

Storm King 411

Chapter 411: Time to Think

When Leon thought about war, he imagined an incredibly intense conflict, something that would grind thousands of warriors into bloody meat on a daily basis. For the most part, that was accurate to the kind of lightning wars that he had experienced—even the war with Talfar was over in a matter of weeks, but it still left tens of thousands dead.

This war, however, was surprisingly peaceful, at least after the violent first week-and-a-half was over.

After the Central Consul retreated from the pass leading to Ironford, a month passed in relative peace. During that time, both sides continued to muster their forces and shore up their alliances, but there wasn't a lot of excitement between them. They settled into an uneasy status quo, with August controlling the Eastern Territories, Octavius with the Southern, Western, and Central Territories, and both sides jockeying for the Northern Territories, which remained largely undecided apart from a few notable exceptions, such as Count Whitefield and Marquis Grandison.

Leon's part in all of this was relatively small. He didn't have the bureaucratic skills to help Minerva out with the logistics of getting fifteen Legions and a small army of nobles ready for a war, though he contributed where he was able to, mostly acting as a supervisor for units running training battles.

But that hardly filled his days, and it left him with a great deal of time to think and reflect on all that had happened during the past few months. Trajan's death, Naiad's departure, his relationship with Elise, his relationship with Valeria, his decision to continue the fight with Minerva, and even Gaius' interrogation, all of it turned about in his head and refused to leave, no matter how much he wanted them to.

He returned to training with the Thunderbird, which he had put on hold during the hectic two weeks or so following the flight from the capital, but she knew that something was wrong...

—

The Thunderbird easily deflected Leon's almost painfully slow slash and countered by sweeping his lead foot out from under him with her own. Leon hit the soft padded mat of the training room he'd built in his soul realm, with nothing hurt but his pride.

"You're distracted," the Thunderbird said with a sharp glare. "Your mind is elsewhere, not here with me."

Leon groaned in frustration and struggled back to his feet where he returned to a rather sloppy stance.

The Thunderbird, naturally in her human form and dressed in a pure white tunic and tight pants that matched, derisively snorted and lunged at him. Leon attempted to block her attack and found himself knocked onto his ass for his trouble.

"Why am I continuing to bother if you won't do me the courtesy of actually *paying attention*?!" the Thunderbird demanded, while from outside the training room Leon could vaguely hear the sounds of his demonic partner snickering at his repeated knockdowns—Xaphan's pavilion wasn't too far from Leon's private residence he built near the top of his mountain, and the demon could easily see into Leon's dojo with his magic senses.

"Give him a break, he's only human!" the demon shouted from outside, his deep resonant voice sounding muffled in the training room.

The Thunderbird didn't give Xaphan the satisfaction of a verbal response, but she did exert enough power to slam him into the stone floor of his pavilion.

"You *lost* against another lightning mage, that is unacceptable," she growled as she glared at Leon.

For his part, Leon rose to his feet and made no excuses for himself. Sertor was much older and more experienced than Leon, but he knew that the Thunderbird wouldn't accept that as an excuse—he'd had his ass handed to him too many times in the past month over that particular failure for him to continue making excuses.

"I will ensure that you do not lose again," the Thunderbird continued, her voice softening as she stared at Leon, her yellow avian eyes picking up on the fact that it wasn't Leon's loss that was weighing on his mind so much. "Speak up. Something is distracting you. What is it?"

Leon stared at the wall for a moment as he thought about how to respond. Admitting to mistakes wasn't something he ever found that difficult, but when it was something so personal, it was still hard to give voice to them.

"I... I got a letter from Elise yesterday, and I just... Well, with her, and the whole situation around Naiad, and then me running off out here..."

"You're rambling," the Thunderbird interrupted, sending a bolt of lightning arcing through the sky above the open-roof dojo, the sound of its thunder shaking the entire mountain.

"Sorry, it's just that I don't really have the words to properly describe what I'm feeling..." Leon said.

"Take it slow, I'm not going anywhere. How about this, start with this letter, what was in it?"

"Nothing too earth-shattering," Leon said. "However, it wasn't so much a great revelation that was in it that got me thinking, it was more the tone, plus a few small details. She mentioned that our home was seized by Octavius and that Heaven's Eye was under great scrutiny to support Octavius in this conflict, or to at the very least, stay neutral.

"But it just got me thinking, and I realized that this wouldn't happen if I weren't around. Elise wouldn't be under so much pressure, she wouldn't have had her home taken by the state, and her family wouldn't be facing the scrutiny of a Prince."

"Given the power of Heaven's Eye, this doesn't seem like that big of a deal, to be honest," the Thunderbird muttered. "I think you might be—"

"I know that it isn't that big of a deal to them," Leon said, interrupting his ancestor, much to her chagrin. "But that's not the point. The point is that I have made myself a part of Elise's life, and by extension, a part of Emilie's life. And yet I've done so little. They have done so much for me, and I haven't even the faintest idea of how to pay them back for their generosity."

"Does any of that generosity have to be paid back?" the Thunderbird asked. "Speaking from my own great experience dealing with the many men of the harems I've had in the past, whenever I've given

them gifts or done them favors, I never expected anything in return, for the pleasure of their company and their cocks was enough.”

Leon visibly cringed. He didn’t want to hear about something so private from his ancestor.

Moving past sex talk as fast as he could, he replied, “I get that, but I feel like a freeloader. I want to give something back, even if it’s something they could easily get themselves or that Heaven’s Eye can procure with a snap of its mighty corporate fingers. I just want to do something that shows Elise how much I love her.”

