

Storm King 401

Chapter 401: Night Raid II

It didn't take long for the fires to be brought back under control. Octavius' forces had been taken completely by surprise, but with a few water mages in their ranks, the rain that continued to hammer the camp, and a few good experienced knights taking control of the situation, the fires were extinguished within half an hour.

The white fire that had consumed the supply tent took the most work, as it burned so hot that the rain evaporated before it had a chance to help. It took nearly all of the water mages in the army working together to finally put it out, and even then, they had to wait for the magic in the fire to dissipate a bit, cooling it from white to bright yellow.

Throughout this time, Gaius nervously tried to find the Count of Tarsus, the commander of the fifteen-thousand-strong army—and also the largest contributor of knights to it, even including Octavius himself. Gaius was worried and extremely paranoid about the lack of further attack following the chaos of the initial attack. They had no sentries, no walls, no defensive wards protecting the camp, it would've been the perfect time to strike. That there hadn't been a follow-up attack disturbed him greatly.

Only after the fires had been extinguished was Gaius able to find the Count. Tarsus had returned to his fortified tent with more than a few burns covering his body. He wasn't the oldest man around, but for a fifth-tier mage, he was well into middle-age. His hair had almost turned completely silver, and his pale face was steadily growing more wrinkled with what seemed like every passing day. Being caught up in all this excitement hadn't done him any favors, either, as his pained expression clearly indicated.

"My Lord!" Gaius exclaimed as he saw the state of the Count. Tarsus was being tended to by several attendants and healers, but he still turned and politely nodded to Gaius upon the latter's arrival.

"Lord Tullius," Tarsus said in greeting. "What's the state of the camp?"

Gaius was about to answer, but the words caught in his throat for a moment. He hadn't been able to find the Count since the start of the chaos, so he'd assumed that Tarsus had been out coordinating the response. If Tarsus didn't already know the state the camp was in, however, then Gaius couldn't help but begin to doubt his assumption.

"Uh..." Gaius mumbled, his noble upbringing being the only reason he didn't mumble even further. A moment later, he straightened up and reported, "The fires have been put out, the camp is safe. There doesn't seem to have been any follow-up attacks."

"Good to hear..." Tarsus murmured as he leaned back in his chair, one of the healers next to him pressing an expensive—and to Gaius' eyes, far too powerful for the wound in question—healing spell against one of Tarsus' burns, which healed in an instant. Tarsus' expression relaxed as the pain vanished. "Call the commanders, we need to get things set up. We need a proper accounting of our losses, and we need to coordinate a proper response. Such a brazen attack cannot go unanswered. No matter who did this, they must *pay*!"

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Leon smiled to himself as he snuck around the perimeter of the camp, his body completely invisible. As a sixth-tier mage, he could keep his invisibility up for hours, and since the camp had no walls or defensive wards, he could essentially come and go as he pleased so long as he didn't bump into anything magical that might disrupt his invisibility, such as another mage.

Far above him, Anzu flew with both Alix and Valeria strapped into his saddle, both armed with powerful bows and most of Leon's remaining explosion spells. They were far above the limits of where most mages would project their magic senses—flight was an incredibly rare power in the Bull Kingdom, so while it wasn't impossible for anyone to spot something so far up, Leon wasn't too worried. Besides, he'd ordered them to stay well out of the effective range of Legion bows.

Somewhere beneath the camp shifted Lapis, moving surprisingly quickly for such a large being. It didn't have any need to breathe, and with the natural control over earth magic that came with being a stone giant, it was a simple thing for it to move its rocky form a few dozen feet below the ground. Of course, if it were human and needed air, then it would've needed a tunnel that would've been impossible to hide, but since it didn't need air, it didn't even need to make itself a tunnel. It simply burrowed through the earth as easily and smoothly as a snake swimming through a river, its magic closing the soil and stone behind it with ease.

Leon didn't know where his comrades were, and he wasn't going to risk releasing his magic senses to find out. They had their jobs and he trusted them to do those jobs. He could only focus on his own task. To that end, he moved through the camp slowly and methodically, taking his time scouting the place out and looking for his goal.

He found it about an hour after separating from Grim and the rest of his knights. An hour of moving through the camp as carefully as he could, coming harrowingly close to being discovered several times when a roaming knight, squire, or whoever else almost bumped into him unexpectedly. Grim was absolutely correct when he told Leon that this was reckless and stupid, but Leon was willing to risk it anyway. If he were to be discovered and killed, then they'd only lose him and not someone who was actually *important*.

Leon thought the risk worth the reward, and once he found the commander's tent, that belief multiplied within him. He was gratified a bit to hear some of the servants talking outside about how the Count of Tarsus had been injured and was resting in his tent as he waited for the command staff to meet—Leon had already heard that the Count was the commander of this force, confirming that he was in the right place.

The only problem he now faced was how to get inside the tent. Apart from the expected guards, it had been enchanted to keep the interior warm and dry, and though this wasn't a meaningful defensive enchantment, it was enough to disrupt his invisibility if he were to touch the tent's fabric—nearly all of the tents in the camp had been similarly enchanted, in fact. More than that, it had been raised off the ground on an earthen platform which had then been fortified with a stone wall he'd have to surmount, through which he could sense flowing a decent amount of magic that could reveal him if he wasn't careful. He'd hoped to encounter the Count out in the camp where he might be vulnerable to attack from a distance, but now if Leon wanted to kill him and confirm the death, then he'd have to get inside somehow without being seen.

He could always, of course, simply jump up there, walk in, kill the Count, wait the five minutes for his ring to recover, and then leave, but that bore great risk. Though he didn't want to release his magic senses to confirm, it seemed to him that the Count only had a couple of weak attendants in the tent with him, but between the Count's fifth-tier power and the number of attendants, Leon wasn't confident in killing all of them without revealing himself to the entire camp—assuming he could even get in there undetected in the first place.

A better solution would be to leave a Thunderblast spell somewhere on the tent and simply hope that it would kill the Count, but that would defeat the purpose of coming this far. Leon wanted to confirm the Count's death and save the spell if he could. He'd use it if he had to, but he wasn't quite convinced that he had to just yet.

This left one more solution to his problem in his mind, and that was to cause some kind of distraction nearby and simply hope that it would draw enough people away that he could get away with dropping his invisibility, killing the Count, and then making his escape. However, he felt like it was a good chance that any distraction he could make sufficient enough to get most of the large number of attendants and guards surrounding the Count's tent to leave would likely also send a number of higher-tiered mages into the tent, if only to make their report.

Leon grimaced, then quickly made his way around the tent, inspecting it from every angle that he could. The guard detail was heavy, enough to even overpower Leon's own severe recklessness.

With a deep, quiet sigh, Leon turned around and started making his way back to the edge of the camp. As much as it would pain him to do so, he decided to take the most cautious option and tie a Thunderblast spell to an arrow and fire it at Tarsus' tent. At the range he would have to do so, there was little chance he would miss, but he wouldn't be able to personally confirm the Count's death.

Before he left, though, Leon played with the idea of waiting until the Count met with some of his higher-ranked subordinates. If he was going to obliterate the entire tent with a Thunderblast spell, then he wouldn't mind taking out a few more knights along with the Count, assuming Tarsus even died in the blast. However, with Valeria, Anzu, and Alix flying above him and Lapis 'swimming' through the earth like a snake through water, all waiting on him to begin their own work, he decided that he needed to focus solely on the Count and not stick around to see when a meeting might take place.

And so, Leon silently made his way out of the camp over the course of the next fifteen minutes or so—he had to stop and wait for a few men-at-arms that had unexpectedly boxed him into the gap between two tents to leave at one point. Fortunately, with how narrow the camp was, he didn't have to go far before he was out into the valley forest. He found a tall tree and scampered up it as easily as he would a ladder, and once at the top, he had a fantastic vantage point from which to fire his bow.

He unlimbered the weapon and without any sign of hesitation, nocked an arrow with a Thunderblast spell tied to the shaft and loosed it right at Tarsus' tent.

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"... it's just coordinating our response, as far as I'm aware," Gaius said as he and a couple other knights in the army made their way through the camp toward Tarsus' tent.

“Good,” one of the knights, a young fifth-tier nobleman named Marius Balbinus who had brought a force of three hundred knights of his noble House with him. He was rather short, had dark brown eyes, a round face, and a thin build. “If I were to return home, my mother would be enraged if I didn’t take revenge for whoever killed our people...”

Gaius nodded, understanding the feeling. Marius’ mother was a relatively powerful Baroness in the Western Territories, and the thirty knights that had been lost in the attack from House Balbinus represented a terrible blow to their war potential. The Baroness only had about five hundred knights in her retinue, if Gaius recalled correctly.

“We’ll get them, but we have to keep our other goals in mind,” the other knight accompanying them said, her tone deadly serious. “We’ve lost at least half of our food and drinkable water in that attack, let alone our spells and other equipment. If we lose much more, we’ll have to resort to taking supplies from the locals, and that will slow us down considerably.”

This knightess Gaius wasn’t too familiar with, but he knew that she came from a family of hereditary knights in the capital rather than from landed nobility and that her name was Victoria Vitellius. She was very tall, to the point of towering over the much shorter Marius. She had long auburn hair tied into a professional bun, a stern expression, dark blue eyes, and the kind of body that Gaius could easily believe had been trained practically from birth to fight. She was of the fourth-tier, but between her and Marius, Gaius thought her the more dangerous of the two.

As they approached the tent, they could hear the muffled conversations of several of their colleagues who had arrived before them. The tent wasn’t as warded against sound as it should’ve been, Gaius noted, as they could hear the conversation that was being had within quite easily.

The three never made it into the tent. As they drew to within twenty feet, it suddenly erupted in an explosion of golden lightning. The bolts ripped through the tent fabric, setting some of it on fire and utterly ravaging those within. Gaius was hurled back into the other two knights with him, and all three went flying backward.

Gaius was taken completely by surprise, though he at least had donned his armor not long after the fires had been put out. Still, the shockwave from the explosion completely knocked his lights out, and he didn’t see the lightning tearing those within the tent to pieces. The most powerful knights inside the tent weren’t outright killed, but they were severely burned, and their flesh was cut to ribbons. Those who were of the fifth-tier and below were not so lucky, with many of the attendants and servants being outright incinerated by the lightning. Gaius also missed the follow-up explosions—five of them ripped through the camp, targeting the densest parts of the camp and starting new fires.

But that wasn’t the end of it. Huge stone spikes burst from the ground, impaling the survivors still in the tent and killing most of those that remained. Luckily for Gaius and the other two, they were far enough away that they hadn’t been targeted.

It was over in the space of a heartbeat, and the leaders of Octavius’ force of knights had nearly all been incapacitated or killed.

Chapter 402: First Command

Gaius groggily shook his head, trying to clear his head of the high-pitched whining and ringing in his ears. Something had just happened, he was sure of it, but the pounding in his brain was preventing him from remembering just what it was.

Minutes passed as Gaius tried to open his eyes. He had no idea what was around him, but he wasn't in the proper state of mind to truly care. It took what seemed like an eternity before the ringing in his ears began to fade, and he heard the faint sounds of screaming as if something terrible had just happened in the distance.

But as the ringing continued fading and the screaming became louder, Gaius began to pay more attention, his mind slowly clearing of fog and haze to vaguely recall a thunderous blast and scorching lightning.

That memory of the flash of lightning and searing pain jolted Gaius back to reality, his eyes quickly opened, and he took stock of his surroundings.

He saw a scene not too dissimilar to the one he saw during the first attack just a few hours ago; the orange glow of fire in the distance, screaming and running around from the lower-ranked knights and their subordinates, alarm bells, and rain.

It took Gaius a moment to find his balance, but he managed to struggle to his feet. He wasn't too injured, but he'd been lying on Marius Balbinus and Victoria Vitellius, whom he'd been thrown into by the blast of lightning that tore through the Count's tent...

'The Count!' Gaius thought to himself in panic as everything finally came back to him. He wanted to help the other two knights, who were beginning to stir out of unconsciousness, but Gaius' priority had to be the commander of the army and the rest of the command staff that had been in the tent.

Gaius hadn't been moved after falling, as the panic and lack of leadership ensured that the camp was taken by the iron grip of chaos and no one had seen to him or the other two knights. As he turned his gaze to the remains of the command tent, he could easily see why.

The tent itself was long gone, incinerated by the heat of the lightning or simply blown somewhere by the wind after being knocked loose from its anchors by the blast. Massive stone spikes had erupted from the center of the fortified platform the tent had stood upon, impaling many of the senior knights and raising them into the air for all to see. Most of them had been horrifically burned by the lightning, though nearly all were still recognizable. The Count of Tarsus himself was easily located, being near the center of the blooming flower of stone spikes, impaled upon the largest petal and raised more than thirty feet into the air.

No one was even trying to bring the knights down or do anything about the spikes. Gaius himself could only stare at the grisly scene, and as his eyes flit from one impaled knight to another, he realized something else that sent a deep chill running down his spine.

He was in charge, now, assuming the chain of command still meant anything.

The Count had made him second-in-command to curry favor with his father and older brother; it was also an acknowledgment that, as the son and younger brother of a Duke, Gaius possessed a greater social rank than everyone else in the army, even the Count himself. However, while it was official, it

wasn't truly supposed to mean anything. The Count hadn't intended to fight on the front lines, so logically speaking, Gaius shouldn't have ever been in a position to exercise much of that authority. Most of the leadership in the army knew that and understood the Count's decision.

Now, most of them were on the spikes at Tarsus' side.

Gaius, coming to his senses, quickly ran around the 'flower' of spikes, identifying each of the knights and nobles impaled upon them. His accounting was bleak; by the time he was finished, he realized that only himself and a handful of other knights were left who were of high enough rank to command the army.

Two of those knights had awoken and pushed themselves to their feet behind him—Marius was the son of a somewhat influential Baroness, and Victoria was a high-tiered mage from a long line of respected hereditary knights.

Gaius felt his noble upbringing surge within him, urging him to take charge, douse the fires, and pacify the camp. He immediately walked back to them and ordered, "Return to your forces! Get them under control! If we let this chaos continue, the army will disintegrate around us!"

