

Storm King 391

Chapter 391: To the Boats

Minerva's group charged through the light forest of the southeastern part of the capitol island. Here and there, they passed smaller, more remote parts of the palace complex, like an isolated guest house, an unused amphitheater, or a small deserted park, but no one stopped even for a moment; the Earthshaker Paladin's subordinate knights were still hot on their tail.

Earthshaker had brought ten sixth-tier and twenty fifth-tier knights with him in addition to the battalion of soldiers to stop them from escaping with Prince August. Minerva and her group had gotten past the soldiers while the Brimstone Paladin dueled Earthshaker as a distraction, but the remaining elemental mages—a few had been killed in their short confrontation—gave chase.

Minerva knew they couldn't stop for long, otherwise she would've just halted their running column and dealt with the pursuing knights. They were in the very heart of the Kingdom, and there were undoubtedly additional knights and soldiers moving to stop them. Their journey wasn't over once they reached the boats, either, since the Legion checkpoints and fortresses along the Naga River meant that they'd have to re-enter the city and escape on foot.

All of this required time, and she hadn't the luxury of spending what little she had on the knights behind them.

With all that said, they were making good time. The sixth-tier knights that had fallen to the back of the column were doing a good job keeping Earthshaker's knights from overwhelming them, and there had been no other sign of obstacles in front of them so far.

Minerva cursed her optimism as soon as she considered these things. Fortune hadn't been their most reliable ally ever since Trajan had been killed, and once again, it turned on her. As they charged into an open field, not even a quarter-mile away from the coast and their waiting boats, they found a paltry dozen people standing in their way.

With the numbers on her side, Minerva might've simply charged those in front of them and forced her way through, but the figure in front made her hesitate.

This figure wore blue armor that glittered with sapphires, lapis lazuli, and turquoise. Her blond hair, gleaming almost silver in the moonlight, had been tied back into a tight bun, and her bright blue eyes were locked on Minerva's even from across the field. In her right hand was a thin, elegant blade, though it wasn't raised, and her empty left hand was covered in frost.

The Earthshaker Paladin had been deployed against them, tying up Brimstone in a duel. Now, the Sapphire Paladin and eleven other sixth-tier mages stood blocking their way.

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Leon, Valeria, and Anzu flew along the southern coast, quickly outstripping the more leisurely pace of Princess Stefania's yacht. With the Royal sigil emblazoned upon its side, the yacht was uniquely suited to infiltrating the capitol island, but the water runes that propelled it through the water were not up to the task of getting it to move quickly. With the explosions and sounds of battle that Leon could hear getting quieter and less frequent, though, he decided that he didn't have much time left if he wanted to join in

the fight, so he and Valeria mounted Anzu and took off, making for the original rendezvous point while Princess Stefania took Princess Cristina and Lady Isabelle toward the secondary rendezvous point.

Both Princesses had their own guards, so Leon wasn't worried about leaving them alone. What was happening with August and Minerva, though, did worry him, since all their plans relied on breaking August out of prison so that he could grant them some measure of legitimacy.

Anzu's powerful wings carried them fast, the griffin's potent wind magic keeping them aloft about ten stories above the water of the lake. Leon could see bright flashes of light in the distance, visual evidence to go with the sounds and piercing aura of the battle raging farther east.

A bit further south, though, Leon could see his destination. It was the edge of the cliffs and rocks that nearly surrounded the capitol island that made landing ships nearly impossible, right where the sandy beaches began. It was the location that Minerva had selected for their rendezvous point, and where about three dozen small boats had been stashed, each one big enough for perhaps five people.

Unlike the other parts of the island, the southern shores had been designed with aesthetics in mind. No harsh rocks, no sheer cliffs, just beautiful white sand. This meant that these areas had to be protected with frequent patrols by the Royal Guard and a dense network of wards, but these were designed more to repel criminals and foreign invaders. With two Paladins on their side, plus their status as knights of the Royal Legions, most of Minerva's people had made it onto the island without difficulty, slipping past the wards.

As Leon drew close enough to the boats to get a better look, he could sense that the wards hadn't even been properly maintained, making their infiltration that much easier. It seemed that no one had truly expected someone to try and attack the Royal Palace, and so had neglected the lake-side defenses.

Anzu gracefully landed on the beach, thankfully not triggering any wards that might have targeted airborne infiltrators in the process—though Leon wondered if it was simply illegal to fly over the Royal Palace, or if that consideration had made it into the palace's wards. He hadn't the time to properly investigate, for one of the dozen knights that had been left to guard the boats rushed forward with her weapon drawn, almost about to attack him until she recognized his armor.

"Ah! Sir Leon!" she cried in surprise.

"Where's Dame Minerva?" Leon demanded, not recognizing the knightess with her face-concealing helmet.

"She hasn't returned yet!" the knightess responded.

Leon nodded, then slid off Anzu with Valeria following suit. They'd make the rest of the journey on foot, for he didn't want to miss the group in the forests and gardens.

Before he started running, however, he paused for a moment and stared in disbelief at the rocky cliffs at the edge of the sandy beach. He could see a few of the rocks shifting, then rising up into the air, revealing themselves to be a humanoid figure several times his size with streaks of blue running up and down its body.

"Lapis?!" Leon exclaimed in recognition as he ran over to the stone giant. "I thought you were supposed to be with Dame Minerva!"

[Minerva did not seem to trust me, Leon,] Lapis rumbled as quietly as it could, though its voice still carried far enough that Leon couldn't help but be grateful that the battle not too far away was so loud.

"Well... whatever, that doesn't matter now, come with me!" he said, leading the way toward the tree line to the north. At this point, he was close enough that he could easily use his magic senses without alerting anyone to his presence elsewhere in the palace, and he quickly took advantage of that by projecting them. He could see Minerva's people trapped between two groups of knights, with Roland and a number of other knights closing ranks between them to defend August at the center. Further north, he could see the battalion of soldiers that Earthshaker had brought with him following Minerva's knights, while Minerva herself and three of her knights were locked in battle with the Sapphire Paladin. Leon didn't know how long she or her people could last against a seventh-tier mage, or if the rest of the group could successfully escape before Earthshaker's battalion caught up, so he set a rough pace.

Lapis, Anzu, and Valeria kept up easily enough, and within a matter of minutes, the small group had closed the distance between themselves and the site of Minerva's battle. Leon wasn't too sure how much of a difference he could make, but he had the element of surprise on his side.

"Bows, how do you like them?" Leon asked Valeria.

"At this range, I'm confident in my skills," Valeria immediately responded. There were perhaps only a hundred and fifty to two hundred feet between them and the closest of Sapphire's blue-clad knights, an easy distance for any enchanted bow to make.

Leon nodded, then summoned a pair of bows from his soul realm. One was his usual bow made of dark red wood that he had spent years slowly enchanting. The other was a spare, with only a few basic enchantments to increase range and power. It would be enough, though, and he summoned a quiver of arrows for Valeria to use.

The silver-haired knightess took the bow without hesitation, slinging her glaive across her back as she did, and prepared to fire.

Leon did likewise, nocking and drawing his bowstring. Both of them were using regular arrows since the enemy knights were fighting in too close to their allies for Leon to use anything more powerful. Before he fired, though, Lapis softly asked, [Shall I join the battle?]

"Not yet," Leon replied, loosing his arrow as he did. Valeria's arrow followed a split second later.

Neither of their arrows hit their marks, with Leon's missing his targeted knight by a hair, and Valeria's glancing off her target's armor. Given the chaos of the battle, though, this was hardly an unexpected outcome, and the simple fact that there were now archers putting some pressure on Sapphire's knights was a great boon for Minerva's side. Sapphire's knights were put on the defensive as more arrows followed and they were made aware of Leon and Valeria's presence. The arrows themselves did little damage to heavily armored knights, but it made them more cautious than before, and Minerva's knights were skilled and experienced enough to take advantage.

One of Leon's arrows slid past the head of one of Sapphire's knights, startling him and causing him to instinctively try and dodge any follow-up attack on that side, causing him to dodge right into the plummeting mace of one of Minerva's knights. The hit was solid and weighty, stunning the sixth-tier sapphire knight enough for the three fifth-tier knights he was fighting to knock him to the ground and

disable him with strategic strikes to his unarmored joints. Once immobilized, his helmet was easily torn from his head and his skull bashed in by the mace-wielder.

Valeria had a bit more success on her end, with her target almost stepping into one of her arrows as he struck at one of Minerva's knights, allowing her arrow to sink an inch or two into the armpit of his dominant arm. The man screamed in pain, dropped his blade as his arm went limp, and suffered a crushing blow to the back of the head inflicted by a heavy ax. It wasn't clear if he was dead or not as he fell, but even if he wasn't, he was out of the fight.

Things proceeded in this vein for a few more minutes, and Minerva's knights slowly gained the upper hand, both with and without Leon and Valeria's arrow fire. Unfortunately, the Legion battalion was still advancing, and Minerva was locked in combat with the Sapphire Paladin, with her and the two sixth-tier knights at her side just barely holding their own against the seventh-tier knightess.

Sapphire clearly realized what was happening around her as the pressure upon her intensified; three of Minerva's knights who had defeated their opponents lent their magical prowess to the purpose of defeating her. She dodged and blocked blasts of fire, blades of wind, and spikes of ice and earth, all while answering with great torrents of ice and water of her own. Her power was considerable, but more and more of Minerva's knights were gaining victory in their own battles, allowing them to concentrate upon her.

Her power wasn't greater than all the knights Minerva had at her side.

Leon froze for a moment as her head briefly turned in his and Valeria's direction after one of his arrows barely missed her unarmored head. He thought for a moment that she was going to charge him in revenge for disturbing what was otherwise a relatively even fight. Instead, she seemed to suddenly explode as a massive ring of ice spikes erupted from the ground around her, not killing anyone but pushing them back far enough for Sapphire to leap almost a hundred feet into the air, clear the battleground completely, and take off running for the advancing Legion soldiers further out. The remainder of Earthshaker's knights that were still in the fight did likewise, abandoning their battles in favor of retreating.

"Don't follow her!" Minerva shouted, and half a dozen knights who were about to do just that paused. "We make for the boats!"

The group quickly reformed, with several of the knights grabbing their own fallen comrades and began running in Leon and Valeria's direction.

Leon and Valeria fell in with Minerva, while Lapis waited for them to pass and joined the column at the rear, where its stone body would better protect the group in case they were attacked from behind.

"The Princesses?" Minerva tersely asked.

"Safe, moving for the secondary fallback point!" Leon said.

Minerva nodded, and the two saved the rest of their breath until they were in a safer position. Fortunately, they made it the remaining quarter mile back to the boats without further incident.

"Get in the boats and set off!" Minerva ordered as they spilled out onto the beach.

The knights scrambled to follow her orders, while Leon asked, "What about Brimstone?"

Leon couldn't see her reaction for the helmet she was wearing, but he could tell she was scowling.

"We might have to leave him behind. He's still dueling Earthshaker..."

"We can't count on him coming out of that on top," Leon said, suddenly turning toward Anzu. "I'll go assist!"

"Not a damn chance, Ursus!" Minerva glared at him as he stopped and turned back to face her, daring him to challenge her order. "We *have* to come out of this successful, and I'm *not* leaving both of you behind! Brimstone is a seventh-tier mage, he can take care of himself!"

Leon almost began to argue, but he knew the score. Leaving behind a seventh-tier mage could potentially cripple their fighting chances against Earthshaker and Sapphire in the future—assuming Brimstone lost his duel, at least—but it was still far more important for August to escape than for them to go back for Brimstone.

Still, it was his instinct to go back and assist in any way he could... and if he so happened to get a shot at killing Earthshaker, then all the better.

"Sir... Valera began, unsure as she was if Minerva would take offense to her offering her opinion. However, Leon turned to look at her, so she continued, "I agree with Dame Minerva. It's a terrible risk, especially with so many Legion soldiers between us and Sir Saturnius. Anzu may be able to take that kind of heat, but if he's shot down, then we're dead."

Leon noted her use of 'we're', clearly indicating that she assumed she'd be coming along. However, he couldn't fault her for having that opinion. He could turn invisible, fire arrows from a distance, had powerful magic of his own and was clad in effective armor, but none of that applied to Anzu. The boats would probably leave without him if he charged back into the forest, regardless of Minerva's claims about not leaving him behind, and it would only take a few arrows or blasts of magic to Anzu's wings to render the griffin flightless. If both things were to happen, he'd be stuck facing down not only the battalion of soldiers and knights that were still slowly advancing in their direction but whatever reinforcements were undoubtedly being prepared in the Royal Palace.

"... Fine," he reluctantly whispered, deciding for once not to indulge his reckless streak. Not for the first time, he found himself missing Naiad.

"Good, then let's go," Minerva said, pointing to the boats.

"I'll cover you from the air," Leon said, hurriedly adding "I won't go back for Brimstone!" when Minerva raised a suspicious eyebrow.

"You'd better not, he'd be furious with me if you fell here," Minerva whispered, then made for her own boat.

Leon grimaced, understanding 'he' to mean Prince Trajan. It had its intended effect, though, and any remaining thoughts of turning back for the Brimstone Paladin vanished from Leon's mind. He and Valeria quickly mounted Anzu and took off into the night sky, bows drawn and eyes open, covering the small boats as they slowly made their way across the lake.

Chapter 392: Escape

The trip across the lake was harrowing, to say the least. The water wasn't as calm as it could've been, and there were quite a few boats to keep track of, but it was the possibility of being caught by a Legion war galley while they were still vulnerable that caused everyone the most stress.

From his vantage point above the boats, however, Leon could see from the back of Anzu not only that they were clear of any other ships—there weren't that many out to begin with since nearly all had returned to their moorings once the sun went down—but that the palace behind them had turned into an absolute flurry of activity. He could see the entire palace complex lit up like the night sky and plenty of motion along the bridge to the capitol island.

It wasn't that great of a stretch for him to guess that a more coordinated response was being hurriedly thrown together after their successful escape. That they had only encountered a single Legion battalion during their entire operation was a miracle in and of itself, even if that battalion had come with a few dozen sixth-tier mages and two Paladins.

With August out of prison and all of them off the island, the advantage lay with them.

The knights spilled out onto the small dock that they had chosen to disembark from while Lapis hauled itself out of the water—it had been walking along the bottom of the lake, barely able to keep pace with the boats. It took a little while, but soon all one hundred or so knights were back on dry land. They carried with them the bodies of more than thirty of their comrades, most of them dead but a few simply too injured to move. Healing spells, potions, and salves were quickly handed out as needed.

One thing that stood out to Leon, though, was the complete absence of Princess Stefania's yacht. There was no sign at all of the Princess' entourage anywhere around the dock.

"Be as quick as you can, we have to move!" Minerva loudly ordered. "Ursus! Where're the Princesses?"

"Yes, Sir Leon, where are my sisters? And my mother, you did spring her from the harem as well?" August asked, now standing up with his own power. He hadn't the energy to keep up with them during their escape, so Roland had taken to carrying him like a child. Leon understood why the Prince was standing on his own even though he seemed about ready to collapse at any moment; if Leon had been in that position, he'd have been humiliated, and he wasn't even a Prince.

"I'm not sure," Leon admitted. "And yes, Lady Isabelle was with Princess Cristina when they boarded Princess Stefania's ship."