“If you could give something back to me, I’d be ever so thankful!” Xaphan shouted from outside, his face still held against the stone floor by the Thunderbird’s aura. “I’d settle for being able to stand back up!”

“Hmmm...” the Thunderbird hummed as she thought, not paying any mind to the shouting Xaphan.

“Getting a present for your primary mate, is that all that has been on your mind, boy?”

“No,” Leon admitted. “There’s been a lot, actually. I’ve been thinking about Naiad, Gaius Tullius, and other things.”

“And your training? Has that entered your mind at all?”

“Yes, but I confess that it’s taken something of a back seat to the rest.”

The Thunderbird sighed and resigned herself to the fact that Leon was done with training for the day and that she now had to attend to his psychological needs.

‘If he weren’t my only descendant remaining, I wouldn’t bother with this...’ she uncharitably thought.

“All right, what about your other mate?” she asked out loud.

Leon, after returning his sword to his vault, freely said, “I was unfair to her. And unkind, I think, given how helpful and undemanding she’s always been.” After speaking his piece about Elise, he found it much easier to speak, the Thunderbird’s somewhat exasperated expression notwithstanding. “I forced her to make a decision... and she ran. If she were still here, I could’ve solved this entire thing. I could’ve just walked right into the palace and killed Octavius then and there. Earthshaker would’ve been made a head shorter, and then I could’ve left this damn Kingdom behind.”

His words were harsh towards the Bull Kingdom, but his face was regretful rather than hateful and vindictive. It was clear enough to the Thunderbird that whether or not he actually felt that way about the Kingdom, it was being colored more by his own anger at how he treated Naiad than anything else.

“Why did you treat her that way, then?” she asked.

“She tried to force herself on me when we first met,” Leon answered. “But... in the end, when she saw that I didn’t want that, she backed off. After that, she was nothing but helpful.”

“Was the decision you forced her to make necessary?”

“I think it was. We were about to go to war, and I wanted to know how she felt. We never really talked about it before...”

"Sounds like you were a bit of an idiot," the Thunderbird said with the faintest hint of a smirk playing at her lips.

"I can't argue with that, as I reflect on my actions, I find myself being far too passive. I think I should've acted more and waited less. All of these things with Elise, Naiad, and even how I've been since Trajan was murdered..."

"What set off all of this self-reflection? Unless it just came out of nowhere..."

"No, I think it came after speaking with Gaius Tullius..." Leon quickly filled the Thunderbird in on Gaius' circumstances as they had been explained to him.

"And you saw your situation in his? Being forced to participate in campaigns that you didn't believe in?"

"A bit, yes."

"But you chose to be here."

"I did."

"Have the reasons for that choice changed?"

"Hardly. Trajan wanted to see this Kingdom thrive, to see it at peace and its people happy. What kind of person would I be if I were to leave while it's in the midst of a civil war kicked off, at least in part, by his murder?"

"Sounds like you have a pretty good idea of what you're doing, so what's with the second-guessing?"

"It just... it doesn't feel like my future is here, you know?"

"Of course, it isn't! If your future was in this backwater, then I wouldn't bother training you and resign myself to the fact that my clan has come to an end! I would never have revealed myself to you and demanded that you reach the sixth-tier so that we could speak properly! I would've let you continue in peace, probably to be killed somewhere along the way like the rest of the baseborn plebeians that call this cursed graveyard their home."

"Right... well, it does kind of seem like I'm wasting my time by staying, even if it is to fulfill my obligations to a dead friend. There's just so much going through my head about what will come next that I'm having trouble focusing on the here and now."

The Thunderbird stared at her last descendant, her eyes sharp and piercing, and sighed. "You're still only twenty years old. Take the time to broaden your horizons, to live in the moment, and to make sure that when you leave, you do so without regrets. Your Prince Trajan had great expectations for you, and you can fulfill them later when you start to build a power base in the Nexus. You have plenty of time ahead of you for other things."

Leon frowned, his general sense of unease not abated.

"Listen, boy," the Thunderbird said with uncharacteristic tenderness, "when a mage achieves Apotheosis, they essentially become immortal. They do not age—in fact, they will age backward until they reach their physical prime, assuming they weren't in their prime when Apotheosis was achieved."

And yet, immortals rarely live for longer than a few thousand years, for the weight of all that time is immense, far more so than most are able to bear. Few things will kill an immortal faster than apathy and boredom.”

“If they’re immortal, how do they die?” Leon asked without too much seriousness.

“Usually in ritual suicide, or by getting others to kill them. When someone abandons all desire to live, it’s not unheard of for them to abandon all respect for the rule of law—though, fortunately, it’s mostly those who leave nothing behind that go to such extremes. If they have a family, they’ll usually choose to end things by their own hands.”

Leon grimaced. He didn’t think he’d ever choose suicide, but he wasn’t even fifty years old, yet, let alone five hundred or five thousand. “How many of our clan have claimed their own lives?”

“Many...” the Thunderbird whispered as she stared at nothing in particular. “All of my children grew tired of life, and all of my grandchildren, too.”

Again, Leon frowned. If the Thunderbird existed within them, then she likely would’ve seen all of her family members being crushed under the weight of the years they had lived and then taking their own lives. It suddenly made a bit more sense to him why she had always been so aloof to the rest of his clan, only revealing herself to him, when he was the last one alive who carried her power.

In a blatant change of topic, the Thunderbird said, “I’m making some progress with your request to learn how to transform into a similar kind of being as myself.”