Both knights looked like they wanted to argue with him, perhaps even to question his ability to give them orders. However, the shouting, burning, their own minor injuries, and general chaos of the rest of the camp was too pressing to ignore.

"We can discuss... *things* later," Marius promised as he turned and ran into the twisting paths of the camp, shouting at everyone he could see to calm down and regain order. Victoria did likewise, though she barely even glanced at Gaius before sprinting off to assist in getting the Count's personal forces back in line.

Gaius sighed, then turned back to stare at the stone spikes. '*I can do this... I can do this...*' he thought to himself.

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It took hours for the camp to be brought back under control. Luckily for Gaius, it didn't take nearly as long to pull down the corpses of the Count of Tarsus and the rest of the impaled knights. He had to grab about a dozen young squires from nearby tents to do it, though, since nearly all of Tarsus' attendants and servants had either fled in the wake of the attack or were scattered around the command tent in pieces.

The 'flower' of stone spikes had erupted from a central location, with the spikes further on the edge angled more in line with the ground, while those closer to the center were thrust into the air at steeper angles more perpendicular to the ground. Those closer to the edge were thus easier to get down, but it took Gaius and those he roped into this duty with him significantly more time to retrieve the bodies in the center.

It was an experience that Gaius was sure he'd never forget. It was grisly work, only becoming more so as the sun began to rise, and he could better see the extent of the lightning burns covering the bodies and the gore that seeped from their wounds onto the rock spikes. The smell was terrible, and many dead faces had been frozen in expressions of pain and terror, compounding Gaius' nausea and horror.

But he'd managed to complete his work not long after the sun rose from behind the Border Mountains in the east, and he dismissed the workers to assist in getting the camp back under control. The second round of fires had been luckily put out during the night—though the rain had stopped partway through, making it a little more difficult than the first time—but the hard part of reasserting control was keeping the knights, men-at-arms, and squires who had just lost their top leadership from deserting, looting the camp, or getting into fights.

It was almost noon when tenuous peace and order had been restored to the camp after the devastating attacks. Gaius and the handful of knights still left in charge gathered in a makeshift command tent to discuss what would happen next while the rest of the camp was put on guard duty. No one wanted a repeat of the previous night.

Everyone sat in a circle on stools without even a table between them. There were only seven of them left, and while Gaius was the weakest among them, he was also the one who was formally in command and highest on the noble totem pole. As such, he didn't put too much thought into the seating arrangements.

That being said, he wasn't about to let anyone forget that he was in charge, no matter how humbling the past few years had been. "Give me a status report," he demanded of the entire tent, uncaring as to who would respond.

"Who do you think you are, boy?" one of the knights immediately responded. He had the appearance of a muscle-headed brute, with a shaved head to cover his prematurely receding hairline, arms like tree trunks, and a huge barrel chest. His eyes were bright blue, his jaw was strong and square, and his nose was straight and long.

"I am Gaius Caecilius Tullius, son of Domitius Aquillius Tullius and brother to Gratian Tullius!" Gaius indignantly replied, his noble pride finally showing itself after lying so long dormant. "My family rules the Duchy of Lentia, and I am a knight in the service of Prince Octavius! Who are *you*?"

Gaius knew that everyone here already knew that much about him. However, he had to emphasize it if he were to keep them in line. He, of all people, knew that noble pride meant that he had to assert his authority, otherwise the entire army would lose any respect that had for him and desert.

"I don't care about who your family is, whelp! Unless you're my liege lord then you have no business ordering me around!" the brutish knight shouted, his face rapidly turning beet red with indignation.

Gaius simply waved for one of the few survivors of Tarsus' household attendants to come forward with a small stack of papers.

"Aaand... there we go..." Gaius whispered as he quietly wrote 'Tanicus Nummius' in a blank space on the first page of the stack.

"What are you doing, boy?!" the brute demanded.

"Charging you with treason, desertion, and insubordination, Sir Tanicus," Gaius simply replied as he handed the stack back to the attendant. He knew that someone would challenge him, so he had the letter drafted before the meeting started. Being the official second-in-command had its perks, he had to admit since it made much of this so much easier. "I knew you people would have some trouble

accepting me, so I went to the trouble of having a number of such orders made, enough for all of you. If this army falls apart, I will make *damn* sure that Prince Octavius knows who's responsible. And lest anyone forget, I squired for the Prince for two years. If push comes to shove, I wonder who he'd side with..."

Left unsaid was Gaius' desire to reiterate his family's noble rank. He didn't doubt that Octavius didn't care for him, but his brother's status as Duke of Lentia was influential enough that the Prince couldn't ignore him, especially with Gaius' father now retired and free to concentrate on ascending through the magical tiers, as well as nearly all of the other high nobles who had led the army now being dead.

The brutish Tanicus, on the other hand, was a Baron from the Central Territories, a vassal of Count Tarsus with barely even two hundred knights and men-at-arms to call his own, many of whom were back in his home Barony protecting his castle and patrolling his lands. Few in the tent, whether that was the leadership or their attendants and adjutants, had any doubts who Octavius would side with if Gaius and Tanicus were to quarrel.

Tanicus looked like he had just swallowed a lemon, with a mix of fury, indignation, and fear written all across his face. It was a look not too uncommon among nobles who didn't interact with those of higher rank too often. Barons could act as they pleased within their own meager lands, but outside their territory, they only outranked the landless nobility, and the vast majority were too unimportant and too rural to frequently interact with those who outranked them. Even the Earls of the Serpentine Isles were ranked higher.

In a way, Gaius was glad that it was Tanicus that spoke up first and practically volunteered to be made an example of. The Baron hadn't the power to risk crossing the Prince, and that made things easy for Gaius. He barely managed to suppress his smirk as Tanicus grumbled something incoherent and lowered himself back into his seat.

"Does anyone else have something to add?" Gaius politely asked those in the tent as he handed the papers condemning Tanicus to a nearby attendant who promptly shredded them—Gaius had plenty more, as the stack of papers conspicuously still nearby attested. He was answered with silence. "No? All right, then. So, about our current status...?"

"We lost more than a thousand fighters in the attack, many of them knights," Dame Victoria answered, her tone calm and even as if Gaius hadn't just threatened the room with charges punishable by execution.

"Yeah, most of them were our leaders, too," another knight added. "We've had just as many desertions as fatalities due to the loss."

"What about injured?" Gaius asked.

"We still have several hundred being treated by healers. Two thousand were injured in the attack, but most of the damage they suffered was superficial and easily healed," Victoria quickly replied.

"And food supplies?"

"Burned. Those who held more in their soul realms died last night."

“Two days,” said Marius Balbinus as he subtly glared at Gaius. “That’s how long we have at our current size until we starve.”

“If they haven’t been yet, send out foraging parties,” Gaius said.

“I’m not touched in the head, of course I already sent out foraging parties!” Marius angrily muttered.

Gaius almost snapped at him, as he couldn’t afford to let such disrespect go unanswered before his authority was firmly established, but he stopped himself and decided to take Marius at face value.

“I know you’re not stupid, good work on taking the initiative,” Gaius replied, pulling out a slightly more confused look from Marius than before. “As I recall, there were a couple of small hamlets in the area—mostly small logging and mining villages. Before we move on, I want us to take the local castle and resupply as much as we can from the castle’s reserves and from those villages.”

“And who will lead the vanguard to take the castle?” another knight asked.

Gaius paused for a moment to think. The person he’d select would probably be seen as his second-in-command, and if he didn’t pick correctly, he could offend some of those who remain. Even with his threats of charging them with treason, some of them could easily take their personal knights and go home. If that happened, then the army would just fall apart, with all the knights deciding to leave. And he had to pick one of them, for he couldn’t lead the troops himself given what had just happened.

Their lack of discipline was distressing, but Gaius was going to take what he could get. As far as he was concerned, taking care of these people was his biggest responsibility, with the mission given to them by the Central Consul coming in second—not that he was planning on just giving up on that. He could see that the situation in the Kingdom was effectively already in a state of civil war, and if he could end it in the next few days by taking Ironford, then that was what he was going to do.

“Sir Marius, you’ll take the vanguard,” Gaius said, putting Marius in command of the frontline knights and giving him the responsibility for taking the castle.

Marius was stunned into silence, but no one could argue with Gaius’ choice—Marius was the second-highest ranked person in the room, after all—at least, if Gaius factored in more than pure noble rank, since Tanicus was an Baron in his own right, while Marius was only the heir of one.

Without waiting for Marius’ reply, Gaius moved on, and by the time everyone left the tent about an hour later, the knights and men-at-arms that had lost their leaders to the attacks the previous night had been temporarily reassigned to new leaders until the mission was over. Gaius couldn’t make any of them stay, as was evident by the thousand or so that had already deserted when their leaders fell, but assigning them to the surviving high-tiered knights would keep any more desertions to a minimum—he hoped.

And with all of that settled, the camp picked up and began to move again, though this time with significantly more caution and security. It was already relatively late, so they didn’t get far, but Gaius made sure that crude walls were erected and given basic enchantments to give them better defenses going forward. Tarsus’ arrogant confidence and inexperience brought them great suffering, and Gaius was determined not to make the same mistake.

Chapter 403: Wild Success

Leon could see his Thunderblast spell go off in the distance, and he immediately turned around and ran back into the forest, trusting in his invisibility ring and skills in the forest to keep him hidden. He could hear the thousands of people in the camp begin to scream, followed soon after by a series of explosions that he recognized as his own spells. They weren't numerous, but he was sure they still did damage—they'd been fired by Valeria and Alix, after all, and even if he trusted nothing more about them, he knew that their archery skills were on point.

He didn't hear what Lapis did, but he didn't doubt the stone giant for a second. It was hundreds of years old, Leon was sure, and from the way it moved through the earth, he couldn't imagine it would run into much difficulty with all the other more pressing distractions around the camp.

Thus, it was no surprise to him when, only minutes after he arrived at their fallback point, Anzu arrived with the ladies on his back, followed by Lapis a minute or two later, emerging from the ground as if it had been buried there for centuries and only now woke up.

"Well?" Leon asked, his smiling face hidden behind his helmet. The simple fact that no one was injured was enough for him to know that the mission went off without a hitch, but he wanted details.

"We hit the biggest tents," Valeria swiftly and professionally reported. "We can't say for certain what was in them, but whatever it was, it's gone up in smoke."

"We also used all of the spell arrows," Alix added. "They didn't see us, and if they tried shooting us down, they never came close. As a result, we used all of the remaining arrows."

Leon nodded, his smile widening. His eyes then turned to Lapis.

"Numerous humans survived in the tent you destroyed, Leon," the giant rumbled, its language sounding so much like an avalanche or grinding stone that the ladies had no hope of understanding what it was Lapis said. On top of that, stone giants had no facial features, and didn't communicate much with their body, so Valeria and Alix were kept almost completely in the dark until Leon translated after the conversation was over. "I killed all those who remained and made an offering of their bodies to the gods—to your Ancestors."

Leon felt something akin to appreciation welling up from within him, though he knew it wasn't coming from him.

[You watching right now?] he asked anyone who might be listening in from his soul realm.

[Of course, I am,] came the smooth, melodic voice of the Thunderbird's voice when in human form.

[You say that as if I should've been expecting you to watch,] Leon responded with a hint of accusation, though his mild amusement covered it well.

[Mmm. You'd have noticed if you'd been paying attention,] his Ancestor replied. [You know, you ought to take a few cues from your pet rock, at least it knows how to show some *proper* courtesy.]

[I'm not going to sacrifice people to you,] Leon said, his tone immediately growing dark and serious.

[Not what I was implying you should do, but you should be grateful that I allow you to speak with such informality, boy,] the Thunderbird retorted, and Leon felt her attention shift away. If he were in his soul realm, he guessed that he would probably be seeing her flying away into the Mists of Chaos right now.

Shaking his head a bit to return to his current circumstances, Leon rubbed Anzu's feathered head and said to the rest, "Good work. Let's get the hells out of here."

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"Look at that..." Grim murmured.

"Are they retreating...?" the fourth-tier knight beside him wondered aloud.

"Looks like they're tucking and running," Grim replied.

The two were on a hill with a fine, if imperfect, view of the valley. They were keeping an eye on Octavius' forces, and though they couldn't make out too many details, the movement of thousands of people wasn't so easily concealed.

The two knights could see the army they'd been sent to delay turning around and moving back roughly west, but their specific route gave Grim some pause.

"They're not taking the same route they took previously..." Grim observed.

"Regardless, they seem to be retreating," the other knight said.

"Right, let's go report in."

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"They're not retreating," Leon said as he stared at the map in front of him. On it was marked the location of Octavius' army and the rough direction they had been heading in. What Leon stated, however, wasn't that revelatory, he was simply stating what was on the mind of the knights that had gathered to plan another raid.

The army was moving in the direction of a nearby castle. The castle was small enough that it had been safely ignored up until this point, but with the army heading directly for it now, it seemed that something had changed.

It was a terrible situation for the Baron of the castle, but for Leon's small force of two hundred, Prince August, and the thousands of affiliated knights holding the pass to Ironford, it was some of the best news they could ever receive, for Octavius' force wasn't just marching through their pain to reach Ironford.

"I agree," Grim said. He and the other knight that had been sent scouting hadn't been able to see the castle, but now that he was looking at a map, it was almost painfully obvious where the army was heading. "If I had to guess, I would say that the attacks last night severely disrupted their supplies, and they need to restock."

"That would be the best-case scenario, I think," Leon replied. "It's possible that when Lapis and I killed Count Tarsus, another knight took his place who's taking a more cautious and systematic approach. Hells, maybe they just think that the few rural fighters that Baron... whoever owns that castle was responsible for the attack. We can't say for sure. No matter their intentions, I think we can chalk this up as an absolute win."

The other knights around the table nodded their heads—the three fifth-tier knights were present, along with the fourth-tier squad leaders, Valeria, and Alix. They didn't have the exact numbers, but it was clear they had inflicted heavy casualties upon their enemy while not taking so much as a single battlefield injury of their own—though one of their lower-tiered knights managed to slip and fall close to their camp in the hills and break his leg. This detour that Octavius' fighters were taking would give them at least a day, maybe even more.