As if on cue, from a nearby building emerged an elderly first-tier mage. He'd likely achieved his level of magical power by virtue of breathing so long that his lungs finally adapted to magic power and was otherwise not a mage in any sense of the word.

"Sir Leon?!" the man called out, searching for Leon.

Leon momentarily rested his hand upon his blade, but after a brief scan with his magic senses that confirmed that the man was alone, he raised his hand and responded, "Here!"

The man quickly stepped forward with dignified purpose. He wore a dark green uniform that, once he was out in better light, Leon realized bore the sigil of House Taurus.

“Sir Leon, I bear a message from Her Highness, Princess Stefania!” the man said as he approached.

“Give it or speak it, then,” Leon growled, in no mood for pleasantries, and from the way Minerva and August stared at the messenger, neither were they.

“My mistress decided not to wait for you here, Good Sir,” the messenger explained. “Too much violence in the area, you see. Instead, she has decided to vacation in the Eastern Territories for the foreseeable future. Should you require her for any reason, she can be found in Ironford.”

Leon raised an eyebrow in curiosity. “No mention of anyone traveling with her?” Leon asked, drawing a brief look of reproach from the messenger at his informal way of addressing the Princess.

“None,” he testily replied.

Leon glanced at Minerva and August, looking for their opinions.

“We were heading for Ironford anyway, we can meet up with them there,” Minerva said, responding first. “I’m not surprised that they left first, but it’ll mean we can’t protect them.”

“We must catch up to them!” August insisted. “They can’t have gotten far in, what, not even an hour?!”

“We don’t know their route, we won’t necessarily catch up to them until we reach Ironford,” Minerva responded as she glanced around the dock. The injured knights were getting back to their feet, while litters were being hastily assembled for the bodies of their dead comrades. They’d be ready to get moving again in five minutes at the most.

“I can’t leave my family out there undefended right now!” August began to shout, but he tempered his tone after drawing a glare from both Leon and Minerva.

“They made their choice, we’ll do what we can but right now we have to see to your safety. We have to get you out of the city.” With that, Minerva turned to check in with the rest of the knights. August briefly looked to Leon for any sign of sympathy or assistance, but in this Leon supported Minerva. He could well understand August’s need to protect his family, but they had to keep their priorities straight.

Five minutes later, the group was moving again. Minerva set a hard pace, even though August still wasn’t up to the task. Leon eventually had to let the Prince ride Anzu, much to the griffin’s displeasure. Valeria, despite being the weakest mage among them, still managed to keep up without difficulty.

They hurtled down streets, through alleyways, and over the occasional bridge over small canals. Their goal was to get further south, avoid the Legion outposts along the way, link up with the rest of their force, and then continue south until they could find a convenient place to cross the Naga River. Much of their path was misdirection—going south instead of east—since it was easy enough to assume that they would be moving east to get August to his biggest base of support and thus, easy to set up some kind of ambush in line with the resistance they’d already encountered.

And, for a while, it seemed to be working. The group ran unimpeded through the city, quickly making their way toward the outskirts.

They made for quite the sight, and it wasn’t too much longer until they began to feel magic senses sweep over them. None of them could tell if they had actually been seen, but Minerva began to run

even faster regardless—Lapis alone made their group about as subtle as a brick to the face. Less than two hours after breaking August out of his cell, the group finally reached the outskirts of the city.

So far away from the densely packed urban centers, it was hard to say when they exactly ‘left’ the city, but by the time they reached a mustering field in the south, most of them considered themselves no longer in the city. In the mustering field waited thousands of knights. The place was almost eerily quiet, though, with barely a word spoken amongst any of them. At least four thousand knights and men-at-arms, silent.

Making up their number were the two thousand—less the hundred that went with Minerva—knights of Trajan’s retinue, along with one thousand from Roland, and another thousand from Brimstone. There were a few more of August’s supporters here and there, but all-in-all, the conspiracy to break the Prince out of the dungeon had been relatively small and didn’t involve too many people in the Royal Palace.

Without missing a beat, Minerva ordered the group to disperse to their positions, and then she and Leon made their way to the front of the group with August, Anzu, and Valeria. Roland had to see to both his and Brimstone’s people and while there was some tension there at first, by the time Minerva began to move, the rest of the column moved with her.

Now hampered by the weaker members of the group, Minerva had to strike a slower pace, but August, for one, was grateful for it. It meant he could slide down off Anzu’s back and walk on his own two feet.

For his part, Anzu was happy, too, when August dismounted. The griffin chirped happily and then nuzzled Leon while staring daggers at the Prince as if he was hoping he could kill this presumptuous human with his eyes alone. August shivered under this withering glare, and he fully believed that if Leon weren’t present, he’d be utterly savaged by the griffin.

To take his mind off the incensed war beast, August made his way to Minerva to speak for a while.

“Dame Minerva!”

“Your Highness,” Minerva replied, her tone even and perhaps a little bit annoyed at his presence. August was a little irritated himself at her lack of respect but given that he had been a few hours away from losing his head and that Minerva was a big part of the reason why he hadn’t—yet—he let it slide.

“I was hoping to learn some further details about what our plans are. If we’re to successfully escape to the Eastern Territories, then I have some things I need to plan.”

“That you do,” Minerva replied with a look of expectation. “Octavius will come for you. We’re going to need every able-bodied soldier and knight that we can get if we’re to survive what he’s going to throw our way.”

“Yes, but we first need to get east. How are we going to cross the Naga? I assume that we landed on the western side of the river for a reason?”

“We did. We weren’t sure what the response time might be for the local war galleys, so we needed to get off the lake as soon as possible. Worse, that blue bitch could’ve easily caught up to us and killed the lot of us if we didn’t get across the lake as soon as we could. After that, finding a bridge to get all of our people across undetected on such short notice was essentially impossible—”

“Why was it impossible? Surely it would’ve been easier to land on the eastern shore of the lake and then simply head east from there, rather than taking this southern detour?”

“Our people were being watched,” Minerva replied, her face stoic and confident despite her own fears that she hadn’t made the right decision. “Not to mention there are Legion checkpoints at every bridge. Crossing so many of our people to the east without attracting attention wouldn’t have been easy, so those of us who were already in the east are doing exactly what you suggested: they’re already making their way toward Ironford. The rest of us are taking this detour to try and shake our pursuers before making ourselves vulnerable as we cross the river.”

“How long do you think we have? The 1st Legion will be on our trail soon if they aren’t already, and the 2nd Legion isn’t too far to the south, if we get caught between them...” August tapered off as Minerva flashed him a terrible glare. It was a risky plan, she knew that, but it wasn’t good for the knights behind them to hear their leaders discussing their plan with anything less than absolute confidence.

August seemed to get the picture and wisely moved the conversation along.

“What about after we cross the river?”

“We make our way to Ironford.”

August nodded in understanding. The Ironford March was a hilly region in the Eastern Territories that bordered the Central Territories. Its land was incredibly rich in iron and coal, among other valuable metals, and was the central foundry for the Blasted Forge, the single largest weapons and armor manufacturer in the entire Kingdom. More than half of all the company’s forges were located in the city of Ironford.

Making the place even more important was the presence of a Royal mint, one of the few locations in the entire Kingdom outside of the capital where silver coins were struck. Most silver that was mined in the Kingdom passed through Ironford on its way to the capital anyway, so control over the city was strategically crucial.

Satisfied with that plan and looking forward to seeing his sisters and mother again, August almost asked about the possibility of Brimstone getting away from Earthshaker. His first concern was his own family, but Brimstone wasn’t that far down the list from there. He was irreplaceable to August, and not just for his military potential, but the Prince also valued him as a friend and advisor.

Whether or not that feeling was mutual or not, August wasn’t sure. What he did know was that if Brimstone fell to the Earthshaker Paladin, then he would be devastated.

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Small fingernail-sized stones bounced off Brimstone’s armor like tiny arrows, each one hitting with tremendous force. Sand whirled around him, seeking any crack in his defenses where it could spill in and shred his skin. The earth shifted beneath his feet, carrying the promise of impalement if he made any mistakes.

So far, Brimstone hadn’t made any mistakes. His armor held against the rocky shrapnel, his aura and fire magic kept the sand at bay, and his constant motion prevented spikes from erupting from the ground and piercing his legs. All the while, Brimstone kept pressure of his own on Earthshaker, with great gouts

of bright orange-hot fire pushing him back and fiery explosions tearing holes into the ground around his fellow Paladin.

Minerva and the others had managed to escape, and the battalion of soldiers had followed her. Brimstone was too preoccupied to check in with them, but he trusted Minerva at least to see August safely out of the city. Now, all he had to do was keep Earthshaker here and they'd win.

It would obviously be better if he managed to kill Earthshaker here and now, but after more than fifteen minutes of fighting, neither was any closer to killing the other than they were when the fight began. However, they were also locked in this duel, each one putting up enough of a fight that the other didn't feel safe breaking away.

In spite of this stalemate, Brimstone wore an enormous smile on his face. His normally black obsidian armor glowed red from the heat of his magic, his muscles ached from exertion, and from his mouth sprang insults after provocations after insults.

"HAHA! Almost got me that time! But that's the thing about you boys from Valencia, never able to seal the deal without paying for it or using daddy's status!" Brimstone shouted, his smile growing wider as a rock spike missed his leg by a hair and he vaporized a cloud of sand with a burst of fire.

Earthshaker roared incoherently and hurled another exploding boulder at Brimstone's smug face, but it was a bit slower than usual, and Brimstone easily dodged it with a well-timed jump. His smile only grew wider; it was incredibly rare for him to be able to fight and use his powers without restriction, so even though both he and Earthshaker were aiming to maim and kill, the fun he was having and the physical catharsis he felt from going all out were both undeniable.

"Not getting tired already, are you? I was under the impression that you could go for much longer than that!"

The earth beneath him split open in response, threatening to swallow him whole. Brimstone quickly saved himself by directing an explosive blast of fire out of his legs, hurling him out of harm's way. The Paladin landed on his feet and snapped his fingers, summoning five bright stars to hover around Earthshaker.

The first star launched itself at Earthshaker's back, splashing harmlessly across his armor. The second had much the same effect, barely even denting the surface of Earthshaker's left greave. The Paladin condescendingly smiled at his fiery colleague and decided to ignore the remaining three stars.

The next two stars seemed only to prove Earthshaker's disdain accurate, as they had as much power as the previous two. The last, however, struck Earthshaker in the back of his shoulder and exploded with extreme force, not meaningfully damaging the Paladin but throwing him off-balance.

Brimstone clicked his tongue in amusement. "You're not too experienced with this position, are you? It's all right, we can switch to one you find more comfortable if you want..."

Earthshaker looked up just in time for Brimstone to flash him a smile, a wink, and a fireball. Earthshaker couldn't dodge in time, nor could he summon a wall of stone before the fireball struck him, so he simply summoned his magic power and prepared to get hit.

Instead, a wave of water washed over him, protecting him from the fireball. Most of the water was flash-vaporized from the heat of the flame, but it was nothing the seventh-tier Earthshaker couldn't handle.

Looking in the direction the water had come from, he saw the Sapphire Paladin sprinting forward, ice spikes already summoned and hovering around her, ready for battle. Earthshaker wanted to ask what happened, but he knew this wasn't the time. He refocused back on Brimstone and was somewhat gratified to see the smirk on the other Paladin's face had disappeared.

"Well, I would normally consider myself more than man enough to handle both of you at once, but I think I ought to be leaving, now..." Brimstone said, his hands glowing as they filled with fire mana, ready for another attack.

"Oh, you're not going anywhere!" Sapphire declared, sending her ice spikes hurtling toward the fire Paladin. A wall of fire materialized in front of the spikes, though, vaporizing them before they reached their target.

Earthshaker tried to take advantage of the brief lack of visibility caused by the fire and smoke and stomped his foot on the ground, sending shockwaves through the earth. Unfortunately for him, Brimstone had also decided to use this opportunity and hurled himself backward as hard as he could. He practically flew a hundred feet through the air, hit the ground running, and charged back in the direction of the dungeon.

As confident as Brimstone was, as much fun as he was having, facing down two of his fellow Paladins was a bit too tall of an order for him to do without support. From behind him, he heard the Sapphire Paladin douse his fires and the subsequent shouts of anger from both her and Earthshaker as they gave chase. They hadn't realized he'd turned to flee since both had been under too much pressure to use their magic senses on too great of a scale.

Brimstone tossed a few fireballs behind him to force them to slow down, but for the most part, he concentrated his magic power in his legs to increase his speed as much as possible. Though it wasn't light or lightning, fire mana could increase a mage's speed by a dramatic margin, and Brimstone put that trait on display as he slowly increased the distance between himself and the other two.

Earthshaker and Sapphire weren't giving up, though, and Brimstone had to endure ice spears and exploding boulders as he fled.

The chase stretched across nearly the entire island, and Brimstone was only slowed when he reached the northern cliffs that dropped down onto the coast. Still, he wasn't slowed by much as he hurled himself with all the explosive power that his magic power could give him, rocketing out into the lake.

The water hit him like a hammer, and he was lightly scalded as the water around him boiled on contact with his heated armor. Luckily, this also cooled it enough to stop glowing, making him less conspicuous. He immediately began to swim for his very life, for Sapphire was a water mage and he did *not* want to be caught by her in the lake.

He cut through the waves with great speed, but a quick glance backward with his magic senses was enough to put the fear of the Ancestors in him, as he saw both Sapphire and Earthshaker on the cliffs he

had just jumped from. Fortune smiled upon him, though, as even with magic senses and night vision, a single man in black armor at night in the middle of a huge lake was not easily spotted.

He saw Sapphire pause only a moment before she dived into the waves after him, while Earthshaker seemed to give up the chase. Earth mana did *not* help mages swim or move very fast, so Brimstone understood if Earthshaker was bowing out of the chase.

Sapphire, on the other hand, was about to turn into his nightmare. He swam for all he was worth, silently praying to his Ancestors, to the Old Gods that held sway in these lands before them, and to every god worshipped under the light of the stars. He'd need all of their assistance to escape a water mage in a lake.

His limbs pumped faster than he had ever used them, and he submerged himself beneath the waves, concealing himself further. Several times he felt Sapphire's magic senses sweep over him, and he didn't dare respond in kind, focusing on swimming and swimming alone.

As he drew nearer to the northern coast, however, his terror cooled, and he risked a glance backward. The water was too dark to see in, but he couldn't see any sign that Sapphire was behind him. Still, he didn't allow himself to use that as an excuse to slow down, and he kept swimming as if she were breathing down his neck.

It wasn't until he pulled himself out of the lake on the northern side of the city that he allowed himself to relax even a little bit. He was still cut off from August, Roland, and Minerva, and now he had an entire city filled with knights and soldiers aplenty on Octavius' payroll between them and him.

With a deep sigh, Brimstone began to run north, intent on simply getting out of the city as soon as possible. When he was able, he'd run in a wide circle and head east to link up with his compatriots—assuming they had even managed to escape Octavius' minions and get out of the city themselves—but for now, getting as far away from Sapphire and Earthshaker as he could was his only concern.

Chapter 393: Sertor Arellius

Never in Leon's life did he think that the construction of a simple bridge could be so infuriating. He wasn't an earth mage, but it didn't seem that difficult to him, at least until the group finally reached a good place to cross the Naga River.