“Oh? What kind of progress?”

“Nothing that will bear fruit in the near future, I think, but...” The Thunderbird didn’t look at Leon, instead choosing to continue to stare at the walls of the dojo.

However, unlike a few moments before when her eyes were unfocused and distant, now they seemed to be locked on something specific, though Leon had no clue what it could be. There wasn’t anything in that direction except the Mists of Chaos, so he could only assume that whatever she was seeing was in her head.

Continuing, the Thunderbird said, “I had to apply some principles I learned from other Primordial Beasts, but I think that when it’s ready, it will work. It will require greater power than you currently possess, though, so don’t go slacking off just because I’m making progress!”

“Thank you for going so out of your way for me,” Leon humbly said, and he meant every word. “I don’t know how I could ever repay you for this.”

“Prove yourself worthy of it. That will be enough,” the Thunderbird replied. “Now, have you come to any conclusions regarding your problems? Or are we going to sit here and play at therapy for a few days?”

Leon stifled both a chuckle and a frown. He didn’t know what kind of conclusions he could’ve drawn in so short a time, but his head felt a bit clearer now and felt ready to continue with his training.

“I’ve decided to continue with this war,” he said. “I don’t have to stay, but I’ve put far too much of myself into this to just up and leave so abruptly. If I did, I’d regret it forever, and you specifically told me to avoid regrets. I’ll see this place that has been... well, not *good*, but at least somewhat decent to me

returned to peace, and in doing so honor Trajan's memory. I'll also kill Octavius and the Earthshaker Paladin because *fuck* those two."

"Good," the Thunderbird said approvingly.

"I've also thought about the issues with Naiad and Elise. If Naiad ever returns, which I think she will given what I can feel from the power she left within me when we made our contract, I'll do better. I'm fairly sure that I love her, and I want to make her a part of my family. And as for Elise, well, I think I can start by showing how much I appreciate her. In that vein, I could use some advice from your end..."

"We'll see," the Thunderbird coyly replied. "What did you have in mind?"

Leon smiled and told her.

"You can't buy your way out of guilt or into someone's good graces," the Thunderbird said. "Or, at least, I don't think you'll be able to do so in this case. Either way, I like it, and I will render what assistance I can."

Chapter 412: Saron

Journeying across the large Bull Kingdom was something that Naiad could do quite effortlessly. The Naga River and all of its branches and tributaries ran up and down its length, from the farthest reaches of the Northern Territories down to the coast of the Gulf of Discord. If she wanted to, she could go from the Bull Kingdom's capital back to her cave in the western marches of the Talfar Kingdom in a matter of three or four days, whereas it might take Leon two weeks if he were in a spectacular hurry.

However, once she left Leon's villa, she didn't move all that fast. He had sprung quite the conundrum upon her, and she needed some time to think before anything. And so, after leaving the villa, she simply melted down into the Naga River and let the water carry her southward.

Ultimately, she had left to seek out her mother back in Saron, the city that all river nymphs had come from, but for now, she needed her space.

The most important issue on her mind was that of Leon himself. Over the year that she had been with him and Elise, the two had made a serious effort to make her feel welcome and a part of their family. They slept together a lot, and Leon in particular made her feel wanted, even if he rarely said much.

His silence wasn't something that bothered her; their physical relationship was all that she wanted or even needed to feel loved, and everything else was just a bonus. And yet, she had to admit that on those times when they did talk—rarely was it about anything more consequential than what food they were going to eat or what they had seen during the day—that she enjoyed it far more than she could have ever guessed she would.

She didn't want to leave him, that much Naiad knew. However, to be a part of his family wasn't something that she felt ready for, she didn't even know what all that might mean. She didn't even know if she would want to stick around once she was pregnant.

If she were corporeal, she might've run her hands down her toned belly, wistfully wondering what their future child might look like, but alas, her body was now water. She wasn't yet with child, but already she knew that she wanted no one's seed save for Leon's. Whether or not that qualified as wanting to be a

part of his family wasn't something she could say, and as she drifted down the Naga River, she wasn't able to come to a decision.

She wanted Leon's child, but she wasn't sure if she wanted to be a part of his family. She didn't know how she felt about him. That was as succinctly as she could put her situation.

Unable to come to a conclusion, Naiad began to move in earnest about two weeks after leaving Leon's home. She drifted quite the distance from the capital, but she was still in the northern reaches of the Southern Territories and had a long way to go.

A few times on her journey, it occurred to her that she didn't leave Leon at the best of times, but every time that she thought about returning, she couldn't quite bring herself to turn around. She knew that Leon was in a bad way right now, but he still had Elise there with him, and she didn't think he would want her by his side until she was ready to commit to the two of them. Until she was ready to make that commitment, she wasn't going to go back.

To that end, she slowly meandered her way back to her cave, eventually walking out of the water and onto the beach of the small island in the middle of the underground lake where she had spent so much of her life. It had only been a little over a year since she had left, but so much had changed since then. Not only had she gotten together with Leon and Elise, but she had introduced herself to human culture, and now, compared to the capital and its constant hustle and bustle, her island felt small, isolated, and dark.

A deep melancholy settled into the pit of her stomach as she walked back to the center of the island toward the pond that had been her home, where she had almost forced herself upon Leon during their first meeting. She quite enjoyed her solitude, but right now, sitting in the clearing illuminated by the light shed by the glowing leaves of nearby trees, she couldn't help but shiver. She had long ago shed the clothes she had taken to wearing in the Bull Kingdom, and she missed them now more than ever. The only accessory that still adorned her was the invisibility ring that Leon had given her after he killed Tiberias, its emerald seeming dark and lusterless within the grotto.