They just had to keep the army from reaching Ironford until the 7th Legion came up from the south. They only had one problem: they were out of explosion spells. Leon's entire stash—and those humbler spell collections of the other knights—had been used up in their raid the previous night, and though he still had quite a few Thunderblast and white fire spells, it simply wasn't enough to make that big of a difference when dealing with an enemy ten thousand strong unless used *very* judiciously.

"If we're going to assume that they're moving over to this castle to resupply, then that presents an opportunity," Valeria stated quietly, though she drew the attention of everyone else. "They'll send out scouting and foraging parties, and we can make some of those people *disappear*."

Leon cocked an eyebrow in mild surprise at how matter-of-factly Valeria made this suggestion, but he agreed completely. In fact, this sort of fighting was what he was best at. He'd never seriously fought in a shield wall before so he didn't know how good he'd be if he were stuck into one, but running around in the forest with his bow in hand shooting at isolated groups of enemy combatants... well *that* was something that he was more than comfortable doing.

"There's not much else we *can* do," the fifth-tier knight—whose name Leon still hadn't learned yet—said in support of Valeria's suggestion, "we're outnumbered worse than whores on the day that the troops come home, and if we try to fight in the open, we'd get fucked even harder. Best not to fight in the open."

A few frowns could be seen around the table from the crude comparison, but no one could disagree. Their tactical and strategic situation was terrible, and while Leon had sent word back to Minerva about how bad it was, he wasn't expecting any assistance from her end given that her force was facing down an army of their own the size of two Legions.

"Let's do it," Leon said. "Let's bleed them dry from a thousand cuts. If they can't move or resupply without fear of attacks, then they won't move quickly. All we need to do is hold until the 7th Legion arrives."

Glancing around at the faces of the knights listening to him, Leon felt his heart flutter a bit in anxiety. He spoke with confidence, but he couldn't banish the feeling of doubt that had settled into his chest. He was much younger than just about everyone else here, and effectively unproven in command, so even if he knew he was making the correct call in the situation, he simply couldn't get rid of the idea in the back of his mind that he was leading everyone to their doom.

Fortunately for him, his natural stoicism helped to mask his anxiety, and not a single person questioned the strategy he'd settled on.

Leon continued, "We're also going to pull up camp. We shouldn't have a permanent place that can be attacked. Best to stay on the move. We're smaller and can move much faster. Best not to give up that advantage even if it makes us a bit less comfortable."

There was a bit of grumbling, but the practicality of Leon's order outweighed anything else they may have wanted to say. Leon counted himself lucky that these were knights from Trajan's retinue, and Trajan's retainers were too disciplined and experienced to be picky about where they slept when on campaign.

The specific logistics of their move was quickly worked out, and then Leon's group broke camp and vanished into the forest. They had an army to harass.

—

Gaius sighed as the gate of the castle came crashing down. It brought him no pleasure to seize this castle and kill its defenders, but it had to be done. Were it his choice, they wouldn't have taken it, but his army needed the supplies within if they were to accomplish the mission that Octavius had given them.

Gaius had to admit, though, that he was more than a little conflicted as he walked through the gate and into the small, muddy bailey. He couldn't imagine how it would feel if someone were to take his home, the palace in the Duchy of Lentia, and he had just done that to the Baron who had lived here.

Several times over the past day and a half since Tarsus had died, Gaius had played with the idea of simply letting the army fall apart and letting the mission fail, but in the end, he felt like he couldn't. As much as he hated Octavius and those the Prince surrounded himself with, Gaius couldn't defy the orders he had been given. This was a Royal mission to bring traitors to justice, not turning a blind eye to Earthshaker's horrific hobbies.

Still, Gaius felt awful.

The Baron who owned the castle had fled almost two days ago, before even Tarsus' death, leaving about twenty knights and forty men-at-arms to occupy the wooden, unenchanted structure. These people were remarkably loyal to their Baron, for even when Gaius' army showed up on their doorstep and made a grand display of their power, the castle gate remained closed.

It wasn't a large place, barely large enough to house a granary, a small two-story keep with only four rooms, cramped barracks that barely managed to house its garrison, and a shrine to the owner's Ancestors. The walls were only twenty feet tall, and without enchantments to keep Gaius' stronger knights out, they were easily able to leap right over them and reach the castle's small bailey.

From there, it was easy to enough to open the wooden gates, though they had to kill most of the knights and men-at-arms defending the castle, for they did not surrender.

The castle itself had been built atop a steep hill, with the rocky terrain to its north rough enough that Gaius could only reasonably approach from the south, not that that stopped him. There were a few injuries on his side from projectile weapons, but the price for taking the castle was only five injuries and two deaths—not too bad for taking the strong point.

Unfortunately, this castle was also far too small to house even a small fraction of the army, but Gaius quickly set about fixing that. The castle was taken not long after midday, and by the time the sun set, enough of the surrounding forest had been cleared to build a workable camp with low walls.

The knights, men-at-arms, and all their squires didn't work with the efficiency of Legion soldiers, but Gaius couldn't help but be impressed with what they had accomplished after the thrashing they had recently taken. Even better, some of the more powerful knights had some limited enchanting skills, and the walls were reinforced with magic. Gaius knew that if whoever had attacked them came back, they would not find the camp nearly as vulnerable as they had two nights previous.

As the camp was being established, he also sent out small foraging parties to hunt down some food to replenish their depleted stores, as well as a few more parties to visit the villages in the area to procure some much needed supplies from them. There would be violence when they arrived at the villages, that much he knew, but his first priority was to keep the army he was in charge of from starving. He gave strict instructions not to sack the villages—not that he felt like there would be much there to sack—but still, people would die because he'd sent knights out to retrieve much-needed supplies. That responsibility weighed heavily on his mind, and he didn't think he'd be getting a good night's sleep despite the camp's greatly increased safety standards.

As the sun was setting, Gaius was busy inspecting the hastily-constructed walls with Dame Victoria at his side. Sir Marius was busy keeping the knights and their men-at-arms organized—or so Gaius thought, for as he was nearing the end of his inspection, Marius and a handful of others, mostly higher-tiered knights, came running over to him.

"Sir Tullius!" Marius called out, all noble pride in his voice gone.

"What is it?" Gaius asked, a little startled at the group's expressions; some panicked, others deadly serious.

"Almost a quarter of our foragers have been attacked in the forest!" Marius reported.

Chapter 404: The Lion in the Valley

"Their foraging parties were large, too large for all of them to be hit, but we got quite a few," Grim reported to Leon. "Our casualties were minimal, while theirs were substantial."

"Define 'minimal' and 'substantial'," Leon said, his eyebrow rising almost into his hair at the mention of their casualties.

"... We lost three knights, and seven more were wounded," the fifth-tier knightess reported.

"Balance that against the hundred or so *at least* that we killed, and I'd say this was a win," the fifth-tier knight said.

"I'd rather this not become a game of numbers," Leon said, interrupting the argument that he could sense coming. "We have so few people that turning this into a battle of attrition won't get us very far. As it is, if they realize just how badly we're outnumbered, I'd guarantee that they'll just push right through, eating whatever casualties we inflict. I think the only reason they haven't done so already is simply because our first raid was so devastating."

The rest of the group's leadership around Leon nodded. They were all sitting on a cliffside overlooking a good portion of the valley, and they could see the castle that Octavius' people had taken in the distance, mostly because of the clearing of the forest around it to build their palisade.

"Have these reports been sent back to Dame Minerva?" Leon asked.

"They have been," Alix responded. She had been quite diligent in keeping Minerva up to date regarding what they had been doing, though from what Minerva had sent back to them, the fighting in the pass to Ironford was keeping them from sending reinforcements. Fortunately, it seemed that Minerva, Roland, and Brimstone had been so far successful in their endeavors to hold the pass, but Leon had been hoping for at least a few hundred more knights and men-at-arms with which to accomplish his own task.

"No sign of reinforcements?" Leon further asked.

"None," Alix replied.

'*Shit*,' Leon bitterly thought. "All right," he said out loud, "if we want to convince our opponents that we're a lot more numerous than we are, then we're going to have to step this up."

—

Night fell upon the valley, and Leon and the rest of his people ventured back out into the forest. Leon hadn't ordered any further attacks during the daytime since it was risky to move around in the forest when so many of their enemies were out hunting and foraging for supplies.

At night, however, Octavius' people retreated back into their camp. On the one hand, this meant that Leon's knights hadn't much opportunity to attack them, but it also gave them the run of the forest.

Leon watched the camp with most of the rest of his force behind him. The camp was quite large, but its defenses prevented another raid like what they had accomplished two nights ago. However, that wasn't Leon's goal. Rather, he kept the only gate in and out watched, waiting to see what would happen.

If nothing would happen at all during the night, he'd simply hit the gate with arrow fire and call it a night. However, if he were in charge of the camp, he'd have patrols sent out to ensure the safety of the camp and to keep an eye on the villages.

It seemed that whoever was in charge in the camp had the same mindset as Leon, as not even an hour after the sun fell below the western horizon, about two hundred mounted knights came riding out of the gate.

Leon smiled. Horses were the staple of the landed nobility, as they were the only people rich enough in both coin and land to raise a cavalry force. Legions focused almost entirely on infantry, with some care paid to archers, but for the most part, horsemen were limited to nobles and the knights who served them.

Leading this particular band of knights was a middle-aged woman riding a large stag. The stag was at least half again as large as the largest destrier trotting behind it, with rich brown fur and tree-branch-like antlers. Based on its muscular form and the fourth-tier aura Leon could sense from it, he could tell that it was strong for a war beast, and as a mount, it was probably faster than any other horse he'd ever seen employed in the Bull Kingdom.

'That creature doesn't have a damn thing on Anzu, though,' Leon thought with more than a little bit of pride in his griffin, who was crouched far back from the tree line, hiding his shiny white body in the shadows of the forest.

It was a large patrol—if a patrol was actually what it was. No matter what, Leon knew that he had found his target, and once the knights had ridden off, his people turned around and slipped back into the forest.

From the back of Anzu and about a thousand feet in the air, Leon could, with some difficulty due to the tree cover, track the movements of this unit of knights. Once he figured out that they were on their way to one of the nearby villages, the makings of a plan began to form in his head, and a vicious smile spread across his face.

—

Along the route back to their camp, the mounted knights and their men-at-arms slowly made their way through the forest. Their formation wasn't as tight as it could've been simply due to how broken the terrain was, but they moved in a reasonably neat formation.

That changed as soon as the head of the column erupted in an explosion of lightning that enveloped the twenty or so knights and men-at-arms at the formation's head. A moment later, before those further back could process what was happening and react accordingly, arrows began to rain down upon them, along with a few lightning bolts, fireballs, and ice spikes.

Octavius' troops were strong and well equipped, but in ten seconds, a third of their number had fallen, and the arrows just kept raining down into them from all sides, finding gaps in their armor or targeting the lightly armored horses beneath them.

The leaders of the patrol were the first to be targeted, and the formation began to fall apart as those in charge were killed or incapacitated. Some of the knights tried to charge out on their horses into the dark forest to try and find the unseen archers. A few managed to find their quarry and engage them in melee combat, but most that tried were quickly targeted and put down with accurate arrow fire.

The unlucky knights at the back were unable to retreat, as Lapis appeared as if from nowhere behind them—in the Eastern Territories, there were more than enough boulders around for the stone giant to hide with ease, and that wasn't even going into how well it could hide underground. Lapis crashed into the back of their formation, crushing many knights beneath its stony fists and terrifying their horses.

A few of the knights had bows of their own and tried to shoot back, but ultimately, about five minutes after the Thunderblast spell went off, the patrol sent out by Octavius' knights had been completely defeated.

Not all the knights were killed in the fighting, though. In fact, many survived with various injuries, while some of the weaker men-at-arms and squires surrendered once all the knights were defeated.

Leon was sorely tempted to have them all killed. He wanted no prisoners, no survivors to report back on their numbers, but when he looked around at those who had accompanied him, he knew that that wasn't an attractive option. One of the knights that followed him had even fallen at the side of one of

Octavius' knights that had fallen with an arrow in his belly and was tending to his wounds with the care of someone who personally knew him.

Roland's words before the battle at the Naga wound their way back into his head. These weren't enemies, truly. They were fellow citizens of the Bull Kingdom. If they were warriors of the Talfar Kingdom or invading Valemén, Leon figured there would be little hesitation if he were to order them killed. But these were fellow countrymen. Until just a few days ago, they were comrades in arms. Many of them were still lovers, friends, and family members.

And so, it was with a groan that Leon had his people pull back after collecting their own dead and injured, leaving those who survived their ambush behind, tied to trees, to wait for those who would sally out of their camp to find them. Leon could only hope that leaving them alive wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass.

—

Over the course of the night, Leon's group ambushed three more patrols sent out from the camp, all of them of similar size to the first. In total, roughly five hundred of Octavius' knights and men-at-arms had either been killed or wounded severely enough to take them out of the fight for a good long while.

It wasn't all good news, though, as Leon could say the same about fifty of his own people. He was left with one hundred and fifty, while he barely put a dent in his opponent. He only had so many people to work with, and at this rate, it was a matter of time until they took so many casualties that they couldn't fight any longer. As they were, every knight they lost weakened them by an almost noticeable margin, and though their casualties were light by most standards, he'd still lost a full quarter of those under his command.

Another night like that, and he couldn't in good conscience continue the campaign as he had been. It was time to switch tactics.

Octavius' army didn't move the following day. Leon couldn't infiltrate the camp as he had been, so he had no idea why they were staying put, but he guessed it was because of a supply issue or they simply didn't want to leave their most wounded people behind while the rest continued onward. No matter what the reason was, they stayed for another day. Leon led an ambush during the day on a patrol bringing supplies back to the camp, but he didn't stay to win the fight. He fired a single Thunderblast at the head of the column, and all of his people fired only three quick arrows before retreating back into the forest while Octavius' fighters were still confused and trying to figure out what had just happened.

Consequently, the casualties inflicted were significantly lighter, but Leon's force escaped without taking a single loss. Fighting this way meant that Lapis couldn't be used to its greatest efficiency, but a single stone giant, while powerful, wasn't invincible, and Leon wasn't going to squander his one advantage and a profoundly loyal follower on relatively small and strategically insignificant patrols.