They had likely been followed, it was essentially impossible for them to have not been seen—though it was a possibility, it wasn't one that anyone was willing to entertain. They had hours at the most before the 1st Legion would be bearing down upon them from the north, and probably not too much longer after that before the 2nd Legion came up from the south. They had to get across the Naga as soon as possible, because there were elements of both Legions that were certainly coming up from the eastern side, too.

In order to safely cross, the decision had been made to not try and force a crossing at any existing bridge. Those were almost all guarded, and besides, they would've had to go quite a bit further south to find a suitable bridge across the Naga south of the capital, and that would probably mean running straight into the 2nd Legion.

No, Minerva had decided, it was better to build their own bridge. They had earth and water mages, so constructing a bridge across the river shouldn't be that difficult.

Unfortunately, everyone had underestimated just how deep and fast-flowing the Naga River was south of the capital. It narrowed considerably, causing it to cut deep into the earth and flow fast enough that to build a bridge with the strength and stability needed to support their crossing wasn't an easy task. Water mages had to direct the flow of the river so that earth mages could build their stone bridge, and the strain of their task was such that they had to frequently switch out. Almost half of their elemental mages were tied up in shifts to keep the construction going.

In response, Minerva took control of the four thousand-strong force, having a few spare earth mages erect some small earthwork fortifications while the rest of the force got what rest they could. She then went back to supervising the construction of the bridge while leaving Leon and Roland to take charge of the watch.

—

"You're looking quite glum, Sir Leon," Roland said in an amused tone. "You're not thrilled at the prospect of keeping watch with me?"

Leon looked away so that it wouldn't be so obvious that he was rolling his eyes. "Not thrilled at having to keep watch," he grumbled. "Makes me antsy. I honestly don't care what, I just want something to happen. I hate waiting around."

"I can understand that, but there isn't much else we can do other than wait around, is there?"

"There's plenty we can do, like making some pre-emptive strikes on the 1st Legion..."

Roland chuckled, though part of it was to cover up his own minor disquiet at Leon's statement. "We don't know where the 1st Legion is, so attacking them would be difficult. Besides, whatever else, they're still our countrymen."

"So?"

"Look, I get that you're a Valeman..." Roland let himself pause there just long enough for Leon to get concerned. Roland knew who he truly was, and little acts like this where the Paladin reminded him of this always frayed his nerves. "... and because of that, you might not consider the people of the Bull Kingdom your own. However, most of the retainers who are here now *do* consider the soldiers of the 1st Legion their countrymen, and I'd wager that most of those in the 1st think the same about us, as well. If we attack them first, then we cement ourselves as the enemy. If, however, we force them to make the first move, then we're acting in self-defense. We're still making our opening moves, here, but it would be better for our first large-scale engagement if they were the aggressors."

Leon grimaced, but he whispered, "I guess that makes some degree of sense..."

"It may not pay off in a visible, *tangible* way that killing a handful of their soldiers would, but it's not going to get a bunch of us killed in a foolish hit-and-run mission when they don't have to be."

"I'd hardly call it foolish," Leon retorted. "Striking first will slow them down and give us more time. It would kill some of them, and—"

“Yes, yes, I know all of that,” Roland interrupted. “It’s a matter of philosophy, I guess. Or maybe principle? I don’t know, I guess Minerva and I are just hoping that the rank-and-file soldiers in the 1st Legion aren’t buying into the same shit that Octavius has been selling to his cronies.”

“An overly optimistic view, I think,” Leon whispered.

“And you’re too cynical, I think.”

Leon didn’t argue Roland’s assessment; he agreed with Roland on that front. However, if both he and Minerva agreed that waiting around was a better option, at least for now, then he wouldn’t try too hard to convince them to try something else.

A few minutes passed in awkward silence, which Leon was more than happy to continue. Roland, however, had other ideas.

“Sooo... You’ve quite the eclectic retinue...”

Leon raised an eyebrow and glanced over his shoulder at his ‘retinue’, consisting of Valeria, Anzu, and Lapis. The stone giant, despite its prodigious command over earth magic, had little experience in construction, and so wasn’t helping with the bridge. Instead, it was keeping vigil over the makeshift camp. Valeria and Anzu were also nearby, with the latter dozing in a patch of grass and the former quietly practicing a few basic moves with her new glaive.

“Uh-huh...” Leon muttered, not seeing Roland’s point.

“Well... I—”

Roland suddenly stopped speaking and turned his eyes northward. Leon projected his magic senses and immediately tensed for battle; he could see the front ranks of the 1st Legion appearing just over a mile away. There were no signs of either Legion on the other side of the river, though, and for that Leon counted their group unfathomably lucky. Still, it was only a matter of time until elements of a Legion appeared on that side, so they’d have to move fast once the bridge was completed.

The Paladin swiftly blew a horn, alerting the rest of the knights to what was happening. They had been resting in a loose formation, so once everyone began waking up and springing to their feet, it was only a matter of three or four minutes for them to form a line five ranks deep protecting the bridge.

Barely a minute later, Minerva came sprinting over. She’d already updated herself on their tactical situation once she heard the horn, so she didn’t require any explanations as to what was happening.

“Ursus, Roland, you two get down to the first line with me, I need as many of our sixth-tier people out there as I can get.”

“Got it,” Leon replied, a wide smile blooming on his stoic face. Roland agreed, as well, but where he immediately jumped over the lines of knights and earthen fortifications, Leon took a moment to glance back at his ‘retinue’, as Roland had called it.

Anzu, sensing the excitement in the air, looked to Leon and fluttered his wings. He wanted to fight, that much was obvious, but Leon was hesitant to bring him into such a conventional battle. He didn’t think his griffin would last long against a Legion shield wall. Reluctantly, he decided then to leave Anzu behind. Valeria and Lapis, on the other hand, he was not going to leave behind.

"I'll be out front, probably locking down a sixth-tier," Leon said to Valeria. She reluctantly nodded, clearly wanting to fight at his side, but if he was going to be involved in a fight that intense, then she wouldn't stand much of a chance—for now, at least. "Lapis, you're with me, Valeria, join the line. I'll leave it to you if you want to use your bow or glaive."

"Understood," she whispered.

Leon moved to rejoin the rest of the group, pushing his way through the formation until he stood out in front. He caught the eye of Minerva, who was directing the available sixth-tier mages to where they needed to be along the line. With a few hand gestures, she moved Leon and Lapis south, to face the oncoming 2nd Legion along with four other mages. Roland, herself, and the remaining four unoccupied sixth-tier mages faced north since she could see more sixth-tiers coming from that direction.

Fortunately, there was no sign of either Earthshaker or Sapphire, so it seemed they didn't need to worry about any seventh-tiers making moves. However, they also lacked Brimstone, and they didn't even know if he was alive or dead.

The 1st and 2nd Legions each stopped about a thousand feet from their lines, just outside of the max effective range of most Legion bows—the bows could shoot further, but the arrows would lose too much of their penetrative power over such a vast distance, making them largely ineffective. From both Legions, a single sixth-tier mage began to calmly walk toward them, making no signs of hostility.

Minerva and Roland both moved at the same time, stepping toward the obvious messenger to negotiate and, at the very least, extend the amount of time they might be able to give their engineers to finish the bridge. On the south side, however, no one stepped forward. Leon looked around, a little confused until he noticed that the other sixth-tier mages were looking at him.

'Oh... they want me to do this...?' Leon wondered, his chest rapidly filling with dread at the thought. He took a few cautious steps forward, and when no one stopped him, sighed and continued walking. Lapis made to follow, but Leon stopped him with a quick wave of his hand.

"I'll be enough, my friend," he told the giant. "We don't want to make them nervous..."

"I would prefer to follow you anyway, Leon, but I will stop here for now..." The stone giant didn't quite move back into position, but it didn't move any closer, either. It was clearly still in position to act if anything happened.

A couple minutes of slow walking later, Leon met with the Legion knight between their lines. He was quite large, about six and a half feet tall, terrifically well-built, with more obvious muscle than Leon, dark hair—either black or dark brown, Leon couldn't tell in the dark—and light brown eyes. His skin was a bit more tanned than the usual pale shades of Bull Kingdom citizens, making Leon think for a moment or two that he was a foreigner, but when he spoke, he did with a perfect Bullish accent.

"I am Sertor Arellius!" the knight proudly declared, his name alone banishing Leon's wonderings about him being foreign. He stood tall with his arms back just a bit to puff out his chest, almost looking like he was trying to intimidate Leon with his looks alone.

“Leon Ursus,” Leon replied with significantly less theatricality. He wasn’t as tall as this man, nor as muscled, but that wasn’t enough to prove fighting skill, and Leon had great confidence in his abilities. He wasn’t going to be intimidated by Sertor.

“By the order of His Highness, Prince Octavius, Regent of the Bull Kingdom, you are all hereby ordered to stand down and turn over the fugitive August to face justice! If you do not, then we will have no choice but use force!” The knight spoke vigorously, but there wasn’t so much as a hint of genuine hostility in his voice.

“I’m afraid we can’t do that,” Leon replied.

Surprising Leon, Sertor didn’t look angry, only a bit confused.

“Sir Leon,” he said, “why do you ally yourself with this villain? He is the one who killed your Prince! Prince Trajan himself died at the order of August, and yet his own knights now defend him?! This is unthinkable! Have you no loyalty to your Prince?” Sertor was an animated and expressive man, and he waved his hands and made a great many faces as he spoke. Leon, however, wasn’t swayed by the energy he was putting into his arguments.

“We do not believe that August is guilty.”

“It was proven that he was!” Sertor shot back. “The Assembly was called, and they pronounced him guilty!”

“That doesn’t mean he did it.”

“Then you are mistaken!” Sertor definitely declared, his voice beginning to rise in volume. “The Assembly has deemed August guilty, and so he is a fugitive from justice! If you will not hand him over, then the only explanation is that you are complicit in his crimes!”

“Nothing could be further from the truth,” Leon said, his voice cold and icy as he began to emit killing intent. “None of us would have ever harmed Prince Trajan.”

“Yet you defend the man who murdered him! Prince Octavius sent us a message telling us that all of you were attempting to launch a coup... I did not believe it at the time, ‘there was no way’, I’d thought, but it seems that he was telling the truth...”

Feeling an odd sense of static in the air, Leon began to channel his magic power. Sertor had gone silent, his eyes locked on Leon in a deadly glare or realization.

“I AM SERTOR ARELLIUS!” he roared. It didn’t seem to Leon that it was for the entire battlefield to hear, but everyone heard it regardless. Instead, it seemed that the knight was just a loud man, and his frustrations had gotten the better of him. “YOU ARE TRAITORS AND VILLAINS! YOU DEFEND A MURDERER, A MAN WHO SLEW HIS OWN KIN! BY MY NAME AND FOR THE HONOR OF MY LEGION AND THIS KINGDOM, I WILL BRING YOU TO JUSTICE!”

Sertor erupted in golden sparks as innumerable arcs of bright golden lightning reached out from his skin toward Leon. To anyone else, it would’ve been over in a flash, but Leon’s own lightning magic was already flowing through his veins so he held out his hand and projected his magic power, forming what

amounted to an invisible shield around himself. Sertor's lightning hit this shield with thunderous force, pushing Leon back more than a dozen feet but not once touching him.

Leon's face split in an abject smile. Sertor was a lightning mage. Leon had never fought a lightning mage before, and his fighting spirit soared in the face of this new challenge.

Chapter 394: A Thunderous Duel

Sertor scowled at his attack's inability to harm Leon. The lightning he'd ejected from his body would've been enough to severely injure even another sixth-tier mage, but Leon had blocked it with seemingly little effort. The magic had been hastily cast, but powerful.

"For such power to dwell within a villain of your caliber..." the Legion knight muttered, his killing intent sharply rising despite his softer tone.

"I take it that negotiations are over with?" Leon asked without a shred of sincerity, eliciting a glare from Sertor. "A shame, your voice is delightful to hear, I could listen to you read genealogical records."

Leon's excitement was strong; he'd never fought another lightning mage before—let alone one of relatively equal power—and he was so eager to test himself against one that he couldn't stop himself from smiling like a madman. In an instant, his sword was in his hand, his helmet was on his head, and lightning crackled around his left arm.

Gratifyingly, there was no pain in his arm at all, despite the magic power coursing through the joint. The pain of losing his left arm more than a year ago was now long gone, though it wasn't something that Leon would ever soon forget.

"I must DESTROY YOU!" Sertor roared. The knight began to charge at Leon, but he quickly came to a halt when the earth started to shake. The source of the shaking of earth quickly revealed itself as Lapis appeared at Leon's side, protectively shielding the young man from any further blasts of lightning that Sertor might see fit to hurl at him.

However, Sertor simply frowned at the stone giant, glanced back over his shoulder at his waiting Legion, and shouted, "CHARGE!" then began his assault anew.

Leon didn't have time to see what was happening with the 2nd Legion behind Sertor as the knight struck with all the speed that Leon had come to take for granted; his sword vanished in a burst of light, replaced with a two-handed war hammer that struck Lapis in the leg before the stone giant could even react. The rock of Lapis' leg splintered and cracked but remained relatively intact. Before the giant could retaliate, though, Sertor had slipped past him and waved his hand at Leon, sending another burst of lightning his way.

Leon raised his arm again, using all the magic power he could force out of himself to block the blast. Sertor's practically unrestrained blast was a refreshingly new way to use lightning magic that Leon had never tried before. It lacked the direction of a bolt, and thus lacked power compared to what Leon was used to using, but it clearly required much less time for Sertor to use than Leon needed to conjure a bolt. In fact, the Legion knight seemed—in Leon's eyes, at least—to have far more in common with a fire mage letting loose with a massive gout of flame than anything Leon had ever used his lightning magic for.

Still, the golden lightning hit Leon's sphere of power like a stream hitting a boulder, splitting around it and distorting until it hit the ground. A few stray arcs lit up Lapis' injured leg, but the stone giant barely seemed to register that as it slowly turned to face Sertor again.

"I'm fine, Lapis!" Leon shouted, not wanting the stone giant to interfere in this duel. He'd undeniably have the advantage if the giant joined in, but this was something he wanted to do himself. Sertor was more than a threat, he was an unspoken challenge not just to him as a knight and not even just to him as a lightning mage; it was to the last remaining heir of the Thunderbird that Sertor was making his challenge.

Lapis' voice of grinding stones indicated reluctance to leave Leon, but when Leon bolted forward, his sword glittering with sparks and small arcs of lightning, the stone giant had little choice left. It was fast for its size, but not nearly as much as a pair of sixth-tier lightning mages. It turned its attention elsewhere.

Leon didn't take too much notice of Lapis' subsequent actions. His attention was fixed on Sertor—who quickly swapped his hammer back out for his sword—with only as much attention devoted to his surroundings as he could get away with. Lightning surged through his veins, silver-blue in color until the moment it left his body, taking on a golden hue to match that of Sertor.

This lightning formed a bolt in Leon's off hand, a long spear of lightning that charged the air and caused Sertor's hair to stand on end. Accompanied with a tremendous clap of thunder, Leon hurled the bolt with all the power he could muster. In a flash, the bolt exploded upon the breastplate of the Legion knight, charring the bright, shiny metal black and hurling the knight onto his back.