And yet, the ring also felt warm on her finger. She could almost feel Leon's presence there with her as she slowly twisted the ring around her finger.

'I will never return to my old life,' Naiad suddenly realized. No matter if she stayed with Leon or not, living the hermit life was no longer in her future. A temporary respite in a quiet place like this, perhaps... But living in it permanently? No, she couldn't go back to it.

'Or maybe if Leon...' she thought, thinking the place wouldn't be so bad with Leon around. Or Elise, for that matter. Leon took up the majority of her thoughts when she thought about what she left behind, but that was almost entirely because of the two of them, Naiad would be bearing Leon's child. But that wasn't to undersell the depths to which Naiad missed Elise, too; Naiad greatly missed the feel of Elise's hands and lips on her body, and if she decided to return to the two, then Elise would be a huge reason why.

For now, Naiad did her best to push thoughts of Leon and Elise out of her mind. If she was going to speak with the teasing, yet often wrathful goddess that was her mother, then she had to be completely

centered and ready for anything. She was a Queen of river nymphs, and even if she had long since given away her lesser nymphs, she still had to act with the dignity and grace expected of one of her station.

Naiad knelt in her pond, her head just barely rising above the surface of the water as her legs rested in the sand below. She didn't turn her body into water, keeping herself flesh and blood to help maintain her discipline and drive thoughts of what might await her back in the capital from her mind.

It took five days of meditation, during which Naiad rose from her pond three times to walk to the beach and prepare to head for Saron, only for her nerve to fail and force her to return to the pond for more meditation. But the fourth time was the charm, it seemed, for she entered the lake, allowed her body to merge with the water, and departed the island for Saron without a single glance backward.

It was a quick journey, far more so than the journey from the capital back to the lake; Saron was not far by any stretch of the imagination, perhaps ten miles at the most depending on the interpretation of where Saron began.

Naiad defined it as beginning when she entered its gates.

The 'road' to Saron was an underground river, one of the three that supplied her lake with water, and as it approached the gates, it narrowed into more of a flooded fissure, many dozens of feet high but barely wide enough to fit half a dozen people shoulder-to-shoulder. Despite being the realm of river nymphs, there wasn't a single nymph in sight, even made one with the water. Naiad wasn't too surprised—most nymphs didn't exactly reach human levels of cognition, though they had intelligence that elevated them above animals, and Saron was the holiest of their homes—if anything could even be considered holy in river nymph society. It was not a place for the lesser nymphs to loiter absent their Queens.

The gates of the city in the deep, flooded, lightless tunnel were more of an intricately carved archway, not unlike the triumphal arches in the Bull Kingdom's capital. However, the arch's complete architectural dissonance with what lay beyond showed it for what it truly was: a stolen relic that had been taken from a flooded city far to the south and stuck into the bare rock of the fissure to pretty it up a bit. It didn't even have proper gates—or guards, for that matter, for who could find such a place, far from human civilization and hidden below millions of tons of rock and water?

The fissure was dark and claustrophobic, pressing in on Naiad even in her intangible watery state, but the immense cavern beyond the archway was anything but. However, to call it merely 'immense' was to do an indescribable disservice to the true scale of the place. It was large enough to contain a city of tremendous size. All of the Bull Kingdom's capital, Teira, and Ariminium could be fit inside at once with room to spare, and even the tallest man-made building that Naiad had ever seen wouldn't have come close to reaching the ceiling from the floor.

But the cavern was already full of structures, leaving no room for any new buildings without tunneling into the rock walls.

From wall to wall, the entire floor of the underwater cavern had been filled with pyramids of varying sizes, each made of inky black stone and with enough absorbable magic power emanating from them to make even Naiad shudder in pleasure as she entered their collective aura. They were laid out with seemingly no rhyme or reason, without even the slightest hint of a grid or other planned layout. Those pyramids furthest from the center were the smallest, with some human single-room huts being larger,

while those closer to the center grew in size, culminating in a pyramid of massive proportions made of stone bricks each larger than the smallest of the pyramids. The entire structure was about a mile tall, with its tallest brick reaching a little under halfway to the cavern ceiling. At its zenith was a flat platform with a strange altar—or something that Naiad could only identify as an altar—in the center.

But, perhaps even more spectacular, an identical pyramid extended from the ceiling directly over its massive counterpart, forming a kind of hourglass shape in the cavern. The two pyramids almost touched at the top, separated by no more than twenty feet. A beam of blue light connected the two altars and surrounding this beam for thirty feet was what Naiad could only describe as a halo of blue light so bright that it shone like a tiny bright blue sun deep in the center of the plane. A few other pyramids had similar spheres of blue light at their peaks, but they were as candles next to a roaring bonfire, and the light they emitted was almost completely blocked by the light of the main pair of pyramids.

Naiad took a moment to take in the splendor of the cavern. She marveled at how much force would've been required to construct such monolithic structures and the magic power that, even now, uncountable years after the creation of these structures, continued to maintain whatever magic spells had been worked into their bricks.

After a couple of seconds, Naiad got back to the task at hand, reformed her physical body with the emerald ring still on her finger, and began dropping through the water toward the floor of the cavern. Here, in this place, only the highest of river nymphs, their Empress, could move as she pleased. All others, even the Queens, had to adhere to ancient rituals.