Leon was a bit conflicted about fighting like this, as it would undoubtedly tell Octavius' people that his force was tiny compared to theirs. However, he couldn't continue to risk his people fighting as he had been, he simply didn't have the numbers to do so. It gave him a terribly impotent feeling, and he could only comfort himself with the reminder that it wasn't his job to defeat this force, he just had to delay it

until the 7th Legion arrived. In that respect, he felt like he was more than doing his job, for the army had been practically halted in this valley less than sixty miles from Ironford for almost three days.

Leon hoped he could squeeze just another couple of days out of this. He hadn't received any word about where the 7th Legion was, but it had to have gotten close by now; it was only a week out from Ironford when Minerva called them in. That should leave them three or four days away, perhaps even as few as two if they moved quickly enough. If Leon could hold this army off for just two more days, then even if he let them continue moving toward Ironford, the 7th Legion would catch up before they reached the city.

Assuming that the 7th Legion was actually on its way, of course. Without word from them, Leon could only take it on faith that they were still marching his way, and faith was not something Leon had in abundance.

Needless to say, despite his accomplishments, he still felt anxious as all hells for what would come in the next couple of days.

Another day passed about as well as the last had gone, with Leon's people hitting Octavius' with hit and run attacks, never stopping long enough to engage in any serious fighting. However, the knights they were fighting against were moving out in greater and greater numbers, making it more and more difficult to move in the valley. With the attacks lessening in intensity and frequency, it didn't take Leon by too much surprise when he saw Octavius' knights surging out from their camp on the morning of the fifth day since Tarsus had been killed. It was clear that they were once again moving toward Ironford, and they moved with great purpose as if the spirits of their angry Ancestors were on their heels.

Leon had no choice but to respond in kind, for there was still no sign that he could see of the 7th Legion.

Chapter 405: Gaius' Decision

"Let's go! Keep moving!" Gaius shouted as he, Victoria, Marius, and all the rest of the remaining leaders in their army urged their people onward. It had been a terrible few days, with the army taking hundreds of additional casualties, and while they had been unable to find and deal with the enemy harassing them, they still had to keep to the rough schedule.

When they had broken off from the Consul of the Central Territories' Legions, it had been with the understanding that they would make their way to Ironford with all due haste, not get bogged down trying to fight a guerrilla war in the forests and valleys to the south of the city. To that end, Gaius had met with the leadership the previous night to discuss their options.

The possibility of staying to find and kill those who were harassing them and taken so many of their lives was floated, and while it received strong support, Gaius had rejected it. That didn't make him any friends, but his appeal to their orders won out in the end. He didn't want them stuck here, for occupying a single insignificant valley wasn't their objective, even if leaving would wound their pride.

And so, with twelve thousand knights, men-at-arms, and squires, they charged out of the castle and fortified camp, leaving most of their wounded and servants behind with a token guard. The more recent attacks against their patrols were smaller and less confrontational, leading Gaius to believe their enemy in the valley was much smaller than most had assumed. Consequently, he felt that leaving five hundred men-at-arms to guard the camp and their wounded was more than sufficient.

The army surged through the forest, covering vast distances without challenge. In the forests, their force could do fifteen miles per day if they pushed themselves, but Gaius managed to get them to do twenty-five. It would only take another day or two to reach Ironford at that pace, depending on how rough the land was between here and there...

—

“They’ve stretched their line out dangerously thin,” Leon stated, indicating the map in front of himself and the leaders of his unit. They had gathered at the top of a large hill to the northeast of the valley which Octavius’ army would have to approach if they wanted to reach Ironford, though they hadn’t made camp and were simply gathered around a large boulder that served as a makeshift table. “Many of their slower units were practically left behind, with a larger mass of people behind this thin, snaky line of faster units.”

“If we had a proper battalion, we could exploit the hells out of that...” Grim bitterly stated, bemoaning their lack of numbers. Even as few as five hundred would drastically increase their options when such an opportunity presented itself.

“Indeed,” Leon agreed, sighing a bit at their lack of ability to properly exploit this chance. “As it is, I think our only hope of confronting them and preventing them from reaching Ironford would be at the end of the valley.”

Many at the meeting agreed. The valley narrowed at the northeastern end, while it widened and opened up into the Southern Territories to the southwest. It didn’t quite narrow to the point that their hundred and fifty could properly block it by themselves, but it was still their best bet to slow this army down.

“I don’t suppose we’ve seen any sign of the 7th Legion?”

“Not yet, but I’ll be making one last scouting fly-over before we commit to any course of action,” Leon said.

There wasn’t much more discussion, simply an agreement on where to meet. They had one last chance to slow this army down before it reached Ironford, one last confrontation. If they failed to hold the army until the 7th arrived, then Minerva would be outflanked and Ironford would fall. It would, in all likelihood, be the killing blow to August’s cause.

—

From Anzu’s back hundreds of feet in the air, Leon could see the entirety of the valley. He could see the long snaky line of Octavius’ forces as they slowly wound their way through the forest toward Ironford. He could see the castle they’d left behind, still guarded by a significant garrison. And as he turned his eyes southwest toward the opposite end of the valley, he could see something else through the haze of distance that greatly piqued his interest.

Something shiny, that caught the light of the sun and reflected it back in dozens of places. It was large, mostly crimson, and moving in his direction. As he flew closer, he could pick up on the faint sounds of marching and the occasional signal horn.

—

“Sir Tullius!” a panicked runner shouted as he came riding forward, looking for Gaius.

“What is it?” Gaius tersely asked. He rode his horse at the front of the formation—or, at least, just behind those who were busy clearing the way. The forest was dense enough that a few fourth-tier mages were the ones who were actually leading the way, and in their hands were big woodcutting axes that they were using to remove any trees that were in the way. They didn’t stop to completely clear a new path, all they were doing was making room for the benefit of the horses.

“The garrison defending the camp for the wounded sent a scout just a few minutes ago, Sir! Legion forces have arrived in the valley!”

Gaius was momentarily confused; this was noble land, there shouldn’t have been any Legions in the area. Besides, the Central Consul was nearby, relatively speaking, so if Legion reinforcements had been sent after them, then Gaius should’ve heard about it.

Suddenly, barely a second after his mind parsed those theories, it clicked in his head. This Legion wasn’t here to support them.

Gaius’ blood ran cold as he thought about that possibility. If that Legion had arrived to reinforce their mission, then they would’ve sent word before now. Gaius would’ve heard *something* about their march at least three days before their arrival. That he hadn’t indicated to him that this Legion wasn’t friendly to him.

That in itself was a bit surprising, since there hadn’t been any indications of Legion activity following August’s flight from the capital, though Gaius considered it likely that some eastern Legions might be sympathetic to his cause thanks to Dame Minerva in August’s corner. Of course, he wasn’t anywhere close to Octavius’ inner circle, so he had no clue what was going on regarding August’s base of support.

Right now, all that mattered was that a Legion had just appeared seemingly out of nowhere right on his tail.

“We have to move faster...” Gaius muttered as anxiety filled his body with panicked adrenaline.

He urged his forces onward as quick as they could move, but some of the more heavily armored cavalry began to fall behind. Gaius had to slow the entire column back down so they wouldn’t be left behind, though Gaius could tell that they were losing ground to the Legion following them anyway—far in the distance he began to hear the deep rumble of thousands of soldiers marching in formation.

His force was mounted, but in the rough terrain of the Eastern Territories, the 7th Legion was going to move much quicker, if only because they were simply following the path that Gaius’ people left behind.

Eventually, he realized that he was going to have to make a decision. Messengers had been sent to the force inquiring as to who they were, but they were rebuffed, clearly indicating this Legion’s hostility. Since Gaius wasn’t going to be able to outpace them, he had to decide if he was going to surrender or fight. He didn’t think he would make it to Ironford before the Legion caught up to the rear of his column, and the last thing he wanted was to be trapped between the defenders of Ironford and this Legion.

His first instinct was to fight. Despite everything, he still retained some amount of pride, and his sense of honor demanded that he put up some kind of resistance and not simply roll over like a well-trained dog

as soon as a Legion showed up behind him. To do so would obliterate whatever might remain of his reputation.

However, the more he thought about it, the less Gaius wanted to resist. To surrender would be to prevent the deaths of thousands, at least in the short term. It would also mean giving up on capturing August, and with a Legion arriving at Ironford to reinforce his position, that would also mean that this civil war would intensify.

Gaius had nothing against August personally, and he hated Octavius quite a bit—probably far more than he ever hated Leon, but he had yet to truly compare the two. He had to stifle a groan, for the more he thought about this, the more conflicted he became. His duty as a knight and a member of a noble House in vassalage to the Bull Kingdom was to hunt down traitors, even if he knew the trial had been rigged. That was simply the law. However, his own conscience demanded that he surrender and put an end to this as bloodlessly as he could. He didn't want anything to do with Octavius' war.

Of course, he wasn't even sure if all the disparate elements of his army would even listen to him, no matter what he chose. Some of the nobles would undoubtedly surrender, taking all of their knights and men-at-arms with them, while some would demand that he fight to the death. There'd be essentially no way he'd be able to thread that needle.

"Sir!" shouted one of the knights leading the way, jerking Gaius out his thoughts.

Gaius glanced up toward the knight. The front of the column had reached the end of the valley, the narrowest point where it would open back up onto the Iron Road. Ironford was less than twenty miles away.

They'd never reach it. The reason that the knight had so loudly pulled Gaius out his thoughts was because of what was now standing before them: a relatively small force, perhaps a couple hundred at the most, along with a large stone giant. Their tiny unit was too small to block the passage, but that wasn't the point. With the 7th Legion on their heels, even this short delay would keep them from their destination.

Gaius almost ordered his people to charge. Their enemy's numbers were so small that the words were practically out of his mouth, but a single person standing among those arrayed against him caused his words to die in his throat.

She was a striking woman, with long silver hair, plate armor shining in the light of the sun, and a glaive in one hand casually resting on her shoulder.

Valeria Isynos.

As soon as she fell into Gaius' gaze, his mind went blank. He simply froze in shock at seeing her in such an unexpected place; he'd thought that she had been assigned to the Royal Guards and was still protecting the King's harem.

"What are your orders?" Victoria asked as she caught up to him. "The Legion is closing in on our back ranks, if we're going to fight then we need to halt and form up now!"

"... no..." Gaius whispered. Victoria shot him a look of disbelief, but it paled in comparison to Gaius' own. He hadn't heard a word she'd said, all of his thoughts were dedicated to trying to process the simple fact

that the woman he'd loved for almost his entire life was now here, standing against him. He didn't even realize that Leon was standing right next to her, his blade drawn and ready for battle.

"Sir Gaius!" Victoria shouted in realization. Gaius' dead-eyed stare at the tiny force in front of them cued her in to the fact that he hadn't been answering her question when he said no. "What are your orders?!" she demanded with increasing desperation. It was the last time she intended to ask, for the Legion behind them had grown so close that she couldn't wait around for Gaius to get his head back on straight.

Pulling himself back together as Victoria shook him back to reality, Gaius quickly glanced backward. He'd already been leaning in one direction before seeing Valeria, but now that he knew she was here, there was only one decision he could possibly make.

And he made it.

—

"Are you sure about this...?" Valeria hesitantly asked Leon as they stood in front of the advancing knights of Octavius. "If they don't stop, then we're all dead. We've been terrorizing them for a week, now, and killed many of their leaders, they could very well want to kill us all in revenge."

"I'm not sure about this in the slightest," Leon replied with an almost cavalier attitude about the risk he was forcing everyone to take—though his heart erratically beat with anxiety and he was ready to fight for his life if his doubts about his actions proved prophetic. "However, I hope that whoever is leading that army is competent enough to understand that even if they push through to the walls of Ironford, they'd only be smashed against them between the city's defenders and the 7th. Given their conduct so far, I'm simply betting that their new commander is somewhat inexperienced, cautious, and even, perhaps, a little indecisive."

"I guess we're about to find out..." Valeria whispered as their enemy stepped out from the forest and into the light. Leon's people could see the for a while, but it wasn't until now that they were close enough to make out more than a few disparate details amongst so many armored horsemen. "Hey, is that Gaius?" Valeria suddenly asked, pointing out one of the knights in the front of the column.

"Hmm? Who?" Leon asked, not quite sure who she was talking about. Even during the graduation ceremony from the Knight Academy, Gaius hadn't taken up much of Leon's thoughts lately.

"The third-tier in front, the weakest of them," Valeria said in a tone of mild surprise and curiosity as she took a few cautious steps forward.

"Oh, yeah, I think that's him," Leon said with even less curiosity than Valeria showed. "I didn't even realize. What are the odds."

"Huh... what do you think he'll do?" Valeria asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea," Leon answered. "He and I were never close. In fact, I should be asking *you* that question; I recall you and him have known each other for years, yes?"

"When my father was Exarch of Calabria, he and I were acquainted since his family rules the Duchy of Lentia, just down the Naga River from Calabria."

“I see. Do *you* have any idea of what he’ll do?”

Valeria frowned and thought for a moment. “I think he’ll surrender,” she confidently stated.

“Oh? Feel like be—” Leon began, but a moment later he was silenced by the sounding of a horn from Octavius’ knights. For a moment, he, Valeria, Lapis, and all the rest at his back readied themselves for battle, but a moment later, they all somewhat relaxed. What they had heard was a standard signal for surrender, and sure enough, a few seconds later, white flags began to appear among the army as the knights and all the other fighters began throwing down their weapons and dismounting from their horses.

“Well... would you look at that...” Leon whispered in amazement.

Chapter 406: Prisoners

“I... surrender...” Gaius said, barely able to get the words out. He had about a dozen knights and minor Lords there with him to formally surrender as well, since, despite Gaius being officially in charge, it was a noble army and not a professional Legion—nobles still commanded their own private forces and Gaius didn’t have as much authority to command those knights to stand down as his position would imply.

“I accept your surrender,” Leon said. He, too, had a posse of knights with him, including the Legate of the 7th Legion. They were all more than a little nervous—as were those representing Octavius’ forces, for that matter—but once the words were said, there was no more fighting.

