it to his Father when he was but a child.

“Yes you are, little guppy. You’re only okay compared to most dimensional fighters. How does that make you feel?” She looked up at him expectantly, her chin coming up to his chest.

For once, the woman waited. Which was just as well, since Armius needed time to consider all this. Here, nobody knew or respected him. Here, he lost the strength his mother died to give him. He could even lose the life she had given him, and never see his family ever again. He would have to contend, scrap and triumph if he wanted anything. So he smiled down at Chifu and felt the pride of a Kaligos surge into him.

“When is round one?”

She stared at him a moment longer, before a genuine smile spread across her face. It conveyed so much excitement that it matched his own. Chifu leaned over to look at something behind him, nodded to herself and tapped his shoulder with her pipe. She gestured towards the fire-bird gate.

“You have time for a drink before all that.”

He followed her into the city, and every step felt lighter than the last.

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