At one end of the cavern a few miles from where Naiad entered was what could be described as a hallway—or perhaps a walled road at that scale—that cut through the throngs of pyramids and led to the base of the Great Pyramid. The long walls of this road were covered in carved reliefs, leaving hardly any bare stone to be seen.

Naiad swam around the edge of the cavern just above the floor, not stopping until her feet touched the paved floor of this road. Once she landed on the bricks, she began to walk along the path as if it were a city open to the sky rather than completely submerged. She walked slowly, respectfully, taking her time to calmly observe her surroundings.

Behind her was the main entrance to Saron, a huge pitch-black abyss in the wall that led north toward the Endless Ocean. The road she walked began at the mouth of this tunnel.

It was only after she had walked about a quarter of a mile that she finally began to take notice of the other river nymphs in Saron. They were gathered around the brightest of lights at the top of the pyramids, swimming around them like schools of fish. Nearly all were lesser nymphs, while their Queens made their statuses known by sitting at the tops of these tallest pyramids. The Queens themselves were small in number, only a small handful compared to the thousands of lesser nymphs that surrounded them, and all were just as nude as Naiad.

A few resembled Naiad, with bronze skin, heart-shaped faces, and buxom figures, but most were pale and more slender, their looks showcasing their lives spent in the underwater caves and their usual choice of mates—the pale-skinned men of the Talfar Kingdom. Some were blond, a few were red-haired, but most were dark-haired, and all had eyes as blue as the water that surrounded them and the light they gathered around.

Naiad didn't stop to watch or greet any of them. They were far away from the hallway, and she had other things on her mind. But they all took great notice of her, with not a single one missing her arrival. Many even had their groups of lesser nymphs part so that they could watch Naiad's advance with their own eyes.

It was a quiet journey, but Naiad's blood rushed through her ears with a deafening roar, and her heart felt like it was trying to escape her chest with how intensely it was beating. All thirty river nymph Queens—each of comparable power to her—were focusing their attention on her, but it was the prospect of facing her mother that had Naiad so nervous.

But she did as was expected. She wasn't going to give any of her contemporaries reason to attack her, as she was sure they were all contemplating doing so. Instead, she almost made a show of examining the endless carvings that decorated the walls of the road she walked. They hadn't been carved by river nymphs, of that she was certain—the entire cavern hadn't been built by her people, they simply lived within it.

The reliefs depicted a story, but it was one that Naiad was generally unfamiliar with beyond the obvious. On her left were depicted various creatures so finely detailed and lively as to be almost lifelike, but she couldn't identify even a quarter of the beasts depicted upon the wall. There were horned beasts, winged things, and creatures with altogether far too many legs. Some were insectoid, others with fur, feathers, or both, and still others covered in scales, spikes, stingers, and all manner of other strange and alien appendages.

On her right, the carvings were less eclectic, only showing two different kinds of beings. One of these beings seemed, to Naiad at least, formless, vaguely human but twisted in ways that no flesh or bone could ever manage. In the center of the shapeless bumps that were these beings' heads were a single blood-red ruby. The second kind of being were quadrupeds; Naiad might've called them centaurs with huge curved horns made of silver that merged with their pronounced brows.

Various scenes were depicted on both sides of Naiad. Some were of the creatures fighting, others were of peace, but most of these scenes Naiad hadn't a clue what was going on.

It wasn't until she reached about halfway to the Great Pyramid that humans made their appearance in these carvings. They were tiny compared to the rest, but as Naiad continued onward, they quickly began to outnumber the others. As she drew ever closer to the Great Pyramid, the scenes became solely those of war and battle, with all of the bizarre and terrible monsters on both sides falling to the blades of humanity—or so it seemed to her.

It seemed to be a history or a legend of some sort, but Naiad hadn't the cultural knowledge to know, nor did she much care about whatever the people who built this place believed. The stories of the dead had little bearing on her life as it was, nor on the lives of the rest of the river nymphs.

She reached the end of the road, finally. Most of the pyramids were built so closely together that a single person would struggle to fit between their bases. The Great Pyramid, however, had been constructed with almost a thousand feet between itself and the closest other pyramids. It wasn't hard for Naiad to guess why, for this open space was filled with corpses, though none of them seemed human. It was clearly a gathering place for whatever alien rituals were conducted at the top of the Great Pyramid, and those that had gathered had all seemingly died in their place.

By now, they had been dead for millennia, for they were all little more than skeletons and Naiad had never in her life seen them as anything but. They were humanoid in shape, but most were massive, between eight and fifteen feet tall. A few of the smallest were of human size, though still tall by human standards, but every single one of them was winged. The smallest had only a single pair of wings extending from their shoulder blades, while as they got larger, more and more pairs of wings appeared from further down their spine. The largest of the corpses had four pairs of wings running down their backs.

They had all seemingly died in place peacefully, for judging by their positions, they had died with their wings covering their faces. Those with more than a single pair had their lowest pair of wings also covering their feet, while those with more than two pairs had spread their extra wings as far out as they could in the relatively cramped space.

There were thousands of these creatures, so many that Naiad could imagine if they were still alive then there would've been very little of the floor showing from beneath the feathers of their wings—assuming, of course, that their wings *were* feathered. But they were all corpses now, and they had about as much bearing on Naiad's purpose as the reliefs flanking the road. She turned her eyes away from the corpses and toward the top of the Great Pyramid. She could sense a great magical presence up there, beyond the magic flowing through the pyramid stones or the bright, gentle blue light that obscured everything between the Great Pyramid and its sibling on the ceiling.