It had been more than a little startling for everyone when Gaius raised the white flag, and it didn’t immediately make every single knight and man-at-arms throw down their weapons. As the 7th Legion closed in with the back of their column, a force of two hundred knights led by Tanicus Nummius either didn’t hear about Gaius’ surrender or didn’t care about it—probably the latter, given Tanicus and Gaius’ disagreements—for they resisted and were killed almost to a man. Only about a tenth of their number was still breathing by the time of this meeting and Gaius’ formal surrender, and Baron Tanicus was not among them.

Fortunately, there had been no one else who defied Gaius’ orders, and the rest of the army surrendered without too much hassle.

For his part, Gaius was more than a little humiliated, but that feeling paled in comparison to the relief he felt at no longer having to carry out Octavius’ orders. This feeling of relief was also mixed with a slight feeling of dread at what he would face when he inevitably returned to the capital, whether that was days or years from now, but for the moment, he found himself relaxing more than he had in a good long while.

He didn’t like Leon, but the Valeman was infinitely preferable to Octavius’ leadership. Perhaps this was why Gaius didn’t even blink at Leon being the one to accept the surrender. Even with Valeria there to witness it, Gaius formally gave up his command with a glad heart and turned himself over to Leon and the 7th Legion.

—

“What are you going to do with them?” Leon asked as he, the Legate of the 7th Legion, and his small retinue walked back to the hastily-erected command tent. It had only been a few hours since the 7th

Legion arrived and Gaius first raised the white flag, but already the Legion had set up a workable camp in the valley.

"The leaders will have to be imprisoned," the Legate answered, "but as they're all noble, they'll probably be placed under some kind of house arrest. In other words, I'm sure they'll be treated as honored guests of the Marquis of Ironford rather than the prisoners that they are. The rest of the knights... we don't really have to worry about. They're more loyal to their own Lords than they are to Octavius, the Bull King, or the central government. With their Lords or their commanders in prison, they won't be a problem."

Leon frowned at that statement. He knew that if Trajan had ever been captured, he wouldn't have just stayed quiet, but he supposed he could understand why someone else wouldn't do anything reckless if they knew that the person they followed wasn't going to be harmed. Still, it wasn't like they actually *had* the Lords of these knights, most of the nobles that gathered their personal knights together to form the army he'd been fighting for the past week were relatives of landed nobles, not the landed nobles themselves. In other words, the knights and men-at-arms that made up the army could still fight if their commanders ordered them to try and release their captured family members.

It made Leon uneasy, but he decided to trust that the Legate knew what he was talking about. Besides, as the Legate said, the prisoners probably weren't going to be mistreated, but that could certainly change if anyone tried to break one of their family members out of captivity.

"So... what, they're just going to be held until the end of this little Taurus family dispute...?" Leon wondered aloud.

"No, Prince August will more than likely ransom them back to their families," the Legate answered, his face twitching slightly from the urge to smile at Leon's description of this civil war. "It wouldn't do to alienate so many landed nobles by executing their family members, and building up some goodwill with them by treating these prisoners with respect could lead to some of those nobles switching sides to his cause. Holding the captured nobles would get him nothing, as their families *would* eventually lose patience if their requests for ransom were denied and start furnishing Octavius with their knights again. But, for now, we don't have anything to worry about. These knights and men-at-arms that make up the majority of the army will return to the lands of their Lords, and we won't have to worry about them for a while."

Again, Leon couldn't help but frown. Were it up to him, he'd probably be sorely tempted to simply execute them all and be done with it, but he could understand why that wouldn't be the best idea. If he were honest with himself, he knew that he wouldn't actually indulge that urge, but just letting so many knights go that only hours ago were mortal enemies still didn't sit well with him.

"You don't like the way we're going through with this?" the Legate asked, picking up on Leon's poorly-hidden displeasure.

"I can accept why we're doing this, but it still doesn't feel right," Leon honestly answered.

"I get it, but these are nobles we're dealing with, not professional soldiers," the Legate said. "The rules are a little different. If this was another Legion, then we'd have to imprison the entire lot, but these are

nobles and their followers. We only need to take the nobles captive, and so long as we're civil about it, their retainers will abide by the surrender and leave."

Leon shrugged. "If that's the way we're going to play, then I guess that's it."

The Legate chuckled and said, "Don't forget that what happens here will be seen by everyone else in the Kingdom. If we don't take prisoners and treat our captives with honor and respect, then the same cannot be expected in turn. Even worse, if we start winning a battle but our enemy knows we don't take prisoners, then they will fight that much harder and make it much harder to win. We'd probably end up losing even more of our own people than we otherwise might. I mean, think about it for a moment; how hard would you fight if your back was against the wall compared to if you were losing and had a way out?"

"Mmm," Leon mumbled as he contemplated the issue. The Legate was making quite a bit of sense, and these points weren't ones that Leon had considered in a long time—arguably since Trajan had sent him to deal with smugglers almost two years ago.

"Think on it a bit more," the Legate said with a jovial laugh. "By the way, I think it's pretty certain that there won't be any more of Octavius' goons coming up this way, so you ought to be clear to return to Ironford or wherever Dame Minerva needs you. You did good here, Ursus, I don't think we would've made it here in time without you doing what you did."

"Thanks," Leon said in response as pride swelled within his chest. All things considered, for only fifty casualties, he'd killed thousands of knights in Octavius' army. That, in his opinion, was something to be proud of. "I'll head back, then. What are you going to do?"

"I think I'll stay here with my Legion and guard the southern valleys leading into the Eastern Territories until further notice," the Legate said. "If any more of those corrupt and treasonous toads try coming up this way, I'll lay them down at August's feet bloody and broken."

"I'll be sure Dame Minerva knows your plans," Leon replied. He then quickly said his goodbyes and gathered his remaining people together to return to Ironford.

—

It took only an hour or two for Leon and his party to make their way through the northeastern parts of the valley and return to the Iron Road. The terrain was rough, but it wasn't far, relatively speaking, especially for mages of their caliber. One hundred and fifty knights, along with litters inscribed with air runes carrying the bodies of their fallen, emerged onto the road in good order, surprising a smallish force of about five hundred knights and men-at-arms of Ironford that had been waiting along the road.

"Hail!" their leader, a fifth-tier knight shouted as he ran forward. The rest of the knights behind him drew their weapons and, while they didn't take strictly threatening postures, their body language made it clear that they were ready for a fight if that's what Leon's group was going to give them.

Leon made no aggressive moves, and neither did those who followed him. Still, they had a stone giant with them, and Lapis emerging from the trees almost made the knights on the road charge in surprise and fear. It was only the leader shouting at them to stay back that prevented any unnecessary violence.

"Sir Leon, I presume?" the leader asked as he closed with Leon, though Leon noted that, despite his orders for everyone to stay back, he was careful to keep an eye on Lapis.

"You would presume correctly," Leon answered. "Who might you be?"

"I'm Karl, a knight in the service of the Marquis of Ironford. I was sent by His Lordship to aid you in holding off the forces of Prince Octavius!"

'Doing a damn fine job of it, I see,' Leon sarcastically thought to himself, silently taking notice of all the tents and signs of encampment that were between the road, the cliffs to the north, and the hills to the south.

"No need, the 7th Legion arrived in time. They're now holding the southern valleys," Leon said.

Karl almost reeled at the surprise, but the emotion was quickly replaced with glee on his face.

"That's *wonderful* news!" he shouted. "I must return to His Lordship and tell him of this... Oh, Sir Leon, I believe Dame Minerva would like to hear of this, as well!"

And with that, the knight ran back to his own unit. He didn't stop to explain anything else, such as why his unit was just camping on the road, and neither did he ask Leon for any more details, such as the fate of the noble army Octavius had sent into the valley. He just ran away.

Leon shrugged, not interested in speaking with the knight. He figured the small force was just a detachment of reserves that had been meant to garrison Ironford against the oncoming armies and that the Marquis simply felt confident that he could spare the manpower. Leon could've definitely used these people a few days ago, but he wasn't going to waste his time being bitter. There was still a battle going on, after all—or, at least, as far as he knew.

"Let's go," he murmured to those behind him and led them westward along the Iron Road. It would take hours to reach the mouth of the pass that Minerva and the rest were holding, so there was some quiet grumbling from those who had been looking forward to returning to civilization, but Leon paid it no mind. These were Trajan's knights, and he knew that they would do their duty, especially when their peers were still holding the pass.

They made good time and reached their destination before the sun fell. The pass was still in their hands, though Leon didn't really need to see it for himself to know that; if the pass had fallen, then he would've found Ironford under siege. At the very least, he would've heard about it at some point.

The pass had been fortified further in the week since the two Legions showed up in front of it, with caves built into the cliffs and numerous archer platforms along the cliff's western faces. Many of the caves doubled as barracks and other necessary facilities, though Leon couldn't imagine they were extensive enough to comfortably house the four thousand or so knights that were with Minerva, Roland, and Brimstone. The earthen ramparts that had been first built by Roland and Brimstone's knights had also been expanded into a full-on thirty-foot-tall wall of stone bricks, complete with battlements and a handful of square towers.

Completing the fortifications was the castle on the cliffs just to the north of the pass. It had also been expanded upon, being enlarged enough to house at least five hundred knights and their attendants, and

the edge of the cliff nearby had been fortified with battlements and machicolations to aid the archer platforms below.

The visuals of all this were impressive, but since it had all been created with earth magic and likely hadn't been reinforced with too much enchantment—that part was the most time-consuming of all the steps needed to create a proper fortress—he couldn't imagine that these fortifications were as durable as even those he'd seen at Fort 127, let alone the Bull's Horns.

Upon approach, Leon's party was stopped close to the mouth of the pass, with the knights on watch only allowing them into the camp once their identities had been verified, and even then, Leon and his handful of retainers were assigned an escort to lead them to the castle above while everyone else had to wait down below. By the time Leon was allowed into the camp, Minerva received word of their arrival and had already sent Roland and Brimstone summons to the castle to hear Leon's report.

And that was where Leon found them, in the audience hall of the castle after being led through the surprisingly extensive cave network that had been built in the previous week and up onto the plateau—unfortunately, Lapis had to be left down below, as it was too large to fit into the caves, and Leon didn't want to mess with the knights' work by having the stone giant create its own way up. Lapis was, as always, quite gracious when Leon asked it to stay behind, though he thought he could detect some hint of regret in its rumbling, inhuman voice at the same time.

The castle was laid out quite simply, as the plateau was surprisingly flat at the top. The castle had essentially been expanded into a large square, with the old castle in the center and the new outer walls separated into four quadrants. There were a dozen towers along the walls, two to a side and one in each corner, though Leon didn't have much time to give them much examination. He had a report to give, and he was also quite eager to hear about how well the battle here had been going.

Chapter 407: Status of the Pass

"Ursus, welcome back," Minerva said with a rare smile as Leon, Alix, and Valeria walked into the castle's audience chamber. "I'm happy that you're safe."

"As am I, Dame Minerva," Leon replied, but when he pictured the reaction Elise might have if she heard him say that, he quickly put on a wry smile and continued, "It's good to see all of you. How's the situation here?"

"Well enough," Roland said.

"They've assaulted our walls five times in the past week, and five times we've turned them away with nothing but blood and corpses to show for their efforts!" Brimstone loudly boasted.

"We've taken casualties of our own, though," Minerva added. "We've lost almost a thousand knights either to death or to injuries too debilitating to heal in the field. How about you? Since you're here and so clearly calm, should we assume that the army that was moving to flank us has been dealt with?"

"It has been," Leon said. "It cost us fifty lives, but we slowed the army of nobles down enough for the 7th Legion to arrive in time to stop them from reaching the walls of Ironford. When the Legion soldiers showed up behind them, their commander surrendered. I'd estimate we killed more than a thousand in the course of our resistance, most of them nobles."

"Who was leading their army?" Minerva asked.

"The Count of Tarsus, but one of the sons of the Duke of Lentia took over after we killed him," Leon said.

"... Wait, you *killed* the Count of Tarsus?" Roland asked in shock.

"We did..." Leon said with a smile of pride.

Minerva and the Paladins then demanded a more detailed report, which Leon furnished them with.

"... and the Legate and I accepted Sir Tullius' surrender. The 7th stayed behind to hold the valley while I and the rest of those with me came back here."

"And Sir Adalgrim? Why didn't he accompany you here?" Minerva asked.

"He's waiting with everyone else at the camp gates. The knights on guard won't let them go far into the camp without an escort until someone comes to verify their identities..." Leon said.

"Paranoid asshats..." Brimstone muttered, though no one else spoke too ill of the guards. They were only doing their jobs, after all, even if these strict procedures were inconvenient.

"That's quite the story," Roland said. "If it were anyone else, I'd consider accusing them of exaggerating or falsely boasting to raise their prestige, but in your case, I don't think that's something you'd do."

"... Thank you," Leon said with no small amount of awkwardness.

"To think that Tarsus is dead..." Minerva murmured. "That in itself will weaken Octavius more than the loss of the flanking army. Tarsus was the wealthiest noble in the Central Territories, and without him, Octavius loses a great deal of pull with the minor nobility in that region. Especially so now when the Legions have been sent east to pursue us. I would guess it's likely that if August did decide to ransom these nobles back to their families, at least a few won't be returning to fight for Octavius."

"Mm," Brimstone grunted in agreement, though he was a little more vitriolic about Tarsus' death. "That worthless sack of dreck coasted through life on his mother's fortune. He thought that made him great, so much so that he once tried to court my cousin so that their children would have not only his County but also our Duchy as well. Fortunately, Attia saw through him as clearly as if he were made of glass. Shit-stained glass."

"Damn, tell us how you really feel," Roland sarcastically muttered with an amused smile on his handsome features.

"We can consider the southern approach secure," Minerva said, drawing their attention back to the matter at hand. "The 7th will hold the valleys, and once all the noble retainers that make up that army disperse, I don't think we'll need to worry about attacks coming from that direction for a while. Now, all we have to worry about are the two Legions on our doorstep."

Leon glanced at Minerva in the hopes of getting some kind of quick briefing to catch him up to speed, and he was in luck for that's exactly what Minerva had in mind.