And yet, Sertor rose to his feet, seemingly none the worse for wear, though his armor was significantly more tarnished. The only proper injury Leon could locate on the man was a small burn on his cheek just barely visible on the edge of his visor from an errant arc of lightning.

"You are strong," Sertor stated, locking eyes with Leon. His anger had cooled from the pain of Leon's retaliatory strike, but it hadn't completely dissipated. "Stop this, there is still time to salvage your honor and show the proper respect to Prince Trajan's memory by upholding his ideals. I don't want to kill anyone today..."

"I *could* do that," Leon replied, his smile not faltering in the slightest. "However, I don't think I will."

With that admission, he raised his stance again and lunged at Sertor.

Their blades met between them with the titanic roar of thunder. Again and again they struck at each other, neither able to decisively seize the advantage. Leon's aggressive style was mitigated by Sertor's thick armor, while Sertor's own counter-strikes either glanced off Leon's armor, were deflected by his blade, or were dodged completely.

It was like a bright dance, both combatants weaving in and around each other, each sparking and practically glowing as lightning magic filled their bodies and uncontrollably lanced out at their opponent when they drew close enough.

Sertor was clearly growing more and more infuriated, while Leon only smiled wider and wider, his glee visible even from behind his helmet at such a fight too much for his stoicism to bear. In fact, Leon's obvious, unabashed joy only added to Sertor's anger and frustration.

"VILLAIN! I WILL NOT LOSE!" the Legion knight bellowed as he parried another of Leon's blows and took that most brief of moments to lunge backward and create some distance. Leon closed that distance as quickly as he could, but Sertor's aura already indicated an imminent blast of lightning was coming his way.

Sure enough, Sertor pointed a palm at Leon and a bolt of golden lightning erupted from his skin. It glowed brighter than anything else he'd thrown Leon's way, indicating a much greater amount of power packed into it. Still, Leon didn't hesitate to reach out with his own power, attempting to seize control of the lightning.

The bolt burst forth, but upon coming into contact with Leon's power, it slowed to a spectacular crawl. Sertor pushed harder, determined as he was to force it to connect with Leon. Leon pushed back, not willing to try and divert its path. Once again, the two men locked eyes, their eyes clearly visible in the visors of their helmets in the golden light generated by the lightning bolt trapped between them.

The lightning itself seemed almost a liquid substance suspended between them. It twitched one way, then the other as Leon and Sertor fought for its domination. Its surface roiled and crackled, angrily twitching as each momentarily gained tiny advantages that were quickly quashed by the other. Tiny arcs of lightning began to be ejected from the larger bolt as power it couldn't contain flowed into it from both sides, turning the air between both men hot and filling it with the smell of ozone. None of the arcs reached Leon or Sertor, though, with all that came close bending around them like they were magnetically repulsed.

Neither gave in. A minute passed like an eternity as they struggled for control, neither willing to give so much as an inch. It was a game of strength, and to lose would be to humiliate themselves before all who were bearing witness to their duel.

And nearly every person on both sides *could* see it, for after Sertor's order to charge, the Legion hadn't. Not a single soldier had moved, and even the knights hadn't fired a single arrow into their ranks. They simply stood and stared at each other, no one willing to break the tenuous peace even as shouting and the sounds of battle began to be heard from the north.

The only two who were fighting in the south were Leon and Sertor. Even Lapis, after deeming Leon to be relatively safe from outside interference, stood aside and observed the fighting, the cracks in its leg inflicted by Sertor slowly closing up.

Two minutes passed. Two minutes that seemed like an eternity, and both Leon and Sertor were covered in sweat. They began roaring in exertion so close together that it was practically in unison, yet the lightning bolt between them didn't move much, though Leon could swear that it was just a little bit closer to Sertor than it had started—or maybe that was just wishful thinking, for even if it was closer to Sertor, it was only by a marginal distance.

Sertor broke first. He was fighting to bring Leon and the rest of the knights to justice, not to show his strength. With as much strength as he could spare, he pressed down upon the bolt, slowly bending it

until it resembled a shallow U shape. The shape became more and more pronounced as Sertor pressed further—the bolt couldn't be moved forward or backward with its points stuck in Sertor's and Leon's clashing magical 'fields', so there was only one way he could end this stalemate that he could see.

The middle of the U touched the ground, and the bolt exploded with immense force. A tremendous shockwave hurled Sertor and Leon back dozens of feet, with both landing so hard that they rolled even farther. The crater that the bolt left behind was deep, and the thunder that had resounded over the entire battlefield caused some of the weakest members of both groups to clutch their ears in pain.

It took a moment for the dust to clear and both combatants to rise to their feet. Leon was a little faster, but his face burned in humiliation behind his helmet. He was the last heir of the Thunderbird's awesome power, and yet he hadn't been able to defeat another 'common' lightning mage in a contest of strength.

His smile was gone. His joy in such a challenge was rapidly replaced with killing intent.

"You've done well, traitor..." Sertor growled as he struggled to his feet.

Leon was gratified a bit to see that the knight was in a much worse state of affairs than he; Leon's black Magmic Steel armor hadn't been meaningfully damaged in the blast, with the defensive enchantments woven into the metal and the Skyflax padding absorbing most of the magic. Sertor's plate armor was clearly of inferior magical defense, as its shiny gray exterior hadn't just been tarnished and burned black, but it had even melted in places.

"... but peace *must* be maintained! I cannot allow you to continue!" Sertor took a few staggering steps toward Leon, while Leon began to run forward, both circling around the crater to reach the other.

However, Sertor stopped as he finally noticed that his Legion hadn't followed his order to charge. Even Leon stopped as this fact finally dawned on him. Neither side was fighting right now—at least, on their side. The sounds of battle coming from the north indicated that the 1st Legion hadn't had the same reluctance to kill their fellow Bull Kingdom citizens as the 2nd seemed to.

Or maybe they were just more disciplined, or they bought into Octavius' version of events more. To Leon, it didn't matter that much *why* they were fighting, only that right now, they were.

"It seems your people are hesitant to spill their countrymen's blood, Sir Knight," Leon said as he and Sertor closed with each other, both a little wary but not quite going at the same level they had just been. Seeing their fellow's watching their actions without fighting themselves was a sobering sight, and it cooled their boiling killing intent substantially.

"It's a feeling I can understand," Sertor responded, his blackened sword at the ready even as his tone softened and his body language relaxed just a little.

"As can I," Leon agreed, his actions somewhat mirroring Sertor's. "I don't want to kill you, if possible. You're the first lightning mage I've ever truly fought, and I've learned quite a bit."

"The same is true for me..." Sertor replied.

The two stood in silence, staring at each other, neither willing to make the next move but not quite trusting the other not to take advantage of a lapse in attention.

“My duty is clear...” Sertor slowly said as he took a few hesitant steps in Leon’s direction. “I must bring traitors to justice. This is a rebellion. I *must* put it down.”

“We are not rebels, Sir Sertor, we only want justice for Prince Trajan,” Leon responded, standing firm as Sertor approached but taking no steps forward of his own. He could see the uncertainty in Sertor’s blade as it quivered in the other man’s grasp, and he meant it when he said that he didn’t particularly want to kill him if he didn’t have to.

Of course, that wouldn’t *stop* Leon from doing so if Sertor forced the issue, but Leon’s reluctance remained. Fortunately, it seemed like he wouldn’t have to, as the surety and conviction in his short statement gave the other knight pause. Leon hoped it meant that Sertor was doubting his stance, but there was no way for him to be sure.

A horn sounded over the chaos of the battle. Leon recognized it as the one that was to be sounded when the bridge had been completed. He was a little surprised, since he knew that the bridge hadn’t been that close to completion before he and Roland had seen the first ranks of the 1st and 2nd Legions, and it had only been maybe half an hour since. Still, he was forced to accept it as the knightly lines rippled in retreat. The knights were moving from their elevated positions and trenches toward the bridge, and if Leon didn’t want to be left behind, he’d have to follow.

“Let’s go!” Leon shouted to Lapis, and he and the stone giant took off running for their comrades.

Sertor gave chase, not quite willing to let them go just yet, but his heart wasn’t in it anymore. Leon and Lapis quickly outpaced him, and Sertor had to stop at the trenches in front of the earthen fortifications or he would be cut off from the support of his own Legion, which was only just now starting to slowly advance.

He could see the knights of Trajan’s retinue falling back in orderly lines, Leon, Lapis, and the rest of the sixth-tier mages on the south side watching him with mistrust. They were *right there*, but for all intents and purposes, they had escaped him.

Chapter 395: Ironford

The way to Ironford was open, and the bridge completed. Knights streamed across it as quickly as they were able while maintaining enough discipline to secure the opposite bank. Those farther north broke out bows to provide those knights who continued to fight the 1st Legion with ranged support, as they had been doing before the bridge was finished. Those to the south, however, maintained the uneasy truce between themselves and the 2nd Legion, which had stopped at the shallow trench that had served to protect the retinue’s line.

Leon, Lapis, and the rest of the sixth-tier mages posted on the south side covered the retreat, never taking their eyes off the 2nd Legion. Meanwhile, the 1st Legion continued to press on the north, forcing the retreating knights back and not giving them a single moment for the first rank of knights to begin their own retreat.

It was a terrible bloody grind on the north side, while to the south it was almost serene.

Still, the knights on the north side did what they could and managed to use their superior average power and greater mobility to break away from the Legion shield walls and retreat to the bridge, while the retreat from the south was far more orderly.

“Ursus! Let’s go!” Minerva shouted as she ran past the remaining knights covering their backs. It had taken about ten minutes, but they and the few sixth-tier mages that were covering the retreat were the only knights remaining on the western side of the Naga River, and the shield walls of the 1st Legion were hot on their heels, not to mention the powerful mages that led those shield walls.

Leon nodded to ‘his’ people, and they sprinted after Minerva. Lapis went last, just in case the bridge was unable to take its weight, but it didn’t so much as shake as the stone giant crossed. On the eastern side, it became apparent why: the earth and water mages that had been building it had rushed its completion and were quite literally using their power to hold their unstable work together as the rest of the four-thousand-strong force crossed. As soon as Lapis reached the dirt on the eastern side, the mages released their magical hold on the bridge and the river around it. The eastern third of the bridge collapsed almost immediately as the river that the water mages had been diverting to more stable sections of the bridge crashed into it.

On one hand, the mages nearly collapsed from the exhaustion of holding the bridge together, but on the other hand, they no longer had to demolish the bridge themselves in order to keep the Legions from immediately following them.

Leon, Minerva, Roland, and the rest of the knights panted for breath and began getting the group organized to march east—they had taken a fair number of casualties, and *someone* had to carry the dead and wounded, after all. The 1st and 2nd Legions watched from the other side of the river, many in the former ineffectually firing arrows at the knights as they retreated. Leon didn’t pay much attention to them, though; his eyes were locked on Sertor, who had removed his helmet to watch the knights vanish into the darkness.

They’d fight again, he could feel it in his bones. More than that, he could feel it in his *blood*, and when they next clashed, he’d win. No other outcome would be acceptable. As it was, he hoped with everything he had that the Thunderbird hadn’t witnessed his inability to decisively defeat another lightning mage of similar power. His pride had already taken quite a hit from that disappointment of a duel, and Xaphan or the Thunderbird chiding him for barely pulling off a draw would be more than he could bear.

Even with his regrets and personal admonishments, Leon didn’t stay there for long. Valeria, Anzu—who were both mercifully uninjured—and Lapis stood at his back—the giant’s leg was still cracked, but Leon could swear he could see the cracks mending themselves at a rate that was just short of noticeable—and he had no intention of staying behind as the rest of the knights fell back to the east. There was no time to waste as it wouldn’t take longer than a few hours for the Legions to rebuild the eastern section of the bridge and cross, let alone the possibility of other Legion elements that may be closing in on them on the east side, as well.

The knights got underway. Minerva and August led the group from the front, taking them on the shortest route to Ironford that was available to such a large group. Roland had command of the center of the column where the dead and the wounded were being carried, while Leon had been given

command of the rear, much to his surprise. But, surprise aside, he took the assignment seriously, marching at the very back of the column and keeping his magic senses projected for any sign of pursuit.

Fortunately, by the time the column stopped to make camp, no one had appeared behind them.

—

Three days of hard marching later, Ironford began to appear in the distance. The Eastern Territories were hilly and mountainous, making large-scale movement through them difficult. But the knights were relatively high-tiered, and they made good time, passing through many small towns and villages and reaching the outskirts of Ironford without even the slightest sign of pursuing Legions.

That didn't mean they could relax and ignore their problems from safety, though. Roland stayed behind at a narrow rocky pass guarded by a castle built by a Count in the service of the Marquis of Ironford. If anyone wanted to pursue Minerva and August's group, then they would have to not only defeat two thousand of Roland and Brimstone's knights but also the five hundred warriors manning the castle, all in incredibly strong defensive positions. In fact, this pass acted as the primary gateway into the Eastern Territories from the Central Territories, so any Legions that might want to pursue them would have to either force their way through the pass or march hundreds of miles around to the more agreeable southern approaches.

Leon, August, Minerva, and the rest of Trajan's retinue walked alone into the city. And a remarkable city it was, built in a tight valley carved by a fast-flowing river, with dozens of forges lit throughout the entire day. These forges were so numerous that they had a reputation for making the city so bright as to blot out the stars at night—though, since the retinue arrived just after midday, Leon wasn't able to verify that reputation. He was looking forward to it, though, the stories he'd heard from his father of the Blasted Furnace's foundries had been enough to excite his imagination, and he was hoping that it would live up to his expectations.

The retinue strode into the city, to the surprise of every citizen they passed by—they weren't used to seeing so many armed and armored warriors in their city, and to some, it felt a bit like an invasion. Fortunately, no one did anything except stare and make way. Ironford had a large population and a dense urban center but getting through the apprehensive crowds was eased by a delegation sent by the Marquis of Ironford that met them outside the city. The Marquis himself waited for them at the gates of his palace near the center of the city and warmly greeting Minerva once she arrived.

"Dame Minerva! So wonderful to see you again!"

"Lord Titus Herrenia!" Minerva responded, a smile gracing her tired face as she stepped forward and grasped the Marquis' wrist.

"It has truly been far too long since we last met, I wish it were under better circumstances," the Marquis said, releasing her wrist as his lips turned in a deep frown at their current circumstances. He was a high enough ranked member of the nobility to have a seat in the Assembly, and if August's trial hadn't been so rigged, Marquis Herrenia would've attended; by the time he heard Octavius' summons for the Assembly to come and gather in the capital, it was already too late for him to attend.

"I wish the same, but unfortunately, none of us can change the past," Minerva responded with significantly less emotion than she truly felt.

“Lord Herrenia,” August said in a light greeting as he stepped forward, his expression one of mixed dismay at having been seemingly forgotten and overlooked mixed with his normally unflappable noble and polite demeanor.

“Your Highness! Ah, I must apologize,” Titus loudly declared. He made to speak further, but August interrupted.

“No, no, I understand, Dame Minerva is so remarkable that greeting her simply couldn’t wait!” August spoke with such sincerity that Minerva legitimately wondered if he was serious or not. However, flattering words were still flattering words, and she couldn’t help but allow her smile to grow a little bit in response.

“Indeed, she is,” Titus agreed. “Please, step inside, I’m sure you’re all tired from your rapid march! Truth be told, I wasn’t expecting any of you for a few days yet, I’d heard that you were going to be held up after leaving the capital!”