She confidently strode right up to the base of the pyramid, where a more human-sized staircase led up and over the gigantic stone bricks that otherwise made up the pyramid, and slowly lowered herself down to her knees. There, she waited for about thirty seconds, her eyes turned downward in supplication, before quietly lowering herself down even further until her forehead touched the bricks beneath her.

As soon as her brow brushed against the stone, a loving, motherly voice rang out across the entirety of the submerged cavern for every watching nymph to hear, though it was by no means human or even of any language that Leon would recognize if he were present. The water that filled the cavern seemed to shake in time with every syllable, and all the Queens that heard it dropped down to their knees while their lesser nymphs froze in place as they swam around their Queens.

"My last daughter has finally returned to us after so long, and she has shown the proper respect... Let no one say that she is impious or lacks deference... Maia, come up here and see me..."

Naiad closed her eyes and suppressed the feelings of joy and sadness as the sound of her true name filled her ears once again, and then stood back up. She had come this far, and she was as ready as she would ever be to see her mother once again.

Chapter 413: Pleione

Naiad ascended the stairs to the summit of the Great Pyramid. It was a long climb, but her eighth-tier body made it with ease. As she drew closer to the blue light that surrounded the peak, it steadily grew softer until it vanished entirely just as she passed through it.

The blue beam of light that connected the altars of the two pyramids, however, remained as bright as ever, and it gave Naiad a terrible feeling of being watched. Ever since she was little, she always thought

that there was *something* in that beam, something trapped or sealed and that it was always watching her.

But whatever gave her that feeling wasn't her focus; the figure that, even to her eighth-tier senses was almost completely obscured by the blue light, was all that she looked at.

"Maia..." the figure whispered in the sing-song language of the river nymphs, her voice gentle and soothing despite the power it needed to project itself through the dense water that surrounded them. "Welcome home..."

The figure twisted, still unrecognizable as anything other than a black silhouette in the blue light, but Naiad knew exactly who it was—her mother, Pleione. After all, Naiad recognized her mother's voice, and no one else save for one of Pleione's power could claim so high a position with all the other eighth-tier Naiads so far below.

"Mother..." Naiad whispered out loud, her voice coming as almost a shock to her after going so long without speaking.

Naiad drew closer to the figure, and the figure calmly strode forward to greet her in turn. By the time the two embraced, Naiad could see her mother perfectly well, even backlit as Pleione was by the beam of light.

Pleione was much paler than Naiad, showing that she hadn't contented herself with the usual Talfar fare that the rest of the Naiads of her generation had, given Naiad's skin tone. She was also just as nude as Naiad was, and apart from their differing skin tones, the mother and daughter were almost identical. Were it not for that one difference, the two could've been mistaken for identical twins, with their broad, heart-shaped faces, piercing blue eyes, long, light brown hair, and well-endowed hourglass figures.

"Maia..." Pleione whispered as she cupped Naiad's cheeks. "I know you can't have come back here without good reason, but please just let me take a good look at you, it's been so long since you last came here..."

Naiad acquiesced, remaining still and silent for about ten seconds as her mother took in her every detail. She hadn't changed too much since she left Saron almost a century ago, but she indulged her mother anyway; she'd learned long ago that it cost her little to indulge her mother like this while keeping her happy, and Naiad wanted Pleione happy right now, rather than the wrathful goddess that she often used to assert her dominion over the rest of the river nymphs.

Pleione stared into Naiad's eyes, but her magic senses swept over the entirety of Naiad's body, taking in every detail of both her physical state and that of her magical aura.

"Mmm," Pleione hummed in satisfaction, "not a single trace of gorgonism. You've finally found a mate, then? And it seems that he's even marked you as his if that ring is any indication..."

"That's... what I'm here to talk about..." Naiad whispered as her cheeks reddened slightly and she dropped her gaze downward until she was staring at the ring on her finger, the invisibility ring that Leon had given her after looting it Tiberias' guards.

“Oh?” Pleione responded, her expression going from one of delight to one of apprehension. “Has this person made you sad?” Killing intent came pouring out of Pleione in such amounts that the water around them began to freeze.

“No!” Naiad protested, trying to allay her mother’s furious reaction, knowing full well the hell that Pleione could unleash if she were truly angered. “It’s not like that... I just want to talk!”

Pleione took a long, deep breath, and retracted her killing intent, allowing the temperature around the two to return to normal. She also made a quick hand gesture to the rest of the watching Naiads far below them, telling them that everything was all right, despite her brief outburst.

“What do you need to talk about?” Pleione asked once she regained her serene demeanor. She calmly leaned back in the water around the two, with the water dense enough at these depths to hold her up like a chair without her power keeping it from doing so.

Naiad, however, remained standing. “He... asked me to be a part of his family...”

“I see...” Pleione replied. She leaned forward after a moment of thought and whispered more to herself than to Naiad, “So this boy wants to take you from me...”

“I’m not yours, mother,” Naiad replied. “Was that not clear when I left?”

“You didn’t leave me, little one, not when you move barely a few long-counts away into a cavern that I built for you!”

Naiad scowled, but she didn’t back down. She glared at Pleione and made it clear with her aura alone that she was willing to fight to back herself up. Pleione’s aura towered over hers, dwarfing it so completely that Naiad hadn’t the faintest idea how powerful her mother was. Pleione could be the weakest of ninth-tiers, or she could be the strongest of tenth-tiers—she could even be stronger, and Naiad had no way of knowing.