"They're being led by the Central Consul himself," she explained to him. "He tried to negotiate with us on the first day, but it was fairly clear that he was just buying time. He strutted around like a peacock in

ming season, then returned to his camp and ordered an attack on our fortifications. We barely held them off, and in the end, the pass itself saved us; they couldn't bring all of their forces down upon us, and we held them back."

"That's impressive considering I didn't see many Legion shields down there," Leon said. "How did you hold off the shield walls?"

"We were fighting from an elevated position," Roland said. "We raised an earthen rampart to prevent the shield walls from coming into range, leaving us to contend with only the mages that were powerful enough to jump or climb up."

"That... doesn't sound too difficult on their end..." Leon whispered as he thought about how he would've handled an assault like that. The rampart couldn't have been too high, perhaps only a foot or two taller than the average man. The contested climb would've been difficult, but if the Legates and other sixth-tier mages were able to push the Augustine forces back even just a few feet, then their followers could've made the climb and assembled into a thin shield wall. At that point, it would've become nearly impossible to hold them back in the confines of the pass.

"It was hard fighting," Minerva admitted, "and most of the casualties we've taken in the past week were during that first assault. Still, we held them back and survived to further fortify our position—"

"—And sent our enemies back bloody and with browned trousers!" Brimstone smirkingly added as he practically flexed out of his shirt from the excitement of reliving the battle.

"Yes. We did that. That happened," Minerva drily replied, putting Brimstone in her steely gaze and silently daring him to interrupt her again. He may have been a seventh-tier Paladin, but she was indisputably the most powerful person in the room, for it was through her that August retained the loyalty of the eastern Legions.

Naturally, he gave her an apologetic look and quieted down.

"They made two more conventional assaults in the days that followed," Minerva continued, "both of which were repulsed at great cost to them. Our fortifications continued, in between assaults, meaning that every time they came, we were in a better position to respond. Their tactics didn't start to adapt until the fourth assault when they brought out a few siege engines that they had been working on. They hit the wall with a few shots from a trebuchet, but it was clear enough that they didn't come anticipating this kind of siege, as they simply fired stones at us rather than anything more magical."

Leon cocked an eyebrow at that revelation. He figured if they were coming with the expectation of laying siege of Ironford, then they would've brought something more substantial to fire from trebuchets so that they weren't relying on mundane stones.

"These stones did have *some* effect, as our walls were hurriedly constructed and not magically reinforced, but we held anyway. We turned them back again. The fifth time, however, they tried building a huge siege ramp to surmount our walls, but again, we held long enough for our own earth mages to tunnel beneath and cause it to collapse with at least an entire battalion upon it."

"Impressive," Leon whispered appreciatively.

"It was, but it seems to have clued our foe into the fact that our walls haven't been enchanted to prevent tunneling. Some of our earth mages on watch have reported strange sensations coming from below, which they believe is the Central Consul's attempts to tunnel beneath our walls. They've been trying to secure the earth beneath our feet, but we're still operating under the belief that the next assault will be coming from down below."

Leon nodded in understanding. "Sounds reasonable," he said, though it did bring up the question with him of why, if they had earth mages capable of digging tunnels, they didn't simply use said earth mages to cut a set of stairs into the cliffs a few dozen miles to the north, move one of their Legions up there, and then assault the castle from the north.

But before he began trying to poke holes or criticize the battle plans of a Consul, he had a couple more questions.

"What about the 3rd Legion?" he asked. "They were closer to the Iron Road than the 7th was to the valley, weren't they? Did they arrive in time?"

"Sort of," Roland said. "I asked them to remain in the north. We have about three thousand people here capable of fighting, while the 3rd has twenty thousand. The combined 1st and 4th out there have roughly thirty to thirty-five thousand. We're not confident in our ability to attack them directly, so the 3rd is staying in the north."

Leon nodded, suddenly understanding why the Consul wasn't trying to maneuver around to the north with his earth mages—if he did, he'd have to split his forces up in order to properly guard them against the 3rd, and even then, their construction would be contested. It was dangerous and likely to fail.

"So... what do we do now?" he asked.

"We wait," Minerva answered. "We have other Legions coming from around the Eastern Territories, and we think it's almost guaranteed that they have additional reinforcements coming from around the Kingdom, too. What happens next will depend mostly on who gets their reinforcements first. If we defeat this army here and have a significant number of soldiers, it's possible that we can move on the capital within a matter of weeks. I wouldn't hold out much hope for that, though, Octavius has been amassing troops for longer than we've been, so I would wager that reinforcements will reach him in the capital before they reach us here.

"As for more *immediate* concerns, the Central Consul is used to us sitting here and waiting for him to come to us, and that has made him complacent. Their camp isn't as well-fortified as it should be, so if we gain another Legion-worth of knights, men-at-arms, soldiers, or whoever, then I think we can take them in a straight attack."

"So, the time for holding back has ended?" Leon asked, his eyes seeming to almost light up in glee as soon as Minerva mentioned that their enemy's camp wasn't that well-fortified.

Minerva's sharp features bent in a long frown. "I wouldn't exactly call what we've been doing 'holding back', but at this point, I think that we can set aside notions of kinship. Too many people have died on both sides for there to be anything like what happened with you and the 2nd Legion."

“Speaking of...” Leon said, “any news on their status? I figured that the 2nd would’ve joined the 1st and 4th in marching east, and yet they’re absent. What gives?”

Roland answered with a thoughtful look, “From what we’ve been able to tell—and to be honest, we don’t have many friends left in the capital so we can’t tell much—Sir Arellius has been formally reprimanded and his command of the Legion was rescinded. Without a Legate to lead them, the 2nd has replaced the 1st as the Legion that’s holding down the capital. They don’t seem too happy with what Octavius did in removing their commander, and the Legion’s command staff has threatened to resign their commissions if Arellius isn’t reinstated. Apparently not assigning a new Legate to them while he figures out what to do is Octavius’ idea of a compromise.”

“Any possibility that we can get Arellius on our side?” Leon curiously asked.

“Maybe... I’ve only ever met the man in passing and he doesn’t have that long of a career, relatively speaking, so neither does he have much of a reputation... I don’t know him well enough to say,” Minerva replied, with both Roland and Brimstone nodding in agreement.

“He’s a new Legate, but he was given command of the 2nd Legion, one of the oldest and most prestigious posts in the Royal Legions?” Leon asked with some skepticism.

“He’s from a family of influential Counts in the Southern Territories,” Minerva said.

“Ah,” Leon replied. “It was a political appointment. Well, whatever. He seemed earnest and honest enough when we fought, he just believes the Assembly’s verdict is legitimate. If we can convince him that the trial was rigged, then maybe we can gain another Legion.”

“I’ll look into it,” Minerva said. “Is there anything else, Ursus?”

“Nothing that can’t wait,” Leon said.

“Good. Then get some rest and *clean yourself up!*”

Leon smiled as he looked down at his filthy clothing—a week out in the wilds wasn’t conducive to good hygiene, though his water magic had done quite a bit to keep him from stinking of blood and dried sweat.

“What about everyone else?” Leon asked.

“I’ll send someone down to get them access to the camp. For now, just wait for further instructions, but be ready for an attack. I’m sure that whatever the Central Consul is planning will kick off sooner rather than later.”

“Got it,” Leon said, and he and his two subordinate knights left. Minerva’s people arranged for some sleeping quarters to be allocated to them, room set aside for Anzu in the stables, and gave Lapis permission to stand guard outside Leon’s window like a massive stone statue. True to her word, Minerva quickly sent some people down to fetch Grim and the rest of the people who’d followed Leon into the valley, and quarters were set aside for all of them, though they slept mostly in the camp in the pass rather than in the castle.

Everyone bathed and got into clean clothes, and then did exactly what Minerva said to do: rest and wait for the Central Consul to launch his next attack.

Chapter 408: Defending the Castle

Leon, Valeria, and Alix all shared a suite of small apartments in the castle since the latter two were in the former's retinue—Valeria as Leon's de facto second-in-command, and Alix acting as an unofficial assistant. Unfortunately, said suite had neither a bath nor a shower, and so all three had to visit the castle's large bathhouse.

Said bathhouse was rather small compared to others that were built in Legion fortresses, but it was still relatively luxurious—or, at least the baths set aside for the knights were. There wasn't much marble or white stone, and the walls weren't painted, but it was clear that whoever the mages were who built the place were quite enthusiastic about their task, for there were quite a few carved friezes covering the walls and decorative columns.

Not that Leon, Valeria, or Alix really noticed the decorations; all three were tired and dirty and just wanted to go to sleep. They hadn't felt so drained when they arrived at the castle, but by the time they started to get settled into their assigned rooms, the week of constant motion with little rest came back with a vengeance.

Valeria and Alix naturally parted ways with Leon when they arrived at the bath, making their way toward the smaller female baths—given how few women joined the Royal Legions or pursued the path of knighthood through battle, the baths set aside for them were positively tiny compared to those for the men.

As they washed, neither of the ladies spoke much. They practically had the entire female section to themselves, but Alix and Valeria still washed and then sat back in the baths next to each other. Valeria still maintained a respectful distance, but Alix was far more relaxed about the situation.

After a while, though, the silence grew to be too much for Alix to bear—Valeria was more than comfortable with it, but Alix wasn't so much.

"Soooo," Alix awkwardly began as she desperately tried to think of something to say and silently cursing her mouth for moving before her brain was ready, "I noticed you at Leon's villa a couple times when I was there... How did you two meet?"

"Knight Academy," Valeria tersely responded. Her brilliant blue eyes were closed, and she was leaning back in the large bath as she relaxed.

"Ah... and Lady Elise? You were at her birthday party..."

Valeria was quiet long enough that Alix felt like she wasn't going to reply, and she said, "I'm sorry if I'm prying, but we haven't had much of a chance to talk to each other in the past week, and—"

"Elise and I are old friends," Valeria said, interrupting Alix's apology. "We met when my father brought me to the capital and the Heaven's Eye Tower. We hit it off well when our parents left us to play while they handled some business on His Majesty's behalf, and we've been friends ever since."

"Ah," Alix said. She hoped that Valeria might ask her some questions in order to keep the conversation going, but it seemed she was going to be disappointed if she labored under those hopes; Valeria asked her nothing in return.

Alix shrunk down into the bath, submerging everything underneath her nose and sulked a bit. She was hoping that Valeria would be a bit more friendly and willing to talk as if they were going to be a part of the same retinue, then they'd be working together quite a bit. She didn't want that working relationship to be too awkward, and simply running around a forest shooting arrows and then taking a bath together wasn't going to ensure a healthy friendship in her mind.

That her relationship with Leon essentially started off with the same circumstances wasn't lost on her, but in Leon's case, he made some small efforts to engage with her, whereas Valeria didn't seem to want to bother.

The young brown-haired woman could only shrug, resign herself to silence, and try to get a bit more comfortable in the water as Valeria stretched her body out next to her as if she were getting ready to fall asleep in the bath. Alix resolved to stay awake, but a mere five minutes later, her own eyes began to feel heavy.

However, rest would not come for either lady—at least, not yet. As they dozed, the water began to ripple and churn as if something large was about to come crashing up from below the castle. It started slowly, with a few tremors here and there, but as it became more and more intense both ladies snapped awake and began looking around in confusion.

"What's... what *is* that?!" Alix wondered aloud.

Valeria's fourth-tier senses were stronger than Alix's, and after a few seconds of listening, she managed to pick out the sounds of shouting and clashing swords coming from somewhere outside.

"We're under attack!" she shouted, springing out of the bath.

Alix followed suit, jumping out of the water as quickly as she was able, and then followed Valeria back into the changing room where they began to throw their clothes on as quickly as they were able.

A thunderous roar suddenly ripped through the air outside the bathhouse, answered a few moments later by the distinctive sounds of actual thunder.

"Sounds like Leon's fighting," Valeria matter-of-factly observed as she swiftly finished pulling her clothes back over herself. Alix was only a moment behind her, and the two sprinted for the bathhouse doors. Neither had their weapons, but that didn't matter, they ran to help where they could anyway.

As soon as they burst out of the bathhouse door and into the small pavilion beyond, they found it completely obliterated. Almost every stone tile paving the ground had shattered, the pavilion itself was in shambles with most of the columns destroyed and the roof collapsed, and in the center of the pavilion were about a dozen knights all locked in combat, Leon among them.

On one side of the ruins of the pavilion, other knights were gathering around something that neither Valeria nor Alix could see, but they could hear the sounds of fighting. Given Minerva's warning that the Central Consul was trying to tunnel beneath the castle, it wasn't too much of a stretch for them both to guess what was happening.

Leon's group was flashing with magic power—bursts of fire, lightning, and other elements were sending shockwaves through the earth and the air. The other group was fighting with more conventional weapons, but conventional weapons Alix and Valeria did not have.

Alix glanced at Valeria and asked, "What should we do?"

"I... don't know," she admitted. With Leon indisposed locked in combat with a Legion knight, she had to step up. After a few moments of thought, though, she started running for the group that wasn't throwing around elemental magic. "Over here!" she shouted to Alix.

Alix followed, but she asked, "What about Leon?"

"We help where we're able!" Valeria replied.

They found the castle knights defending the top of a hole that descended into the earth at a steep angle, through which dozens of Legion soldiers were attempting to force their way through. The knights had halted them, but the Legion shield wall wasn't budging.

"If anyone has extra weapons, we can help!" Valeria called out, preempting a few of the knights in the back ranks who turned around with their weapons up at their approach.

Faced with a Legion shield wall on one side of their line and a pair of unarmed ladies on the other, the knights didn't hesitate to make their decision. Most turned back toward the hole and the Legion shield wall while one—the strongest among them as a fifth-tier mage—waved his hand and conjured a pair of spears for the ladies. Valeria and Alix accepted the weapons and joined the line.

Events moved deceptively quickly from there. Both ladies were jostled and thrown around a bit in the mass of several dozen haphazardly-dressed knights who were defending the castle while the shield wall beneath their feet rippled and flexed as the soldiers rotated in and out, yet never managing to push past the knights. Neither Alix nor Valeria moved too much, and they didn't have much of an opportunity to fight other than thrusting their borrowed spears a few times when a large enough gap in the mass of bodies presented itself. As a result, while it felt like an eternity, in reality, it only took about ten minutes for the higher-tiered fight to come to a conclusion and for the knights participating in it to join the larger battle.