“We were,” Minerva said, quickly explaining the broad strokes of their journey eastward.

“Ah, well that explains it,” Titus said. “I knew you would move quickly, given the power of your followers, but I’d heard that the 4th Legion had been dispatched to intercept you if you had gone directly east.”

“We didn’t once encounter the 4th... Where did you hear this?” August asked.

“From Princess Stefania, Your Highness, she arrived here only a day ago!”

“Take me to her!” August immediately demanded as his face twisted in desperation, his excitement and travel fatigue easily overriding his Royal dignity.

“Of course, Your Highness, but perhaps it might be best if we allow your companions some rest, first?” the Marquis inquired.

“Um, yes. Yes, that would be for the best,” August replied, though his poorly-hid expression indicated that he wanted to see his family sooner rather than later.

The rest of the knights were led into the palace’s enormous primary courtyard. Lapis was given many a strange look as it followed them inside, but all it took was a hint of killing intent from Leon and a stern word from Minerva and no trouble was had, though Leon noticed a sharp increase in the number of guards around the palace, most of them keeping an eye on Lapis.

Given the trouble the Eastern Territories had with stone giants, Leon didn’t hold it against them, and he knew that Lapis didn’t much care about the situation.

Once everyone had entered the courtyard and the Marquis’ people began to arrange accommodations, the Marquis himself led Minerva, August, Leon, Valeria, and a few of the other more important knights into the palace to meet with Princess Stefania. Lapis was left in the courtyard, while Anzu was given his own richly appointed cell in the stables where he promptly curled and fell asleep.

The palace was a magnificent building, not so large as to be ostentatious, but not so small as to be embarrassing for a man of the Marquis’ station. It could comfortably house about fifty people in luxury, with room for a further five hundred in nearby barracks. The palace itself had been built of local gray

granite rather than the white stone traditionally favored by the Bull Kingdom's elite and had an almost stark and cold façade. It was three stories of plain grey brick, surrounded by a thick wall with numerous towers. In contrast, the grounds between the palace proper and its outer walls were filled with gardens of such beauty that they just about put the Royal Palace's own landscaping to shame.

The inside, too, differed greatly from the outer façade, with floors of polished black granite and red carpeting, walls covered in so many red, orange, and gold mosaics that they resembled long sheets of warm, inviting colors. Alcoves and marble statues were everywhere, as were paintings, vases, ceremonial swords, and just about everything else that would make an art collector salivate.

August noticed none of this as the Marquis led him and the rest of the group toward a private wing of the palace. He was so stressed and worried about his family that he could barely even acknowledge the Marquis' questions, and as they drew further into the palace, it only got worse. His worry even began to affect the others, and they walked in relative silence feeling like an enormous weight was pressing them into the floor.

They finally reached their destination about ten minutes after leaving the courtyard, though it had felt like about ten hours to those affected by August's aura.

The Marquis had taken them to a particularly luxurious wing of the palace, and the doors he stopped at were especially so. They were heavy red oak, fixed with marble statuettes, and covered in gold trimmings. Titus loudly knocked on the door, then stood respectfully to the side to let August take the lead from there.

Almost immediately, the door opened a crack, and once the person on the other side saw who was standing there, the door was pulled open to reveal one of the knightess' in Princess Cristina's personal guard—in fact, Leon recognized her as one of the sixth-tier mages who had accompanied the Princess out of the harem, though she wasn't Proxima, who had seemed to be in command of the unit.

"Your Highness!" she exclaimed in mild surprise. "Please come in... though your friends..."

"I understand... everyone but Dames Minerva and Valeria, and Sir Leon should wait outside," August said.

Leon lifted an eyebrow in confusion. Of all the people, he wasn't sure why he was singled out. Or rather, he figured it was so August could show him some favoritism, but it was a strange way to go about it. He knew that the children of the King weren't usually allowed to be in the company of unrelated members of the opposite sex until they had been formally presented to the Royal court, so him going to meet the Princess under these conditions was questionably appropriate and technically illegal.

Ignoring Leon's questioning look—as well as just about everyone else's—August walked into the room, closely followed by Minerva. Valeria hesitated at the door, not wanting to disobey what had essentially been a command from a Prince to enter the room, but not wanting to leave Leon behind, who was her direct superior. With a reluctant sigh, Leon followed August, and he was followed by a smiling Valeria in turn.

Following Minerva and August into the next hall and into another room, a young feminine voice cried out, "Val!" and what seemed to Leon to be a black-colored blur nearly tackled her to the ground.

The blur turned out to be Cristina's hair, and the Princess buried herself in Valeria's arms, babbling incoherently. Leon was able to piece out a word here and there and managed to work out that Cristina had been terrified that Valeria would be killed or injured after they had separated on Stefania's yacht. He was mildly interested to note that Cristina had run right past her own brother to throw herself at Valeria, and August stared in shock, his arms that had been spread open to embrace his younger sister now dejectedly falling back to his sides.

"Sir Leon," came a smooth, sultry voice that sent shivers down Leon's spine and distracted him from the young Princess and his knight.

He turned and locked eyes with Princess Stefania. She stared deep into his eyes, her own deep dark brown eyes holding promises of bliss and ecstasies that he could never imagine; averting his gaze on his own was nearly impossible, but a single thought of Elise was enough for him to do so—as well as a tiny spark of silver-blue lightning flashing in his chest.

"Ahh," Stefania said as Leon's eyes fell from hers, "I think I'm starting to get why Lady Elise likes you so much..."

As if some spell had been lifted, her seductive air vanished, leaving her just the same beautiful Princess she was the last time she and Leon had spoken.

"... What...?" Leon awkwardly asked.

"Oh, nothing," the older Princess responded. "It's just that we've never had much of a conversation before, so I wanted to know what kind of a man you were. I heard you were entertaining another woman at your home for a while, so I needed to be sure Lady Elise was placing her trust in a man worthy of it."

"Ah," Leon simply replied, saying no more. He had nothing to prove to Stefania, and he certainly wasn't that appreciative of whatever it was that she had just done.

"By the way... sister?" Stefania said, getting Cristina's attention from practically sobbing into the front of Valeria's clothes.

Cristina looked up, tears falling from her eyes as freely as rain, and when she saw Leon, she made a sound that seemed both squeak and hiccup and hurriedly brushed the tears out of her eyes.

"Sir Leon..." she nervously whispered, all boldness and adrenaline from her flight from the Royal Harem long gone, "I... was... thank you..."

Leon blinked at her in surprise and confusion. "Uh... Your welcome, Your Highness, though I'm not sure why I'm being thanked..."

"I was remiss in my duties as a member of the Royal Family, Sir Leon," Cristina replied, straightening herself up to be as imposing as she could, which was actually quite a bit, despite being a rather slight and slender young woman. She stood and spoke with the confidence that Leon never would've expected from someone who had spent their entire childhood isolated from her peers. "You helped me to escape from my gilded cage and bring me out into the world. No mere words could ever express my gratitude. However, when last we spoke, I did not make my gratitude clear, and for that, I apologize."

“Right... um... it’s fine...” Leon was completely put off guard with Cristina’s extreme formality and being put on the spot; it felt like everyone in the room was trying to bore holes into him with their eyes—he was the only one there who ‘didn’t belong’, after all—and he couldn’t stand it. He just wanted everyone to look away so he could fade back into the background where he was most comfortable. “I was just there, I didn’t really do anything that warrants gratitude...”

“You have it anyway,” Cristina replied before taking a deep, steadying breath and looking to her big sister. Stefania gave her a quick smile of pride, and Cristina seemed to deflate as if all of that had taken all the energy she possessed. However, she then turned back to Valeria and said, “Come on, let’s go find Asiya!”

Valeria looked at Leon with eyes so bright that he couldn’t possibly say no even if he wanted to, so he quickly nodded, and the two young women quickly vanished through another doorway.

“Well, that was certainly *something*,” August said, a little miffed at being almost completely ignored again, and by his own sister, no less.

A voice from one of the room’s side doors answered him, “She’s young and excited, it’s the first time she’s been out of the capital. Can you blame her for wanting to spend time with her friends?”

Leon looked around for who was speaking and saw Isabelle standing in another doorway, staring at her son with tender, matronly love.

August’s head whipped around, and when he saw her, all he could say was a quiet, “Mother...”

No more words were said between the two. August just crossed the room and pulled his mother into a tight hug. Isabelle maintained her composure in front of the guards, Minerva, Stefania, and Leon, but August was unable to; the sounds of his quiet sobbing could be heard by everyone in the room, though no one seemed to care. It was the first time he’d seen his mother in years, and with all the emotional turmoil he’d been in for the past few weeks, any s

Chapter 396: A Few Moments to Breathe

Everyone in the room gave August and Isabelle some space to reconnect. Given how long it had been since August had last seen his mother, everyone understood that he needed some time with her without their presence. There were no judgments at his minor breakdown, either.

Instead, Stefania led Leon and Minerva into another room while the guards respectfully stood outside the doors to give August and his mother some privacy.

“So, how did your escape go?” Stefania asked once she and the other two were seated.

“About as well as we could expect,” Minerva answered with a scowl.

“You missed the 4th Legion, though, good job on that,” Stefania replied. “We saw them encamped to the east of the capital as if waiting for someone to come through with a certain Royal fugitive...”

“It didn’t take a soothsayer to predict that Octavius would’ve made preparations just in case his pet Paladins failed.” Minerva accompanied her statement with a brief smile, but it quickly turned back into a scowl as she remembered how the actual escape went. “The 1st and 2nd Legions managed to catch up, though...”

It took a few minutes, but Minerva explained to Stefania everything that happened, with occasional input from Leon regarding his actions.

"... That was quite the story..." the Princess murmured once Minerva was finished. "Sounds like you were lucky that you got away with as few casualties as you did..."

"Indeed, it could've been much worse," Minerva agreed. Tallying up their injured and dead, the four-thousand knights and men-at-arms had taken about a tenth of their number as casualties, which was a minuscule amount considering they faced off against two Paladins and a force ten times their number on the same day.

"We could've done much better, though," Leon said, his tone bitter enough that Stefania guessed he was referring to some problem she wasn't privy to.

When the Princess raised an eyebrow in a silent question, Minerva testily responded, "He's just a little upset that his pet giant wasn't more utilized."

"Lapis isn't my pet, and I think I have every right to be upset when I loaned the big guy to you only for you to use him to *guard the boats!*"

"We've been over this, Lapis is a stone giant, a member of a race that was, until just a couple of years ago, *hostile!* We need to be seen as liberators, as seekers of justice and upholders of the law! Not as people who invite foreign interests and beings that are still seen as enemies by the majority of the Kingdom!"

The way they bickered gave Stefania the mildly amused impression that they had had this argument before—probably several times over the past few days as they made their way to Ironford. She wasn't wrong, Leon was frustrated that Minerva wasn't using her forces to their greatest extent, as seen with Lapis and the order she gave him to stay put and not launch hit-and-run attacks on their pursuers, while Minerva was frustrated with Leon for not keeping the political and strategic viewpoints in mind. She took the 2nd Legion's refusal to charge when ordered as proof that her policies were the best way to proceed, and not Leon's advocated policies of pursuing maximum damage against their enemies.

"Please, let's all just calm down, we're all friends here," she said in a soothing voice. Leon and Minerva weren't truly fighting, just a bit frustrated with each other, so they were quite receptive to her calming words. "That's better, we need cool heads if we're to plan our next moves..."

"If 'we're' to plan our next moves?" Minerva inquired. "Should I take this to mean that you're going to side with us?"

"You can, though I won't be taking all that public or important a role, I should think. However, I helped to break Cristina and Isabelle out of the harem, so that alone essentially makes me guilty of treason should we lose."

"Then let's endeavor not to lose, what should we do next?" Leon asked.

"Would you happen to have any suggestions?" Stefania politely asked him.

“I *would* happen to have a suggestion,” Leon replied with a smile. “I have promises of support from the Crater Tribe of stone giants. I didn’t call it in with the recent war with Talfar, but after getting to know Lapis better over these past couple of years, I think it’s time to call in that promise.”

“I would disagree, again for the same reasons why I didn’t use Lapis in our assault on the dungeon,” Minerva said. “This is a matter of internal politics, we shouldn’t be asking outside powers to interfere, no matter who they are or what promises they may have made!”

Sensing a more serious fight brewing as both of their tones started to heat back up, Stefania interrupted again, “How about we discuss this over a meal? I can’t imagine that you two have had a good, hot meal in a few days!”

With that, their barely-started discussion was put on hold as Stefania sent for a servant to take their orders to the kitchens. Stefania opted for a salad, Minerva for fish a fruit, and Leon, unwilling to waste time deliberating the weighty and immensely important decision of what to eat—as he knew he would—simply asked for the kitchen to surprise him.

“What?” Leon asked, looking at the ladies who were giving him very strange looks.

“You know, some women don’t like a man who doesn’t know what he wants...” Stefania said in an amused tone. She gave Leon a teasing smile as his face began to heat up in anger and embarrassment.

“If I—” Leon began, but Minerva cut him off.

“Yes, young Ursus, you should always know what you want just in case. Otherwise, you look ignorant and backward, like you don’t belong.”

Leon looked back and forth between them, exasperation making an appearance across his face, as both ladies fought to suppress their mirth. It took a couple of seconds for him to realize that they weren’t being serious and were just having some fun at his expense, and when that realization dawned, he decided to play into a little.

“I like giving the cooking staff some freedom. Makes for some *interesting* things to try. But hey, I’m just an ignorant barbarian, my taste is questionable at best. Maybe you southerners only want what you’ve already had before, but I like to add a bit of spice every now and then.”

He spoke with more than a hint of sarcasm, owning his decision completely, and all three burst out with a few laughs, relieving a bit of stress that had built up since leaving the capital. However, once they were done, they did not return to planning their next moves, especially since August was still catching up with his mother and Roland was watching over the west, so they simply sat and talked at length for a few more hours. Leon told the other two of the Northern Vales, Minerva spoke of battles she’d fought in, and Stefania narrated a few of the more scandalous affairs she’d witnessed—or taken part in—during her time in the capital.

It was such an entertaining and relaxing discussion that even Leon found himself starting to loosen up and speaking more than he usually did. The three enjoyed their time as much as they could, for they knew that this was only a passing moment and that what would follow would be long nights of work and stress for months, if not years.

—

"They *escaped*?!" Octavius asked, incredulous, several hours after August and company managed to escape over the bridge.

"I'm afraid they did, Your Royal Highness," the Consul of the Center replied, his eyes downcast in shame, though not enough shame that he hesitated to reply.

"Forgive me if I'm mistaken, but you outnumbered them, what? Eleven to one? More?"

"... Yes, we did," the Consul replied, though his tone was one of confusion and apprehension, rather than shame and sorrow as Octavius' own voice sounded almost elated.

"Interesting..." Octavius whispered. "They made it past *two* Paladins, eluded one Legion, and escaped two more!"

The Prince leaned back in the chair, turned away from the conference table, and stared off into space, his mind far away from the large meeting of high-ranking Kingdom officials, bureaucrats, and Legion knights that had packed into his office.

'Probably would've been better if we'd caught them, but this isn't the worst outcome...' he thought to himself. A crisis to combat immediately upon assuming control of the Kingdom, plus an excuse to purge those in the palace he wanted to go.