“Oh, enough, dear. I’m only playing with you, you make the most *adorable* faces when you’re angry!” Pleione said as any trace of hostility in her voice, face, and aura vanished like they were never there, and she leaned forward with the most welcoming and enthusiastic of smiles and continued, “So, tell me about this boy that’s caught your eye. Is he strong? Is he cute?”

“He possesses the blood of the Thunderbird,” Naiad simply replied.

Pleione froze in abject shock as her eyes darted down to the friezes flanking the road that lead to the base of the pyramid. Specifically, what caught her eye was one of the largest carvings on the beast side, behind only a handful of dragons and several other creatures—a carving of a huge raptor with its wings spread, surrounded by lightning and with a pair of topaz eyes.

“... Are you sure...?” Pleione asked. “That bloodline was supposed to have been exterminated thousands of years ago...”

“I’m sure,” Naiad replied, not entirely sure why her mother was acting like this, but understanding that Leon’s blood was, perhaps, far more important than he seemed—at least to her—to realize.

“Dear, you take that boy and you don’t let him go,” Pleione suddenly ordered. “To mate with a man with an Inherited Bloodline is one thing, but his... is *stellar*...”

“What do you mean?”

Pleione glanced back down at the friezes one more time before she answered. “I’m not entirely sure, to be honest, but I do know that the descendants of the Thunderbirds were powerful enough to have once ruled this entire plane! They were almost all killed eighty thousand years ago for reasons I don’t know of, but the power in their blood is... *beyond* powerful! If you have the chance to give your daughters that blood, you *must* take it!”

“So... for no other reasons than Leon’s blood, you’re saying that I should go back to him?” Naiad asked, her face warping with indecision, skepticism, disappointment, and a hundred other negative emotions.

Pleione almost shouted back, ‘Yes!’ in response, but seeing and registering what was going through Naiad’s mind by seeing these expressions caused the words to die in her throat. She sighed, laughed, and said, “You know, you really remind me of myself sometimes. And I mean that as a compliment.”

“I’ll try to take it that way,” Naiad said back, though neither woman knew if she was being sarcastic or not.

“So, tell me about this boy, then, with more detail than simply what he can give your daughters.”

Naiad sighed, then began filling her mother in on Leon’s physical characteristics and all that both of them had done since they had met in explicit detail, and she didn’t neglect to mention Elise.

“That’s... quite the story, kid,” Pleione said once Naiad had finished. “I’ll admit, I never thought about other women like that, but if it makes you happy, I won’t question it.”

“I hadn’t either, but... Getting with Leon is a package deal with Elise. It’s both or none, so I chose both, and have since experienced more than I would’ve ever thought possible.”

“Sounds like a tough situation to maintain,” Pleione said. “Were I in your place, I think I would’ve just pushed this ‘Leon’ boy down and taken what I wanted.”

“I know, but it didn’t work when I tried it. He resisted.”

“And that’s the part I still don’t quite believe. He isn’t blind, is he? Why would he resist? Your father didn’t when I stole him from his palace...”

“But he had Elise. Like I said, both or neither, so I had to negotiate with Elise first.”

“... Well, I’m glad that things eventually worked out, at least for a while. Are you pregnant?”

“... No,” Naiad quietly admitted.

“That’s a shame,” Pleione whispered in response.

The two sat there in silence for a long few seconds as Naiad waited for her mother to say something else. Pleione, however, seemed to lose herself in thought for that time. Once she returned to herself, any frivolousness on her face was gone, replaced with deadly seriousness. If her daughter had come all the way back to cold Saron from the warm bed of her mate, then the least Pleione could do was to take this situation as seriously as Naiad was, even if her joy at finally seeing her daughter again after so many decades made that a bit difficult.

“You’ll be going back to him,” Pleione matter-of-factly stated as she turned her eyes back toward her daughter. “It doesn’t matter what I say or do, you’ll be going back. Any breath I use trying to convince you to stay would be wasted.”

Naiad nodded.

“I suppose, then, that it also doesn’t matter if you have my permission or not... but you have it, anyway. Consider any outstanding obligations you have to Saron fulfilled, assuming you didn’t before...”

“What about all of you?”

Pleione glanced away from her youngest daughter and down to the rest of the Naiads below. Three of them were nearly identical to Naiad in everything, including skin tone. Those were Naiad’s sisters. The rest of the Naiads were more distantly related, though they all referred to themselves as sisters since, under their Empress, they were all equal.

“I had hoped that you would be the one to succeed me,” she quietly confessed. “However, if your place is up there in the world that humanity has wrought, then so be it. I will content myself with one of your sisters. I’m just happy that you didn’t follow in the footsteps of my foolish youngest sister and embrace gorgonism after all this time without finding a mate ...”

Naiad smiled and rushed forward to hug her mother. “Thank you!” she said into Pleione’s ear.

“Just do me one favor, my dear,” Pleione said as she hugged Naiad back.

“Anything,” Naiad whispered.

“If what you say is true and this Leon boy gains enough power to bring his clan back from oblivion, then spread our people as well. The two of you ought to have many children over the years... Oh, and if you make sure they know where they come from, I’d appreciate that, too. I’d like to meet my grandchildren one day.”

“I will,” Naiad whispered back.

“Good,” Pleione said. “Now, how long has it been since you last saw this boy?”

“More than a month,” Naiad answered.

Pleione sighed in thought, and said, “I’m afraid that I’m going to have to keep you here for a little while longer. There are a few things about our kind that I was saving to teach you for when you returned, and now that you’re back, I’d like to get started so that you can return as soon as possible...”