Lightning flashed past the knights, hitting the shield wall with terrible force. If it were just the one lightning bolt, the shields would've absorbed said force well, but immediately following it came boulders, ice, streams of fire, and blades of wind—the higher-tiered knights had finished their battle, and the castle defenders had won.

Leon himself leaped down into the hole along with several other knights. The soldiers tried to respond with their stabbing weapons, but every time Leon trusted his armor to take the damage and used the opportunity to fill the momentary gap in the shield wall with as much lightning as he was able to expend. The other knights did likewise for about half a minute until a shout came from behind them.

Watching with bated breath, Valeria and Alix watched as the knights defending the castle surged backward, while the shield wall slowly pushed forward. However, an earth mage quickly blocked them by collapsing the tunnel behind them and slamming pieces of the destroyed pavilion down into the mouth of the hole, completely sealing it and crushing the Legion soldiers who were unlucky enough to have taken the chunks of masonry.

"Sound the horn!" one of the knights shouted.

Alix, Valeria, and all the rest could hear other horns sounding off all around them, from the direction of the pass, the cliffside battlements, and even in other places around the castle. Most signaled that the assault had been stemmed in their locations, while others indicated that Octavius' forces remained at theirs.

Leon pushed his way through the crowd of milling knights as they secured the area to join the other two members of his retinue. He clearly hadn't bothered to completely dress as the ladies had when he heard of the fighting outside, as he revealed that he had nothing on save for a pair of trousers as he pulled his armor—which, given the almost frantic pace they'd been moving at for the past couple weeks, hadn't been cleaned since they'd left the capital—back into his soul realm.

"You two all right?" he asked, an amount of concern in his voice that surprised Valeria.

"Yes, Sir," she answered, though her eyes kept drifting down his body. She hadn't seen him even partially unclothed ever since she and Asiya had briefly spied on him in the pool at the Knight Academy. He'd been quite muscular back then, but in the years since he'd filled out considerably, and she was having more than a bit of trouble concentrating with him now so close.

Alix nodded in agreement, but she was more focused on Valeria so painfully obviously checking Leon out. Fortunately for the silver-haired woman, Leon was a bit distracted with the ongoing attack to pay too much attention to her body language. Alix smiled at Valeria, nudged the younger woman with her elbow and flashed her a knowing smile, which brought a deep blush to Valeria's cheeks.

Leon's attention was focused on securing the pavilion since, as the strongest knight present, he was de facto in charge. He also kept glancing up over the inner walls of the castle, as the sounds of battle could be heard coming from all around them. The attack wasn't over yet, but here and there came horn blasts signaling that the attack had been repulsed in certain places.

"Are we going to go join them?" Alix asked.

"... No," Leon replied, though it clearly pained him to speak those words. "Dame Minerva has known this was coming for a while, and I trust her to have this situation in hand. We won't change anything on our own, and if we run around without a plan, we could get in the way. Better to stick with this until we're called for..."

"Are you sure?" Valeria asked, sharing Leon's desire to get out and fight.

"Yes," Leon hissed, though his face and posture suggested that he was anything but.

"... Very well," Valeria muttered.

For the next half hour, Leon helped the knights in organizing the bodies of the fallen and supervising the few earth mages that were finishing up with sealing the hole. The Legion soldiers that had been trapped within when the hole was sealed had all suffocated, and so the earth mages also had to work on excavating them. Valeria and Alix helped out where they could, mostly by clearing rubble, carrying bodies, and searching said bodies for IDs.

As they worked, their anxiety about the castle gradually faded, as did the anxiety of the rest of the knights in the remnants of the pavilion, for the sounds of horns signaling victory could be heard more

and more. Soon enough, the sounds of battle faded away into nothing, while signal horns were sounded from the pass to the castle indicating their status.

From what Leon, Valeria, and Alix knew about horn signals in the Bull Kingdom, they could tell that the attack had been repelled. The castle was secure.

Chapter 409: Changing Strategy

“... and they haven’t moved since?” August asked as he stared down from the cliffside battlements at the Central Consul’s army.

“No, Your Highness, they’ve been maintaining their position, but they haven’t so much as pissed in our direction,” Brimstone replied.

It had been three days since the latest assault where the Central Consul had sent Legion soldiers to die in the thousands through tunnels beneath the Augustine defenses. Just as Leon had suspected, Minerva had been tracking the course of those tunnels with the earth mages at her disposal, but a few tunnels escaped her notice. Still, Octavius’ soldiers were fought off and the tunnels were brought crashing down around them.

Not long after, August arrived at the castle overlooking the pass. He’d been in Ironford coordinating with the Legions and Lords of the Eastern Territories to ensure that he had the support needed to wage his side of this war. His first demand was to be given a report of their current situation, so Minerva gathered the entire command staff—including Leon—and brought August out to the battlements where he could see their situation for himself. With everyone together, they were a group of two-and-a-half dozen, plus dozens more attendants and adjutants nearby.

“That’s good to hear, I suppose,” August replied.

“You ‘suppose’?” Minerva asked with anger that she didn’t even try to hide. “We’ve lost over a thousand good fighters holding this ground. We’ve killed thousands more, and all so that you can sit your pretty ass down upon this Kingdom’s throne and behead those who murdered Prince Trajan! I hope you can muster more than supposition when we win victories; Kings are decisive, and if you’re anything less, then I’ll find someone else to take your place!”

Her short tirade was accompanied by a wave of killing intent that sent shivers down just about everyone’s spine, and just about sent August reeling right over the battlements. Standing not too far away, Leon had to admit that he was quietly impressed that Minerva was willing to be so forceful in her use of power. It reminded him a great deal of Trajan, and that attitude had been one of the reasons why Leon had been willing to follow the Prince.

“I... apologize, Dame Minerva,” August hesitatingly replied, his face rapidly losing what color it had as he seemed to shrink and wither under her furious gaze. “I meant no offense, it’s just that the past couple of weeks have been very stressful and I’ve forgotten myself a little. I should not allow myself to forget basic manners, especially when speaking with a friend. Please forgive me.”

Minerva glared at him for a moment, but she quickly sighed and softened her expression. “I’m sorry, too, Your Highness. We’ve lost many in these past couple of weeks, some of whom I served with under Prince Trajan for years. My patience has... frayed...”

“Think nothing of it,” August said with a wave of his hand. He knew that some would frown on him forgiving insubordination and even apologizing to a subordinate so easily, but he didn’t much care. “I’ve managed to renew most of my alliances with the eastern Lords thanks to this victory. They’re mustering their forces, but it’ll take time. At least a month, probably two before they arrive at Ironford.”

“How many are coming?” Roland asked, eager to move away from topics that would have their highest leaders arguing amongst themselves.

“At least fifty-thousand,” August replied. “Marquis Aeneas alone is bringing ten-thousand. He even thanked me for finding something for his knights and men-at-arms to do; apparently, the stone giants have been rather passive for the past few years, and so he hasn’t had to defend the eastern border as vigorously as he’s had to in recent decades.” August paired that statement with a nod to Leon to acknowledge his part in pacifying the stone giants.

“That’s good to hear, we can certainly put these newcomers to work,” Minerva said.

“Have any ideas on that front?” August inquired.

“I do,” Minerva replied. “If possible, I’d like to have our eastern Legions go on offense while the noble armies take up the role of defense. Have the professionals take the fight to Octavius while those who have a stake in keeping the Eastern Territories secure do just that.”

August nodded in agreement with Minerva’s logic. “Sounds good to me.” The Prince turned his eyes back westward. “I hope we can get this done quickly...”

“I hope so, too, but wars are rarely ever so agreeable,” Minerva replied with a grim expression.

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“A QUARTER fucking Legion! Less than that! A quarter fucking Legion stopped us?!” Octavius roared in anger as he slammed his hands down upon his desk, splintering the wood and sending papers flying throughout his office. The dozens of ministers and Legion knights who were there to witness his anger paled a bit and remained quiet as the Prince angrily muttered to himself and did his best to remain composed.

All except one, however.

“Nephew, perhaps we would have had better luck if you allowed *us* to—” the Earthshaker Paladin began in a tone that was both conciliatory and accusatory, but that only enflamed Octavius’ wrath.

“SILENCE!” he bellowed, the force of his unrestrained fifth-tier power shaking the room a bit despite the protective wards in the walls. “I will not be second-guessed!”

Earthshaker sat down in his chair seemingly cowed, though the expression didn’t quite reach his eyes, which leisurely drifted around the room, quietly taking in the reactions of everyone else.

The Prince, however, didn’t spare his uncle another look and instead turned to look out of the windows behind his desk. As it so happened, these windows faced north, roughly in the direction of his father’s private villa where the King lay in repose. King Julius hadn’t improved in the past few years, but neither had his condition worsened. The doctor from the Sacred Golden Empire assured Octavius that the King’s

condition shouldn't deteriorate, but he was still having some trouble securing the ingredients for the King's restorative potion.

But that didn't mean too much to Octavius. Whether King Julius was conscious or not, he could still feel his father's gaze upon him, judging him, finding him wanting. Octavius could feel his father's disappointment—after all, despite outnumbering August's forces by such a huge margin, Octavius had still failed to secure victory.

"Traitors and incompetents... Traitors and incompetents..." Octavius muttered quietly, but his voice carried in the dead-silent office. Everyone heard him, and they began to grow nervous. When Octavius addressed them again, his voice had returned to a normal volume, but his eyes hadn't lost even the tiniest amount of his monumental rage. "It seems that I didn't go far enough in banishing the baseborn from my administration, for I am still surrounded by traitors and incompetents! That is the only explanation for these abject, *repeated* failures! It seems that before I deal with my traitor of a brother, I'm going to have to *clean this house*, and I must be even more thorough!"

"Your Royal Highness—" began one of Octavius' personal stewards, but the Prince silenced him with a glare.

"I want everyone with ties to the Eastern Territories imprisoned," Octavius growled. "Sertor Arellius will be stripped of his command. Recall Avidius, he's clearly not up to the task that I have given him."

After a tense moment of silence, Earthshaker quietly asked, "And what of Avidius' army? Should we leave the 1st and 4th to secure the Iron Road west of Ironford?"

"What point is there?! It's not like it'll be an effective siege now that fucking Tarsus has proven just how much of a fool he was! Keeping those soldiers out there is a burden on our supplies, so bring them back!"

Many in Octavius' office disagreed, but not a single person spoke up to keep those soldiers where they were. With the Prince in this state, all most of them could think about was trying to keep their heads—it was obvious to them all that many people were going to be getting uncomfortably intimate with the headsman's block, and none of them wanted to join those ranks.

"Have there been any moves from Heaven's Eye?" Octavius demanded of the office.

"Heaven's Eye?" the Countess of Lindinis asked with confusion written all over her face, seeking clarification.

"Yes, isn't that barbarian who's fucking that Heaven's Eye girl in August's camp? Has Heaven's Eye made any moves to support my bastard brother?!"

"... None that we can discern," the Countess replied as she cast her gaze around at the other faces in the room looking for back-up.

"Heaven's Eye has made no moves against us, Octavius," the Sapphire Paladin whispered as she strode forward and shamelessly pressed herself against her Prince. "Even if they did, all we would have to do is send word to their headquarters in Ilion and they'd immediately replace Lady Emilie. Heaven's Eye is neutral, and they take that stance extraordinarily seriously. No matter what happens here, they will not get involved."

With his lover staring into his eyes and pushing herself against him, Octavius began to calm down and act with a bit more Royal dignity, which was exactly the result that Sapphire had wanted.

After a few long seconds that almost felt more like minutes, Octavius began to think out loud. "... I had thought that August's escape would be useful, as it would prove the strength of the forces loyal to me. Instead, it has led to humiliation and defeat, and that is *not* how my reign will begin! Something *has* to be done!"

"Your Royal Highness, if I may..." one of the Legion knights began, drawing the attention of everyone else in the room along—along with quite a few pitying and awed glances at a man who would invite the attention of an irate Prince.

"What?!" Octavius snapped before catching himself and repeating in a much softer tone, "What?"

"August's forces have blocked both most of the approaches to Ironford, but those ways are not the only ways into the east. There are paths through the cliffs of the Great Plateau that were built by House Raime that lead to the Eastern Territories, not to mention the paths that are watched over by the Bull's Horns. If we secure the great cities of the north and east—Teira and Ariminium, respectively—then we would have all the methods of entry into the Eastern Territories that we would ever need. Even if August were to have the support of all the Legions in the east, he's still outnumbered, and he can't defend *every* point of entry that exists."

"Hmmm...." Octavius hummed as he thought about that proposal. And the more he thought about it, the more he liked it. "I'm... inclined to..." The Prince paused and glanced around the room. Both Tarsus and the Central Consul were gone, and Octavius had thought them his best military leaders. With Tarsus now dead and the Central Consul now a proven failure, Octavius would have to replace them before anything could be done, not to mention the purges he had in mind...

Octavius gently pushed Sapphire away from him, straightened himself up, and said, "Send word to the Consul of Discord. I want his fleet prepared to move on Ariminium. He will coordinate with the Consul of the South for the taking of the city. Call up the Consul of the West and have him march his Legions here. He will take command of the Central Legions and then march north to secure the Great Plateau. Issue an ultimatum to the Consul of the North: either he pledges his fealty to me, or he will be arrested and charged with treason. There will be no more equivocating from him, he's either with me or against me.

"Furthermore, I want our Legions and those in this government who hold sympathies for those rebels and traitors in the east to be placed under arrest. I will not have a repeat of the 2nd Legion's failure to attack when ordered!

"You're all dismissed. Get to work."

Those around the Prince's office answered with a chorus of, "Yes, Your Royal Highness!" and began to file out of the office. Only Octavius' two Paladins remained behind. They waited for a long and awkward moment for Octavius to acknowledge them, but the Prince remained silent and lost in his thoughts. It was only when Sapphire spoke up that he glanced at them and seemed to fully realize that they were still present.

"My Love, are we just going to leave August alone?" she asked.

“For now,” Octavius replied, his voice even but carrying a thick undercurrent of killing intent.