"I think I can use this..." he mysteriously whispered. He suddenly turned back to his supporters around him and said, "It's time. I want the Royal court called into session as soon as is possible. What kind of time frame are we looking at?"

"Your Royal Highness... by 'it's time', do you mean...?" the Count of Tarsus hesitantly asked.

"I mean exactly what I said," Octavius said with a smile on his face, which quickly twisted in realization. "Actually, don't call the Royal court just yet. We need to send invitations, we need perhaps a month or more... but we can use that time. I want a full accounting of the people we have working here in the palace. Their lineages and current status; are they knights or not? Are they a part of any major family? That sort of thing."

"What will Your Royal Highness do with that information?" the Countess of Lindinis asked, her aged face cracking open into a smile of her own.

"Remove all those of common blood," Octavius answered, obviously relishing every word. "Such an exalted, and dare I say it, *august* place as the Royal Palace should be reserved only for those of *proper* breeding."

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Roland stared out from his perch on the castle wall. Below him were twenty feet of stone followed by another twenty feet of black and red cliffside—the lowest section of the cliff for at least a hundred miles. The castle watched over a huge section of the Iron Road and, more importantly, the closest pass into the hilly and mountainous Eastern Territories that forces from the capital would have to take to pursue August, and Roland wasn't about to let them use it.

The pass itself was fairly defensible, though not to the extent that Roland would've liked. It was narrow enough that a single Legion company would be able to hold it if their shield wall was twenty soldiers

across and five deep. The Iron Road ran down the center of it, though it wasn't the fused stone of the capital, but instead a more common construction of stone bricks, but that wasn't to say it wasn't well-made. It was properly shaped to funnel rain into a pair of small ditches dug into the sand and dirt beside it to allow the water to properly drain; the road had been constructed some five hundred years ago, and yet had required no maintenance it had been so well-constructed.

The rest of the pass was the same black and red stone that the castle had been built upon, with sheer rocky cliffs preventing anyone but the most powerful of mages from scaling, and enchantments powered from the castle even prevented that, to an extent. A sixth-tier mage like Roland would never have been able to jump from the ground to the top of the cliffs, but perhaps someone like Brimstone or Earthshaker would be able to.

Ever since arriving at the castle and gaining the cooperation of the Count that called it home, Roland had been preparing. Over the course of about a day and a half, he'd had a portion of the road torn up in line with the cliff and replaced it with a trench, then had a few earth mages working on raising the iron-rich sand to fully block the pass, with the help of some fire mages heating and melting the sand into a glassy-iron mixture while the earth mages shaped it into a proper wall.

Unfortunately, it was slow work despite multiple high-tiered mages helping out. When Roland had come out to inspect the castle walls, the wall down below blocking access to the pass was barely even four feet high.

Roland sighed as he stared off into the distance, his sixth-tier eyes easily seeing the tell-tale signs of large-scale troop movements approaching, the biggest indicator being the large unusual dust cloud heading roughly in their direction.

"Whatever's making that will reach us by evening," he muttered aloud, mostly for himself but also for the benefit of his adjutants who had come out to inspect the castle wall with him. "We must be ready for a fight. Inform the Count to have his own knights prepared, just in case, and send out a few scouts to get a better look at what we're facing."

"Yes, Sir," one of his adjutants responded, quickly leaving their small group of about half a dozen to spread the word.

Roland released his magic senses with a silent prayer to the Ancestors that he wouldn't see scouts or advance parties of Legion soldiers or any other sign that they would be fighting before evening. He was gratified when he didn't see anything, but he didn't let his guard down. Just because he didn't notice anything didn't mean nothing was there, but given the general lack of vegetation around the cliffs, it was a good sign. Nothing but red rusty sand for at least half a mile from the cliffs.

After that was grassy plains and light forest, which had plenty of places for a mage to hide.

Roland was about to turn away when he noticed something else, though, something that wasn't a Legion scouting party. And it caused his face to light up like a party of drunk fire mages.

He could see Brimstone sprinting for the pass.

Chapter 397: Iron Road

A great cheer rose up from Brimstone's knights and men-at-arms as he appeared in front of the pass, where most of them were working either on the trench or the glass and stone wall blocking the Iron Road. He'd been missing for days, long enough for more than a few of his subordinate knights to have begun murmuring about whether or not continuing to follow Roland and August was the correct course of action.

Behind the Paladin, however, were the tell-tale signs of advancing Legions. The dust cloud that accompanied their marching reached quite high in the dry heat of the central Bull Kingdom. Even the most inexperienced squire in the entire force could tell with near certainty that there would be bloodshed in the pass soon, if not before the day was done.

Roland leaped down from the castle walls, passing harmlessly through the enchantments that would prevent him from doing the opposite, and gracefully landed on the plain before the pass.

"Saturnius!" he called out as Brimstone approached.

"Roland!" the other Paladin responded, though with marginally less enthusiasm. Colleagues and allies they were, but not quite friends. "It's good to see all of you, it's been a hard journey from the capital," he said, grasping Roland's wrist in greeting as several of his subordinate knights came out to greet him as well.

"I'd love to hear about it, but I think right now our priority should be what's clearly about to happen," Roland replied, nodding back in the direction Brimstone came from.

"I agree, let me speak with my people and I'll meet you in a little while. I need a few moments to catch my breath and to get the lay of the land."

"No problem," Roland said, not upset in the slightest with Brimstone effectively assuming command and telling him what to do. The other Paladin was stronger, older, and far more experienced, after all. Roland wasn't much over thirty, while Brimstone was approaching the end of his first century of life.

Half an hour later, Brimstone and Roland met back up on the walls of the castle with their more important knights in tow. Brimstone had taken the time to catch up on the major details of the past few days with his own knights, gave the fortifications a quick inspection, and then eaten some food, so he was about as ready as he was going to be for their quick discussion.

"We have the 1st and 4th Legions bearing down on us," Brimstone said with a grim expression. They only had two thousand to defend the pass with, along with whatever force the Count could bring to bear—the Count himself was busy preparing to evacuate his family, and so wasn't present for this discussion.

"Any sign of other Paladins or their own personal retinues?" Roland asked.

"None that I could see. Far as I know, they haven't left the capitol island since I escaped from it. I imagine they're leaving our pursuit up to the Legions while they assist Octavius with consolidating his power back in the capital."

"Well... I suppose that's something to be thankful for, we're not going to have to fight any Paladins..."

“Hmm, yes, *thankful*. I wouldn’t go feeling better just yet, I’ve heard tell that Octavius sent some additional forces to our south to try and circumvent this pass and that they were quite substantial in number, perhaps comparable to Legion.”

“Who would be sent? That’s noble land, not the Royal demesne. Other nobles can’t just walk freely through it with their armies even if they’re escorted by a Legion...”

“That depends entirely on whose land they’re trespassing on, how big their army is, and if they have dispensation from the capital to do so.”

Roland frowned in response. The army that Octavius would send would have to be substantial enough that they could ignore the minor Barons who might try to argue with their presence. Given that with Minerva on his side, August had significant support in the Eastern Territories, so he couldn’t imagine that any Octavius-aligned army could move unimpeded unless they brought overwhelming force, but regardless, he turned to one of his adjutants and asked, “Was word sent to Ironford of the army on our doorstep?”

The adjutant answered in the affirmative.

“Send another message about this possible incursion from the south.”

The adjutant nodded, then sent a runner to arrange the report.

“Defending from the south will be a much harder task than defending this point,” Roland observed.

The southern region of the Eastern Territories was some of the roughest terrain in the Bull Kingdom, crisscrossed with deep, forested valleys, powerful rivers, and steep cliffs, but they were still far more accessible at the current time than the pass they were defending—in fact, there were quite a few ways to get into the Eastern Territories from the south, some of them even wide enough for large-scale troop maneuvers. To the north, the cliffs extended all the way to the Great Plateau, essentially blocking off access to the Eastern Territories from that direction, leaving the rugged south the only way Octavius’ people could approach Ironford and the other cities in the east without going through the pass.

“Indeed, so we need to hold these Legions here for as long as we can until a proper response can be mustered.” Brimstone looked to the north, then back east. “The 3rd and 7th Legions should be in this area, no?”

“I know what you’re thinking, and they’re not going to get here in time if they move at all,” Roland replied. The 3rd and 7th Legions had marched with them to the Bull’s Horns when the Talfar Kingdom assaulted the fortress and August had them transferred to the Eastern Territories when he re-arranged Legion deployments the year before. However, none of that meant that he trusted the Legates in charge to march their troops to August’s defense, even if Minerva had vouched for them before. Right now, the only fighting men and women they could count on were those in their personal retinues and those in Trajan’s former retinue. Not even the local nobility could truly be relied upon, as the castle’s Count displayed by arranging for evacuation rather than resistance.

Not that Roland or Brimstone truly blamed him, but it was still disheartening to see. Fighting against the Legions was a daunting task for the lower ranks of the nobility, especially so when they had so little

support. A single Count or Baron with a few hundred knights at their disposal would never stand for very long against a fully equipped Legion.

“We’ll fight with what we’ve got,” Brimstone almost nonchalantly replied, glancing down at their meager fortifications and tiny unit facing off against twenty times their number. “Should be fun, if nothing else.”

—

There was nothing Avidius wanted more than to drag August back to the capital kicking and screaming, perhaps with a few less teeth than he had before. It would buy him quite a bit of favor with his new King—or at least, with the man who would soon become his new King, though Avidius thought it such a sure-thing that he already started thinking of Octavius as the Bull King.

Avidius wasn’t much of a military man, and he knew that. He’d achieved his position of Consul of the Central Territories mostly through personal acts of martial prowess in his younger years and a command of politics and bureaucracy that most of the Legates and other high-ranking knights in the Legions did not possess. In that respect, he was greatly looking forward to confirming his position through victory rather than through pushing enough papers.

The scene before him was one that he knew all commanders salivated over. His enemies were few in number though held a relatively decent position. He didn’t think the castle on the cliffs was that out of reach, while the meager fortifications built across the Iron Road would fall before his Legates and other sixth-tier mages like wheat before a scythe.

He was almost quivering in anticipation of the first battlefield victory of his long career. It was so close he could almost taste it. However, he had to dampen his excitement; immediately assaulting the castle wasn’t his goal, and though he hated to do so, he had to wait.

He ordered the two Legions and the knights at his back to dig in. It was time to rest and wait, to put the Iron Road to siege and wait for his southern forces to get into position.

—

“They’re... not charging...?” Roland whispered in confusion. He stared at the Legion lines completely surrounding the mouth of the pass as they made camp, erected walls, dug trenches of their own, and all-in-all, looked like they were getting ready for a protracted siege rather than a battle. “What are they *doing*?”

“Are they seriously going to give us more time to amass our forces and dig in...?” Brimstone wondered aloud, his own confusion rivaling Roland’s.

“Maybe they’re simply not willing to attack right after a march?” one of Brimstone’s sixth-tier mages mused.

“Yeah, and maybe they’re all chicken-shit cowards and will run at the sight of their own shadows, let alone all the hard motherfuckers we got,” another sarcastically replied. “They didn’t come all this way to just sit and stare at us from a thousand feet away. They’re going to attack, the question is when and for what purpose. Do they to push us back, or do they want something else?”

“They have another force going south, I know I heard some of their people talking about it as I made my escape...” Brimstone said as a possibility occurred to him. “This isn’t necessarily the main attack force, maybe they’re trying to draw our reinforcements away from Ironford...”

Roland frowned, understandably concerned. They’d already received a reply from Minerva and August about reinforcements—Trajan’s old retinue and Marquis Herrenia’s personal army would be on their way to reinforce them while a smaller unit would head south to assess the strength of the flanking unit and, if possible, to slow them down. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much time to scout out positions, so they were acting under the assumption that the forty-thousand-plus army on the doorstep of the Eastern Territories was the main threat.

The main force was usually the bigger one, and the flanking unit couldn’t be bigger than the one in front of them, could it...?

As Roland’s mind considered the possibility, his blood began to run cold. The 3rd Legion would arrive to reinforce them in a few days, while Minerva would be there in a matter of hours. The 7th Legion would be coming up from the south and likely encounter the southerly force loyal to Octavius. Most of the other eastern Legions were further to the east, largely guarding the border crossing points or other population centers deeper in the territories, and it would take a week or more for them to mobilize at their fastest—and that was assuming they would come to August’s aid. The fastest Legions that could reach their position apart from the 3rd and the 7th were the three Legions at the Bull’s Horns, but Constantine and the rest of the knights and Legions at the Horns were at least three weeks away from Ironford under the best of circumstances, probably more in this case.

Roland could tell that the same distressing possibilities had wormed their way into not only Brimstone’s head but into the minds of their subordinates, as they continued to quietly discuss their tactical situation. Slowly, the two Paladins glanced at each other, neither man looking particularly happy about their circumstances.

“We should send word back to Ironford about these concerns, let Minerva handle them, she’ll deal with any flanking forces,” Brimstone murmured. “We have two Legions and an unknown number of additional knights in front of us, we can’t simply turn and run as we did at the capitol island and the Naga River. We *have* to hold them here and keep them out of the Eastern Territories. We *cannot* tuck and run again.”

“But—” Roland began to protest, but Brimstone silence him with a fiery glare.

“Whatever happens, we’ll deal with it,” he growled. “We were caught with our pants down. Octavius has had his people assembled and ready for war for weeks, now. We knew that we were going to be floundering for a while, we just have to find our footing. Hold them for three weeks, give our eastern Legions enough time to assemble and for the eastern Lords to rally to Prince August. We just need to give them time.”

Roland’s eyes turned back out to the plain and to the forces there that continued to muster. They were so numerous and organized and in such a good position—across a flat, unbroken plain—that his and Brimstone’s people couldn’t even risk sallying out from their own fortifications to harass them without cataclysmic risk.

'I hope we can buy them enough time...' the younger Paladin fatalistically thought. At the very least, they had a good position in the pass. Whoever would be sent to the south to face off against the flanking force likely wouldn't be so lucky.

Chapter 398: Old Nemesis

"You're not coming with us," Minerva said to Leon, almost petrifying the young man with confusion, frustration, and surprise.

"Huh...?" Leon asked, unable to form any more coherent words.

The two were surrounded by thousands of knights all gearing up for war. The forces from the capital had arrived at the entrance to the Eastern Territories, and they were heading out to reinforce Roland and the newly-returned Brimstone. They would leave in two groups, with those who possessed mounts riding ahead of those who did not. Leon fully expected to be in that group, riding Anzu at Minerva's side.

"Don't worry, boy, you're not staying here," Minerva replied as she made a few adjustments to her horse after her assistants finished readying the rest of her gear. She was clad head-to-toe in red armor so dark that it seemed black in the early evening. Emblazoned upon her chest was the personal crest of Prince Trajan, a charging bull on a field of red, rather than the Royal green.

"What should I be doing, then?" Leon asked.

"I'm sending you south. We have to prevent those southerly forces from reaching Ironford. Delay them as much as you can, we'll get reinforcements to you as soon as we can, but there's no guarantee that it will be in good time. We have to focus on the bigger threat. But Octavius' people *cannot* reach Ironford! Understand?"

"I understand, but surely you don't expect me to accomplish this alone, do you?"

"I'll give you two hundred people. It's not nearly enough to stop an army, so don't try. Just harass them, keep them from moving too quickly through the lands between Ironford and the Royal demesne. We might get surrounded in the pass, but they'll be stuck between you, us, and the walls of Ironford. That wouldn't be ideal, of course, but focus only on doing what you can."

"I... I think I can handle that..." Leon had to fight not to smile. It had been since his time at Fort 127 that he'd commanded more than a single squad of people—and even then, that position hadn't been an official assignment—and he was anticipating it with a mix of eagerness and dread, unsure of whether or not he would be able to do what had been asked of him.

It was a terrible responsibility since the situation didn't have to be explained to him. If Octavius' forces reached and took Ironford, they'd lose. If they trapped Minerva, Roland, and Brimstone between them in the pass, they would lose. And they would be able to do both if Leon failed to slow them down before the reinforcements Minerva had sent for reached Ironford.

Holding Ironford was critical, and he was going to be a key component in August's forces doing just that.

"Got any idea of when reinforcements might come my way?" Leon asked.

“As I said, we have to focus on the army on our doorstep,” Minerva explained. “The 3rd Legion will reinforce the pass, first. The 7th Legion is probably between five and eight days out, though. They’ll be coming to you, so you only need to hold that long on your own.”

“Got it.”

“Good. You’ll do fine, Ursus. You’ve got this. Prince Trajan had faith in your abilities, and so do I. You can do this.”

Leon nodded, not knowing how to respond to Minerva’s confidence, or even if it was genuine. They had no idea how many of their enemies they were facing, and if they were more than a couple of battalions, a mere two hundred knights were going to be incredibly hard-pressed to stop them. He eventually settled on nodding to her in solidarity and saying, “I look forward to meeting you again when we can bring each other word of victory.”

Despite the seriousness of their situation, Minerva almost laughed at Leon’s overly formal and honestly rather stilted response. Still, she appreciated the sentiment, smiled at him with far more warmth than she had in the past few weeks, and then spurred her horse on. Most of the rest of the knights followed her, with the vast majority of the retinue at her back and a thousand Ironford knights joining them.

Leon was left in the city’s staging grounds with the two hundred knights that Minerva had left behind, along with his own followers, Valeria, Anzu, and Lapis. Most of those left behind were in the lower-tiers of Trajan’s retinue—essentially a mix of third to fourth-tier mages, with only about twenty fifth-tier mages and not a single sixth-tier. However, as Leon was quickly evaluating the force he had at his disposal, he noticed a pair of familiar auras pushing themselves toward the front of the group.

Sure enough, Leon saw the faces of Alix and Adalgrim.

“Sir!” Alix immediately said, giving Leon a perfectly formal greeting, though the light in her eyes and the smile tugging at her lips suggested a significantly greater degree of joy than she was exhibiting.

Grim, on the other hand, wasn’t so reserved, clapping Leon on the shoulder with a friendly smile and said, “It’s good to see you again, Ursus! It’s been too long!”

“Good to see you, too, Sir Grim,” Leon replied as he returned Grim and Alix’s smiles. He and Alix then shared a quick clasp of the wrist, and then they were down to business. “What are we looking at regarding our organization? Do you have the highest seniority here?”

“I do,” Grim replied. All of the fifth-tier knights had the same technical rank of Tribune, which made Grim, as the oldest and most experienced of them, Leon’s de facto second-in-command.

“Sir Leon, I’ve also been instructed to inform you that Dame Minerva would like to formally transfer me into your retinue,” Alix added.

Leon raised an eyebrow at his former squire, silently asking what she thought about it. To his mild surprise, though, Alix showed no sign of reluctance or antipathy. Leon knew that he hadn’t been the best mentor—and, in fact, had been pretty neglectful if he were to be honest with himself—but he was gratified to see that she didn’t seem upset at all.

"I'd be more than happy to accept you into my retinue," he replied, and a glowing smile finally broke through Alix's tightly controlled expression.

"Yes, Sir!" she happily said.

"We'll work out the details later, but for now, we need to deal with these bastards to the south," Leon continued, shifting his focus back to the mildly-amused Grim. "What kind of intel do we have on our opponent?"

"Not much, perhaps a Legion's worth of noble knights and mercenaries, maybe even more than that. We really have no idea, and probably won't until we do some recon."

"How about maps? Guides? What do we know about the terrain?"

"We can get maps and guides likely won't be hard to find. We have the support of Marquis Herrenia, and nearly all of the nobles who own land to the south are his vassals. They know the land and will likely commit some people to our cause."

"What are your expectations in that regard?"

"Not high. They are mostly Barons with a single small castle to their name and weak Counts with little more than a hundred or so knights they can call upon. Still, there are a significant number of them, and if we had to, we could probably wrangle together an additional thousand or so knights and maybe just as many men-at-arms. *If* we were lucky. Which we probably won't be. Most of those guys will probably just let this army pass without challenge if they can if only to avoid being destroyed by them."

Leon nodded in understanding and closed his eyes for a moment to think. He had a few ideas of what to do to slow this army down, but he wouldn't be able to decide on anything without seeing the region for himself.

"Let's make sure everyone has bows and arrows," he said after a few long moments of thought. If he could only count on his two hundred, then he wasn't going to take any chances with direct confrontations. They'd fight at range, and only on their terms.

If they were to accomplish their mission, then there was no other way they'd be able to fight.

—

He should've been happy to finally get out of the capital. For more than a year, he'd been kept away in a tiny corner of the Royal Palace doing nothing but busy work, even as the political situation fell apart, but at least he was away from Octavius and Earthshaker. Getting out of the capital had been just about all he could think about during that time, wondering when exactly a good time would be to try and resign and go home to Lentia.

Of course, he knew he'd never be able to leave no matter how much he fantasized about it. He was a hostage in all but name, kept to ensure his father and older brother's loyalty. In that respect, Gaius never expected to be allowed out of the palace, so it came as a genuine surprise when his small unit in Octavius' retinue was reassigned to the army pursuing August.

'Does His Highness even know I was sent out?' Gaius couldn't help but wonder. He didn't think so, but if Octavius did know that Gaius was being put in danger, Gaius couldn't say if the Prince would care or

not—and this was after Gaius had served the Prince for two years as his squire. After those two years had been completed, Gaius had been summarily transferred far and away from anything of any importance—at least, until now.

Now, he had been dispatched to assist a force of about fifteen thousand nobles and their retinues of knights, squires, and men-at-arms to hunt down the traitor August and his supporters.

Gaius couldn't help but note that Leon was included in that, and he didn't know how he felt about it. On one hand, the part of him that remembered his humiliation at Leon's hands was ecstatic, but on the other, his shame made him never want to see Leon ever again. Even as he pondered these things, Gaius let out an uncontrollable sigh of regret. Had he the option to go back in time, he'd have done many things differently.

'Perhaps if I had been less of an arrogant prick then Valeria wouldn't have turned me down so many times...' he thought to himself. The flame he carried for Valeria still burned brightly, even if it had cooled a bit after the two had separated for their squireships.

Gaius forced himself to think of other things. If he allowed Valeria to enter his mind, then he would always think of Leon and his other shames and failures. He wanted to stay positive, especially in his current situation.

In that vein, he looked around and took in the scenery. The past three days had been a hellish march; it started with a terribly hurried deployment from the capital along with the Count of Tarsus and then marching fifty to sixty miles every day. Even for his third-tier body, Gaius could feel the ache in his bones and muscles. Those weaker than him were being pushed to their limits to move so quickly, while those stronger than him barely noticed the grueling pace.

"Doing all right, Lord Tullius?" the Count of Tarsus asked him, pulling him out of his thoughts.

Gaius glanced at his riding companion, the man who was leading the joint army of nobles and their retainers. The Count was a middle-aged man, possessed of fifth-tier strength, and in general, had a relatively cheery attitude. He was the richest man in the Central Territories outside of the Royal Family, and he wore much of his wealth in his armor, which was heavy plate inlaid with gold and covered in runes. Gaius hadn't the skill to see through the enchantments that ostentatiously glowed on the Count's armor, but he knew that they were powerful and definitely not just for show.

The Count had insisted that Gaius ride alongside him for the journey and went so far as to tell his command staff that Gaius was to be regarded as his second-in-command. The older knights, and especially the knight that Gaius otherwise answered to when he was back in the capital, were not thrilled with this, but Gaius was forced to accept. It was more than likely the Count trying to curry some favor with the relative of a powerful Duke—Gaius' father—and so he didn't take the position that was forced upon him too seriously. The Count wasn't a terribly fit man for someone of his power, and he had the attitude of one who wouldn't fight on the front lines, so Gaius hadn't the expectation that he would ever need to exercise the authority that the Count gave him.

"I'm doing fine, My Lord," Gaius answered, giving the Count a reassuring smile.

"Wonderful to hear, you were staring off into space so intently that I felt I had to ask," Tarsus said before giving Gaius a loud full-bellied laugh.

"I appreciate the concern," Gaius neutrally responded. He wasn't too interested in conversation with Tarsus but keeping in mind the rules of etiquette and politeness, he couldn't simply ignore the Count.

Tarsus began to loudly discuss how quickly they were going to defeat August and drag him back to the capital, as well as other things that Gaius completely tuned out. He was sure the Count was speaking about Octavius, but Gaius couldn't bring himself to care, not after seeing to the Prince's whims for two years. He just wanted to get this done with as much of honor intact as possible and for all of this to just be over, but no matter how much Tarsus bragged about the ferocity and power of his knights, Gaius couldn't help but feel deeply unsettled.

Perhaps it was the resemblance that the region had to the training grounds of the Knight Academy, with its sheer cliffs, deep forests, valleys, and mountains, but Gaius felt more and more apprehensive the further east they marched. The last time he'd fought Leon had been under similar circumstances, with his Deathbringers and a couple of other Knight Academy units banding together to bring down his Snow Lions.

The numbers were significantly more skewed in Gaius' favor this time, though, but he doubted that Leon—or anyone else under August's wing, for that matter—would simply give up. Gaius had seen first-hand what Leon could do, and that was three tiers and three years ago.

They no longer bore training weapons, and Gaius dreaded seeing what his old one-sided nemesis could now do. If possible, he did *not* want to face Leon on this expedition.

Chapter 399: Southern Hills

The Bull Kingdom's maps were very well made. There was hardly a single place in the entirety of the Kingdom that wasn't marked on one map or another, and often with extreme accuracy. However, it was one thing to analyze a map to get the lay of the land and another thing entirely to see it from above.

Leon found himself happier than he had been for a while—probably since before Trajan had been killed and Naiad left—as he rode Anzu through the clouds above the Eastern Territories. Below him stretched countless hills, mountains, and valleys, some bare stone colored red from its high iron content, while forests blanketed others, filling his sight with a panoply of greens and reds that he hadn't seen since he left the Forest of Black and White.

One thing he couldn't see, however, was the force of knights that had been dispatched to the south of Ironford by Octavius. He figured that a force large enough to act as the hammer to the anvil of the Legions facing down Roland and Minerva had to be easily seen from the air, but so far, he hadn't seen hide nor hair of them. Anzu had carried him about two hundred miles out from Ironford, and still nothing. At this point, he was undoubtedly back in the Royal demesne rather than the Ironford March, so he reluctantly had Anzu turn back around.

He was tempted to have Anzu continue onward for another hour or two since the feeling of flight was just that enjoyable, but he decided to put his duty ahead of his fun. Besides, he hadn't seen all that the Ironford March had to offer, and there were countless places for even an entire Legion to hide in the wilderness between himself and Ironford.

Great green carpets of thick forest spread out below him, punctuated by lakes, hills, and mountains, and here and there were villages connected by dirt roads. He was far from the realm of paved streets and stone buildings, but if anything, he felt safer and more secure than he had in his own villa.

Anzu carried him through the air with ease, cutting through the sky like a hot knife through butter, flying at speeds of more than a hundred miles per hour with his wind magic catching his wings and keeping them aloft. The griffin seemed more alive than ever, and he clearly shared Leon's joy in flight.

As they flew, Leon finally spotted something of note: a long, thin line of dull grey that he could just barely see passing through the center of a forested valley—obviously armored knights. They were mostly concealed by the trees, though, and it was only by chance that he managed to catch a few glimpses of reflected sunlight off their weapons shining through the leaves.

Leon had Anzu fly a bit closer, but he kept a safe distance from the column. He couldn't see the entire thing with the forest in the way, but he could give a rough estimate based on how long the column seemed to be and how many knights were walking abreast. He put the number at easily ten thousand knights, probably more.

For a brief moment, Leon contemplated using his magic senses to get a better read on their numbers and capabilities, but he decided against it. He wasn't so powerful that his magic senses could wash over the knights below him unnoticed. Anzu had little protection in the air save for his wind magic, and while that might prove enough to keep them safe from arrow fire and blasts of magic, Leon wasn't willing to take the risk. Instead, he contented himself with simply flying over them for a time, staying high enough that the sheer distance and sharp vertical angle masked his and Anzu's movements as he took stock of his opposition.

Once he felt like he had a good idea of the forces he faced, he turned and began to fly back toward Ironford.

He met back up with his force of loaned knights not too far south of the city. He'd sent them roughly south toward a prominent mountain about ten miles from Ironford that was easily scalable from the north to wait for his return. When Anzu landed on the slopes of the short mountain, the force of two hundred knights and one stone giant had already made camp on a flat rocky outcropping on the north side. His 'command staff' hurried over to meet him, consisting of Valeria, Grim, Alix, and two more fifth-tier mages, a middle-aged man and woman who seemed to be in her mid-twenties by mortal standards. Lapis, with no method of efficient communication with the rest, simply decided to guard Leon as best as it was able while leaving the decision making to everyone else.

Valeria was the first to reach him, running over to meet him and gave him a paradoxically terse, "Sir Leon," despite this rush. Alix reached him next, giving Leon a similar greeting and stroking Anzu's neck feathers as the rest gathered—Anzu, now much calmer and more tolerant than he was when Alix had last served under Leon, allowed her touch without even the slightest hint of wariness or disdain.

Leon didn't wait for the others to join him, though, and had Valeria lead him and Anzu over to the command tent that had been set up. It was just big enough for all of the humans to fit, but not so for Anzu and Lapis, who were forced to wait outside. Once inside, Leon filled everyone in on what he had seen.

“... and they’re about fifty miles to our south, which at their pace shouldn’t take longer than three or four days to traverse. They could be at Ironford within the week, assuming they don’t stop to take any small castles between here and there,” Leon explained.

Between the mountain and Octavius’ force of knights were three small castles, barely large enough to house two dozen knights let alone a force large enough to oppose an army of ten thousand or more. They had mostly been built to house the minor Barons that administered this land and to protect them from bandits. In fact, the castles were more akin to fortified houses with four rooms at the most than what might otherwise be thought of as a castle and weren’t even made of stone.

“If it were me, I’d stop and take those castles and would seriously consider taking some of the larger villages in the area,” Grim said, pointing to the villages in question on the maps in front of the small group. The villages were small things, a hundred families at the most, but Leon could see Grim’s point. These hills were sparsely populated, with these villages essentially the only sources of supplies for dozens of miles, while the castles could be used as safe havens for anyone who might want to launch raids against the knights as they marched.

“I’m not so sure they’re going to do that...” Leon murmured, more thinking out loud than truly offering his opinion. Still, he said it and Grim heard it.

“What do you mean?”