“What if he moves before we do? It’ll be easier for his people to move around than ours...”

Earthshaker responded before Octavius, giving a loud boast, “If he leaves those hills in the east, then he’ll die that much faster. I’ll see to it personally! By the way, Nephew, I don’t think that the eastern sympathizers are the only ones we need to worry about...”

“Explain,” Octavius demanded.

“There are others who don’t support you here in the palace, not just in the administration. Others who might support August in memory of Trajan.”

“Who?”

“Men like the Chancellor or the Spymaster.”

“Straighten your fucking tongue and speak plainly. What are you suggesting?”

Despite Octavius’ harsh rebuke, Earthshaker’s lips began to turn upward in a shallow smile. “I’m suggesting that getting rid of the relatives and sympathizers of August and the eastern Lords in your ranks might not be enough. There are many here in the palace that were loyal to Trajan and might transfer that loyalty to August now that Dame Minerva has sided with him. We should expand the scope of this purge so that we can be sure we’ve gotten rid of *all* dissidents.”

Octavius silently stared at Earthshaker in contemplation. Going after the highest officials was risky, but they were men that his father had appointed. For that reason alone, Octavius wanted them gone. After a few seconds, he quietly nodded his head in as Princely a manner as he was able to in his current mental state and said, “Bring me a list and we’ll see.”

“Thank you, Your Royal Highness.”

Chapter 410: Tullius’ interrogation

The palace in Ironford was a nice place, Gaius had to admit, especially since he was a prisoner. Despite this, he was afforded all the care and comfort he could ask for; the only thing he couldn’t do was leave. If he wanted something to eat, it would be brought to him. If he wanted something to read, again, a palace servant would fetch it.

Following his surrender, Gaius found himself relaxing far more than he ever thought he would. He never really realized just how heavy the weight of serving under Prince Octavius had been, even when he had been reassigned as a rank-and-file bureaucrat following his knighting.

‘Damn fine situation I’ve been in if being a prisoner is a more relaxing position...’ Gaius couldn’t help but think to himself on several occasions.

As a prisoner of Marquis Herrenia and Prince August, the only source of stress that Gaius had was that after being processed, not a single person had come to interrogate him. The important people had, for a week following his surrender, left him alone.

This couldn't last, he knew that. Someone would have to come, it was only a matter of time. He wondered who it would be when the time came.

He had a sinking feeling that he knew who it was going to be already.

—

"Me?" Leon asked, his face contorting in confusion.

"Yes," Minerva matter-of-factly replied.

"Why?" Leon inquired.

"Because you know Gaius Tullius. You went to the Knight Academy with him, you have a history with him. Not to mention I believe that your knight, Dame Valeria, even grew up close enough to him to have been childhood friends." As she gave this order, Minerva passed Leon a slip of paper with the Royal seal upon it, which would give him access to the palace wing where the prisoners were being held.

Standing nearby, Valeria cringed a bit and said, "I wouldn't go that far, we were friendly, we weren't *friends*..."

"Regardless, the two of you have the most rapport with him. If he says anything about Octavius' plans, then it'll be to the two of you."

"I'm not so sure about that..." Leon said as his history with Gaius replayed itself in his mind. "He and I have never seen eye-to-eye... and that would be to put it mildly. He had a couple of my friends beaten in the streets of the capital before."

"Then play the bad guy to Valeria's good. Just go talk to him, if you don't get anything out of him then I'll send in someone else."

Understanding that this was the last Minerva was going to say on the matter, Leon sighed and led Valeria out of Minerva's temporary office in the Ironford Palace.

It had been a few days since the Consul of the Central Territories inexplicably pulled both the 1st and 4th Legions back from the pass. Roland stayed behind to watch the pass just in case they came back, while Minerva, Brimstone, and all of their retainers returned to Ironford with August and Marquis Herrenia. If Octavius wasn't going to pressure them by leaving Legions on their front doorstep, then they were going to make full use of it. Over the next few days, hundreds of letters were sent and a few comm stone calls were placed, pulling half a dozen Legions and ensuring that Constantine at the Bull's Horns was still supporting them.

Minerva, in particular, threw herself into this organization, letting August take control of the internal affairs. She figured out the logistics of keeping the Legions moving toward Ironford and how many they could reasonably pull without damaging the internal security of the Eastern Territories while August shored up his alliances with the eastern Lords and made overtures with the northern Lords—the Northern Territories were, even after all of this, still filled with landed nobles who hadn't declared for either August or Octavius, and even the Consul of the North had yet to weigh in.

Out of everyone, it was the Consul of the North who everyone in the Kingdom had their eye upon. He controlled a dozen Legions, a staggering amount of force that could swing the balance of power back in August's direction, balancing out Octavius' control of the Western, Southern, and Central Territories.

But Leon wasn't tracking all of that too closely. He mostly trained with Valeria and Alix while Minerva, with a relatively shrewd understanding of where Leon's skills lay, gave him some time off. Most of the work now was logistics, diplomacy, and paperwork, none of which Leon was particularly talented at.

Work doesn't stay away forever, though, and now Leon found himself and Valeria outside of Gaius' quarters. Most of the Lords and high-ranking knights that had been taken prisoner were kept in the same wing of the palace, within which were about a hundred guards keeping an eye on the doors and making sure no one was going anywhere. Leon simply nodded to the guards on either side of Gaius' door and showed them his pass. They opened the door and the two strode in without hesitation.

They found Gaius quietly meditating on the floor in front of a small window, through which passed a pleasant breeze. He didn't look up from his meditations, but he said, "Finally come to talk a bit, have we?"

"We have," Leon answered. "We'd like to know what Octavius is planning and... well, anything and everything that you can tell us about the composition of his faction."

Gaius looked over his shoulder with an almost dismissive smile. For a moment, his expression was one of condescension, of the expected defiance that any noble ought to make in the face of his captors.

And then he saw that Valeria was here too and he froze in place, the smile on his face vanishing like it had never been there at all. He stared at her for several long, silent seconds, and then he turned back around.

Leon gave Valeria an odd look, but she shrugged in response. He wasn't about to go asking her about Gaius' strange behavior while Gaius was still in the room, though, as even he knew that while he was there to ask questions, it was best not to act completely ignorant.

He waited for almost half a minute while Gaius composed himself. The young third-tier nobleman was partially obscured by the light flooding in through his window, so Leon couldn't see his expression, but he was a patient man and he could wait for Gaius to turn back around. Well, he could wait a while, but he wouldn't stand there like a hapless goon for hours while Gaius ignored him if the nobleman wanted to play games with him.

Fortunately, Leon didn't have to wait long before Gaius rose from the carpet and turned back to face them, a jovial and welcoming smile gracing his classically handsome features.

"My Lady, if I had known you were going to come here, I might've... well, I don't know what I could've done—I am a prisoner here, after all—but I would've made better preparations..."

"It's fine," Valeria stoically replied.

"... Right," Gaius replied, clearly a little put off by the curtness of Valeria's response.

"To get back to our questions..." Leon said, drawing attention back to himself.

"Yes, please give voice to them," Gaius said as walked over to a small table set up in his room, to which he waved Leon and Valeria to join him at.

"As I said, we want to know everything about Octavius' faction. Who are the strongest people in it? Who are the weakest? Who might be willing to defect? Has anyone stepped up to bankroll their armies without eastern silver?"

Gaius listened to Leon's questions without interruption, and when Leon was finished, the nobleman sat there, silently staring at Leon and Valeria. To Leon, it seemed almost like he was going to have to ask again, and much more *forcefully*, but Valeria spoke up first.

"You're not acting like I expected you would, Gaius," she whispered, taking both of the other men completely by surprise.

"Huh?" Gaius muttered in confusion, a sentiment that was reflected in Leon's brief questioning glance at Valeria.

"I just... thought you'd be more... I don't know... arrogant?" she continued. "If this had happened to you five years ago, I think you would've been screaming and demanding that we release you with an official apology. Or something like that. You're acting too calm... and too resigned."

Something in Gaius seemed to crack so visibly that even Leon noticed it. The nobleman's face fell, the smile collapsing in upon itself until only a shell of a man remained. Even his posture shifted, going from straight and proper to so slumped down that Leon almost thought he was looking at a different man. The difference was like day and night.

"... It's been a long few years," Gaius croaked, his voice raspy as if he could barely form the words. He then took a deep breath as if to steady himself, and then said, "I know my duty, and I can't say anything. My personal feelings don't matter."

"So you're just doing all of this out of obligation?" Valeria asked. "You don't believe in Octavius' cause?" Leon frowned slightly when Valeria said this, but he said nothing.

"If you knew what I know about that man..." Gaius muttered before quickly cutting himself off.

"And what do you know about that man?" Valeria pressed on. She leaned in slightly, entreating Gaius to speak by staring at him directly in the eye. "What you say now can save a lot of lives, Gaius. None of us want this to go on, and if you know something that can help us bring this war to a close, then I would like to hear it..."

Gaius stared back at Valeria, an expression on his face that Leon couldn't quite read. It seemed both desperate and defiant, and if Leon had to make a guess, he'd say that Gaius' sense of duty and what he wanted to do were pulling him in two different directions.

Deciding to speak up, Leon said, "If you tell us what you know, we can see that you're released without ransom. Hells, if you want to, you can even turn to our side..."

Gaius glared at Leon as if he were interrupting something private between himself and Valeria, but he didn't refrain from responding, though he did turn back to Valeria before speaking.

"I never wanted any of this. I was made Prince Octavius' squire because he specifically asked for me. It was a way of taking me as a hostage to ensure my family's support without directly taking me hostage."

Valeria's eyes widened slightly, but she kept her composure. Leon, meanwhile, had no discernible reaction, though he was quite intrigued already.

"In Prince Octavius' service, I found out what kind of a man he is. Selfish. Arrogant. Unconcerned with the opinions of those he believes to be beneath him. The well-being of the people of this Kingdom means nothing to him. He surrounds himself with the nobility in order to feel better about the fact that His Majesty was forcing him to share power with his younger brother, which gave him an enormous chip on his shoulder. Since August's mother is a commoner and Octavius' mother is the daughter of one of the most powerful nobles in the Kingdom, he leaned hard into his noble identity to separate himself from his brother."

At this point, Leon cocked an eyebrow in curiosity. He wasn't sure what the tactical or strategic uses for this information could be, but he didn't interrupt.

"Most of the nobles who support him, however, have somewhat more... practical reasons for following him. He's essentially promised certain privileges and favors to nearly all those who have pledged their support to him. Or at least, the most influential of his supporters. Count Whitefield, for instance, was promised to have all Legion elements within his lands removed."

"All of them?" Leon asked incredulously. Fort 127 was in Whitefield's County, and if that place was abandoned by the Legion, there would be little to stop any future Valeman raids into the Kingdom from that particular pass into the Northern Vales.

"All of them," Gaius confirmed. "He made many promises to other nobles, too, such as promising to end the investigations into Duke Decimius' alleged illegal activities."

"So, most of these people are only following him for the practical benefits that he promised them?" Valeria asked.

"Yes, or they're following Octavius because one of these influential people are following him," Gaius said. "With the Count of Tarsus dead, I'm sure Octavius' position in the Central Territories has been greatly weakened."

"Would you have any insights as to how to exploit these promises or that weakness?" Leon asked.

"None at the moment," Gaius admitted. "Hells, most of them were made years ago, and I'm sure that Prince Octavius has made good on most of them by now. I wouldn't really know at this point, I was transferred to a meaningless post in his personal retinue after being knighted and have barely even *seen* the Prince at all in the past year."

Gaius' voice took on a bitter and resentful tone as he said this, which Leon could completely understand.

In fact, to an extent, he couldn't help but feel that Gaius' journey was something of a dark reflection of his in its own way. They were both taken in by Princes because of their families, but whereas Leon was mentored by the bold, idealistic, and honest Trajan, Gaius was given to the deceitful and insecure Octavius. And now, because of these two Princes, Leon and Gaius had gone to war.

Leon, Valeria, and Gaius spoke for about half an hour, with Gaius telling them all about his time in Octavius' service, from the allowances the Prince gave for Earthshaker's depravities to the nuances that Gaius could remember about Octavius' relationships with the nobles that supported him. It wasn't much if Leon were to be honest, but he was sure that August would be interested in it anyway. That Octavius was letting Earthshaker rape common girls alone was something that Leon was sure the Prince would want to know about.

"Is that it?" Leon asked as he put away the paper he'd written everything down upon.

"That's all I can remember right now," Gaius said.

"Very well. We may return, but I think we've got everything we need," Leon replied, not feeling the need to keep Gaius sweating. He'd been defiant when Leon had first walked in, but after Valeria prodded him a bit, he'd been quite forthcoming with what had been asked of him.

Leon and Valeria both stood up to leave, but Gaius, it seemed, wasn't quite finished.

"Val, could you wait a moment?" Gaius asked.

Valeria paused and looked to Leon, who in turn glanced at both of the other two. He saw some hurt in Gaius' eyes when Valeria didn't immediately agree and instead looked to him, but he saw nothing in Valeria except some mild curiosity.

"We can stay a moment," Leon said, not particularly inclined to leave his knight alone with Gaius, even if she was Valeria Isynos.

Gaius frowned a bit, but he simply took a deep breath, made eye contact with Valeria—who had turned back around to wait for him to speak—and said, "I'm sorry. I was always too pushy when we were younger, and I know that I was annoying. For all that, I apologize."

Valeria blinked in surprise, was silent for a long few seconds, and then said, "These few years really *have* been tough, haven't they?"

"I've had to endure much that my conscience tortures me over even to this day," Gaius whispered. "If you could do me a favor, instead of sending my ransom request to Octavius, could you send it to my family in Lentia? Just in case it wasn't already..."

"... Of course," Valeria replied.

"Thank you," Gaius responded as he slumped back in his chair. Leon could tell that the past half hour, and the apology just now, had been draining for him, and even with their rocky history, he couldn't help but feel some sympathy for the young defeated man before him.

More than that, hearing of Gaius' situation had given him quite a few things to mull over about his situation.

But there was nothing more for either Leon or Valeria to say. They had their information, and it was time to go. They left Gaius, letting him get some much-needed rest.