“Hm? Oh, uh, well, they weren’t marching like they were going to try and take any of the nearby villages or castles. Just one long column moving through the forests, staying away from most roads, and heading about as straight for Ironford as they possibly could.”

“That might make some sense,” the fifth-tier male knight said, “they might be on a time crunch and not want to spare the hours it would take to secure those locations, even if it does leave them open to attack from behind.”

“Yeah, they’ve got friends back on the Iron Road that are going to be getting slaughtered in droves while they waste time with mining and hunting towns,” the fifth-tier knightess added. “If these traitorous asshats make it all the way to Ironford, they’d trap our people in the pass and effectively win this whole thing immediately. What’re a few tiny hamlets compared to the prize of August’s noble ass?”

Grim nodded in concession of their point.

“I would err on the side of caution and assume that we have less than three days before they reach Ironford,” Leon said. “What are our supplies like? Do we have decent ranged gear? How about spells? Are we going to be reduced to relying upon melee weapons?”

“We have enough food and drinkable water for two weeks,” said Alix. “I believe that everyone also has bows and a decent supply of arrows, but we don’t have too many spells.”

“That’s unfortunate but not as bad as it could’ve been...” Leon said as he stared down at the map in thought. “I couldn’t get a good read on how strong their average fighter was during my scouting, but I think we can assume that a significant portion is made up of squires who aren’t yet knights, and even more men-at-arms. Would I be foolish in this assumption?”

“Not at all, I for one can’t imagine that we’re looking at ten thousand Legion-quality knights,” Grim said, and the rest of those in the tent seemed to agree. Leon, however, wasn’t going to take it for granted. In the Royal Legions, the third-tier was required for someone to gain their knighthood, but the same couldn’t be said for the servants of the nobility. A first-tier mage or even a mortal could technically be given a knighthood.

However, the standard in the Bull Kingdom was still that a becoming a knight meant third-tier, and most knights who might be deployed in a combat scenario would have a squire and probably a handful of men-at-arms. These assumptions were less accurate for more bureaucratic-focused knights, but Leon figured it was still a safe assumption to make in this scenario.

“Their squires and weaker men-at-arms will slow them down, whereas we don’t have a single knight with us lower than the third-tier,” Leon stated, looking around to the other five for confirmation. When no one corrected him, he continued, “That means that we can move a lot faster than they can. We need to use this, hit them hard and fast when and where they least expect us. Harass them, hit their supplies if we can injure and kill as many as we can in as short a time as we can, and then melt back into the wild. Even if our average power level is greater than theirs, facing ten thousand or more with only two hundred in a pitched battle would be suicide, and I don’t know about all of you, but I still have far too much to do in my life to waste it here.”

“Well put,” Grim said.

“Indeed,” the knight whispered.

“So, what I’m thinking is that we spend the next few hours closing the distance with them,” Leon continued. “We need to get a better idea of what we’re facing. How vulnerable are they? How do they make camp? Can we hit them during the night? How sturdy are their camp defenses? What routes are they taking?”

“Regarding that last point, it looks to me like they’re going to be heading *this way*...” Leon indicated the end of the valley that opened up into another valley. Both were quite heavily forested, but if they reached the end of the second valley, then they’d be back on the Iron Road and only a few short miles away from the outskirts of Ironford, and they’d be in a perfect position to flank Minerva, Roland, and Brimstone. Minerva had specifically told Leon that he didn’t have to stop this force from reaching that point, but he was going to try regardless. Fortunately, Leon didn’t have to explain all of this to the other knights. “There are a few places I see where we can hit them with relative safety, mostly as they pass through some of these larger hills. We’ll also be attacking at night, hopefully when they aren’t expecting it. And even then, we won’t stay long. Hit them hard, hit them fast, and then get the hells out with as few casualties of our own as possible.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me, I have nothing to add,” Grim said. Leon looked to both the fifth-tier knight and knightess, and both shook their heads, and their actions were mirrored when he glanced at Valeria and Alix.

“All right. Then that’s what we’ll do. I don’t think we’ll hold them off completely, but so long as we buy enough time for the 3rd Legion to reach our people in the pass and for the 7th Legion to come up behind this force, then we’ve won this round. So let’s get going, I want us to hit them tonight first. I want us ready to go in an hour.”

Chapter 400: Night Raid I

The knightly host began to set up camp around forty-five miles from Ironford—barely a day's march on good terrain, but in the hills and forests it would take them more like three days to reach the city walls. They hadn't harassed any villages along the way, nor had they made to secure any of the small castles owned by the local Barons. In fact, they seemed to be going out of their way to avoid these places.

This in and of itself didn't change much in Leon's view, but it did imply that the force had all the supplies that they thought they needed. They weren't pillaging, they were simply marching as quickly as they were able through the forested valley.

The valley itself was about five miles wide, more than large enough for these movements, and certainly big enough for Leon's much smaller unit to move undetected. They were like shadows clinging to their quarry but never drawing close enough to be seen. This wasn't too difficult to maintain, since, in their seeming arrogance, Octavius' knights didn't deploy scouts on their flanks and neither did Leon ever feel the touch of magic senses. It wasn't until the knights began to make camp that they began to scout out their surroundings, but by then, Leon and his people had safely pulled back into the hills.

There they waited for several hours, resting as best they could for what would come later that night. Leon and Anzu flew over the camp a few times, but with the tree cover, he couldn't see much. What he did manage to see, however, was encouraging—the knights hadn't decided to build walls around their camp, perhaps because it was simply too big. In this broken landscape, the camp stretched back for miles in a long, thin line, and to build walls around the entire thing wasn't something that could be easily done, though Leon did note that their higher-tiered mages cleared some land and set up some earthen ramparts and short stone walls on top of them around some of the larger tents, which Leon guessed housed either their more important knights or their supplies.

Probably both.

Needless to say, Leon now had his targets, and he was going to severely punish his enemy's arrogance and lack of caution.

His people were ready by the time the sun fell, with the most powerful of the two-hundred-strong force equipped with some of Leon's strongest spells, and his less powerful spells passed out to the rest to tie to their arrows. Some of the other knights had even brought spells of their own, so Leon's stash wasn't completely depleted, leaving him some of his more destructive spells in reserve.

It was a warm night, and dark—the sky was completely overcast, blocking out the moon. Leon could feel the familiar sense of an upcoming storm, but it didn't affect him nearly as much as it had when he was weaker. All he felt was a rush of energy, but no compulsion to train to try to get rid of it. All-in-all, it felt like a good, beautiful night to him, even if others would disagree.

"This doesn't bode well..." Grim muttered as he stared up at the cloudy sky, the last remnants of the sun's light long since faded away below the hills and mountains.

"Talking about the weather?" Leon asked, to which Grim nodded. "Hm. I actually think this is a good sign. We've got the element of surprise, and their weaker men-at-arms and squires won't be able to see us coming. If it starts raining, it'll even dampen the sounds of our approach. I couldn't think of better conditions for our operation."

“We’ll also be uncomfortable. And wet. I don’t like being wet.”

Leon lowered his gaze from the clouds to Grim, an incredulous look in his eye. Alix, who was standing just beside him—as was the rest of Leon’s ‘retinue’—shared his look of disbelief.

“Aren’t you a *water* mage?” Leon asked.

Grim looked back at the younger knight and shrugged. “Well... yeah, I am, but... I just don’t like the rain. And besides, I mostly use ice, not water. I may be a water mage, but that doesn’t require me to like the rain!”

Leon blinked as he tried to wrap his head around this, and he and Alix shared a look as if both were rhetorically asking what in all the hells Grim was on about.

“We’re ready to go!” said the male fifth-tier knight as he ran over to report in to Leon.

“Then let’s get going,” Leon said as he glanced up and down the line of knights, happy as he was to let the matter with Grim go. He loved the rain, and he couldn’t fathom why a water mage wouldn’t share that joy.

At least Anzu seemed eager, as the griffin was pacing like a caged tiger just waiting to sink his claws into his prey. Valeria was much calmer and stood close to Leon with an utterly inscrutable expression on her face. She was as calm and cool as ice, with only a few subtle twitches in her hands indicating her eagerness to set out to battle. Lapis, on the other hand, was completely still, frozen like a stone statue as it waited for Leon’s word.

Leon spared a few looks for the rest of the force, who were assembled in a long wedge formation ten across and twenty deep. For the most part, Leon didn’t see anyone who seemed hesitant or overly apprehensive, which he took to mean that they were as ready as the fifth-tier knight had claimed.

“Let’s go,” he said, and he and the rest of the command structure spread out across the formation, with Grim and the fifth-tier knightess taking up a position at the rear while Leon and his retinue went to the front. The fifth-tier knight, meanwhile, was at the center.

It was a fairly short march, only lasting about an hour. By the time they reached their rally point about a thousand feet away from the camp, the storm that had been brewing had arrived, though the rainfall wasn’t as intense as Leon had hoped it would be. Still, it covered what few sounds they made as they moved that the forest’s ambient noise didn’t already cover, and for that, Leon was grateful. An added benefit was that without moonlight, Anzu’s bright white fur and feathers had practically blended into the dark background.

As the group converged on their rally point, Leon separated each individual squad with quick hand gestures either to his left or to his right, and the long wedge instead became a thin line, and all of the knights quickly unlimbered their bows and prepared to fire their arrows. Taking most of his cues from the mission that Leon had gone on during the siege of Fort 127 where a large number of soldiers at the fort led a preemptive strike on the besieging Valemen, Leon ensured that every one of his people had at least one explosion spell, either from him or from one of the other knights that had brought spells, and that they were ready to retreat at a moment’s notice. He didn’t want a single casualty on this mission.

He waited until everyone was in position and then fired his first arrow. Leon had kept one of his biggest spells for himself, and it detonated in a spectacular burst of white fire that seared his dark-adapted eyes. Barely a moment later, all of his people let fly their own arrows, and along at least half of the camp's length, great orange blasts of fire ripped through tents, sleeping knights, men-at-arms, and squires. Leon's spell, on the other hand, didn't kill anyone but targeted one of the larger slightly fortified tents that he'd seen from the air. Huge portions of the supplies that Octavius' knights had brought with them went up in white flame.

Like a switch had been flipped, the camp was suddenly filled with screaming and the ringing of alarm bells, but Leon's tiny force had already melted back into the darkness of the forest.

They ran like their furious Ancestors were on their heels, for they were far too small a force to stand up to Octavius' knights on their own. They didn't stick around for another salvo, as nearly all of Leon's fire spells had been exhausted in that one attack. Staying would be foolish.

Or, at least, it would be if the entire unit had decided to stay.

Upon arrival at the rally point, the group paused for only a minute, but it was long enough for Leon and Grim to meet back up.

"Are you still planning on that foolish endeavor?" Grim asked, the expression on his face matching his name. "I maintain that it's an incredibly stupid thing to do and I would recommend that you come with us back to our camp..."

"Yeah, it's reckless, but... yeah... I'm still going to do it, it's our best shot at halting this army long enough for the 7th Legion to arrive," Leon said with an apologetic smile.

Grim frowned, but he'd made his attempts to persuade Leon against this next course of action, and there was nothing more he could say.

"Just... don't get too overconfident, all right?" he said before turning to the other fifth-tier knights and giving them a few hand signals to get the unit moving again. "I'll see you back at camp."

With that, he and the two hundred knights quickly vanished into the forest, leaving Leon and his four personal fighters alone in the forest.

"Anyone want out?" Leon asked as his eyes swept over Lapis, Anzu, Valeria, and Alix, though he doubted the former two would ever leave him to do what he was planning on his own. He didn't think Valeria or Alix would opt-out, either, but he had to ask anyway.

Alix replied first, and she enthusiastically said, "Fuck no."

Valeria whispered her agreement, "No."

Lapis quietly rumbled in its stone giant language, "I'm with you, Leon."

Anzu rubbed his head on Leon's shoulder. The griffin wasn't going to leave him.

"All right, then," Leon said. "Let's get this done."

—

Gaius had trouble sleeping that night. He passed the time by sitting at a small desk in his tent quietly writing a short letter to his father that he had absolutely no intent to actually send. It was mostly a therapeutic thing where he vented his frustrations with Octavius—and now, his commander, the Count of Tarsus. It was a recent practice that he started to try and cope with the meaninglessness of his current existence, serving as nothing more than a tool between a Royal and a noble.

As such, when the supply tent less than fifty feet from his tent erupted in white fire, his eyes were open and the fire seared itself into his retinas. He felt the heat wash over him as the sound of the terrific explosion crashed into his ears, leaving him temporarily deaf. The blast wave knocked him over and it took him a moment to truly process what was happening. It wasn't until the follow-up explosions seconds later—sounding dull and distant in his ringing ears—that he truly realized that the camp was under attack.

He tried to bolt up to his feet, but his balance was precarious at best, and he ended up toppling right over. He could see the white glow of the burning supply tent through the walls of his own tent, and the heat radiating from it was horrific enough that he could feel himself starting to sweat despite his third-tier power.

After another attempt, he managed to struggle to his feet, grab the sword next to his cot, and stumble out of his tent and into the rain, though his ears were ringing something fierce and his vision hadn't quite recovered from the initial blast of white fire. Still, he could see and hear enough to understand what was around him.

What he found was a scene of abject horror. Dozens of tents were on fire, and unlike his, these were designed to hold six to twelve people, with six knights and their squires—assuming they had squires—or twelve men-at-arms. He could hear the screaming of men and women as they did their best to fight their way out of the collapsing, burning tents.

Some of the more powerful mages were fine, cleanly tearing right through the scorching fabric, but the weaker knights and their squires weren't so lucky. Some of the fiery tents didn't have any struggling in them whatsoever, showing that many knights had been killed in the barrage.

Suddenly, in the burning hellscape that the camp had seemed to become, Gaius heard a deafening roar—someone was trying to organize the knights and get some kind of response ready.

“QUARANTINE THE FIRES! HELP THE WOUNDED!” roared this person in a distinctly feminine voice. Gaius recognized it as the voice of a sixth-tier knightess serving under the Count of Tarsus.

Her roar was exactly what was needed for the knights to begin scrambling in a somewhat more orderly fashion, and her follow-up orders were more specific. She appeared from the smoke and haze and rain with a blast of water, quenching some of the fires close to Gaius.

“My Lord! Are you all right?” she asked as she saw Gaius standing in front of his tent, his eyes unfocused and a line of blood running from one ear.

However, even with his current injuries, Gaius could hear in her tone that she didn't truly care about him. She was only asking out of courtesy to his official position as the second-in-command of the knightly army. Even with his eyes still recovering from the searing white fire, he could see the disrespect in her eyes.

"I'm fine!" Gaius managed to choke out. He followed up with, "Don't worry about me, see to the fires!"

She raised an eyebrow in surprise, her clear grey eyes regarding him a little bit differently than the slight scorn that had filled them when she first saw him. But it was only a moment, and she quickly turned back to the people running and screaming around her. She continued to bellow orders, doing her best to get the fires under control while she used her own water magic to help where she could.

Gaius, meanwhile, turned his attention away from the fires in the camp toward the forest. There were no signs of the attackers, which was just as well since most of the knights in the camp were focused almost entirely on putting out the fires. Gaius couldn't help but shiver as he thought about the possibilities of being attacked right now.

'Whoever just attacked us can't have just run away... could they...?' he wondered.