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It took weeks for Pleione to impart everything that she knew to Naiad. It was a significant breadth of information, everything from the most esoteric theories on where river nymphs came from to good methods to increase power once Naiad found where her limits lay—as she wasn’t human, the training methods of humanity wouldn’t do her much good.

Those weeks were more than enough time for Pleione to dread the moment when they parted. It wasn't enough time for a mother who hadn't seen her daughter in so long, and she couldn't help but feel melancholic as she watched Naiad walk back toward the edge of Saron, quite possibly never to return.

Naiad loved Leon. She never outright admitted that to Pleione, but Pleione could see it in the way Naiad's eyes glittered when talking about him and hear it in her voice when she told her mother about the past year or so. Pleione knew that Naiad didn't have to admit it to her, she only had to admit it to herself and Leon. After these past few weeks, Pleione hoped that Naiad understood that, and though she never confronted Naiad with it, she made sure Naiad knew that river nymphs of her intelligence and power mated for life.

There would be no other mates for Naiad after Leon. There had been no others for Pleione after Naiad's father, nor before. There may be other women in their shared bed, but since Naiad couldn't have children with them, Pleione didn't think they'd count—though she was certainly curious as to what Naiad's relationship with them might look like.

At the very least, she knew that if anything happened to keep her daughter from the only true mate Naiad would ever have in her life, then she'd use every ounce of her power to gain vengeance on Naiad's behalf, even if she had to massacre every single person on Aeterna in the process.

It wasn't quite official, yet, that Leon and Naiad were mates. Naiad still had yet to tell Leon her true name, and at least until that happened Leon would never know the sound of her voice, but that was a technicality that Pleione didn't think mattered to anyone involved. As far as Naiad was concerned, she and Leon were already mates, even if her emotional turmoil of the past couple of months had shaken that certainty a bit.

Pleione sighed, lay back in the water, and turned her eyes upward toward the beam of blue light looming above her, connecting the altars of the Great Pyramid and its inverted counterpart. The magic powering that great ward was stronger than even Pleione could reasonably estimate, and the thing it contained demanded such strength. She had hoped that Naiad could have helped her to watch over it, but it seemed that it would never be.

That was fine, Pleione thought. She'd make do with the others below her. The thing in that light could never be freed, no matter what it was, but it was her place to watch over it and the rest of the pyramids here, anyway.

Such was the most important duty of the river nymph Empress.

Chapter 414: Golden Lotus

The forges of Ironford were never cold. They turned out weapons, armor, and accessories of all kinds by the hundreds, making the city the single largest producer of war material in the entire Kingdom. A few of these forges were owned by Heaven's Eye, but the vast majority were owned and operated by their only real local competition: the Blasted Furnace.

Leon, however, wasn't interested in any of that. Instead, his focus was devoted to finding a good jeweler and goldsmith that wasn't affiliated with Heaven's Eye. Since the Blasted Furnace was almost exclusively devoted to the manufacture of arms and armor, he had some trouble finding an independent smith for

his purposes. Fortunately, August heard about his search and asked Marquis Herrenia, who then pointed Leon in the right direction.

But that was about a week ago, and now Leon's commission was about complete, so he made his way from his quarters in the palace accompanied only by Alix. The two spent some time catching up, but there honestly wasn't much to talk about. Most of Alix's work with Minerva had been bureaucratic in nature, and paperwork was hardly a riveting topic. Likewise, all Leon could think to talk about for a while was his enchantment work, and Alix didn't have much interest in that.

After reaching the goldsmith, however, Leon managed to find something to talk about for a while.

"So..." he said with some awkwardness to Alix as the smith went to the back to fetch Leon's order, "have you put any thought into a second name?"

Alix blinked in surprise at Leon's question. "Not really," she honestly answered. "I haven't even looked too much into the rules. I'm not sure I even *want* a second name."

"The rules are simple as far as I understand them," Leon said. "Commoners are only allowed their given names, nobles and foreigners get a second name to set them apart. You're a knight, and thus, noble. You can take a second name if you want to."

"I don't really want to, though," Alix replied as she lightly frowned. "My name is simple and easy to remember. Why change that?"

"Some might think being knighted is a good enough reason to change," Leon said. "They'd want the entire world to know of their higher standing."

"Going from commoner to knight is hardly that great of a reach," Alix protested. "If someone told me that there were more than a million knights in this Kingdom, I'd believe them."

Leon nodded. The Bull Kingdom's population was measured in the hundreds of millions, though he wasn't sure what the exact numbers from the last census were. Regardless, while he knew that compared to the number of commoners in the Kingdom, knights were relatively rare, but that didn't mean they were scarce. He and Alix rubbed shoulders with hundreds of knights every day, and they dealt with Princes, high Lords, and some of the most important and influential people in the entire Kingdom.

"I suppose that's a fair enough viewpoint to have," he said.

Alix was about to continue, but the goldsmith returned with a small package.

"Here you are, Good Sir," the smith said. "It was a difficult piece, but I believe it turned out quite well."

Leon barely heard him, and instead directed his attention to the package in front of him. It was a shiny box of lacquered wood, deep red in color with a pair of small brass hinges on the back. It was small enough for Leon to carry it in one hand, but still fairly large compared to most of what was on display in the shop.

"That doesn't look like a ring box," Alix said in mild disappointment, having assumed that when Leon said he was going to a goldsmith that he was going to propose to Elise. Most common marriages in the Bull Kingdom weren't accompanied by gifts of expensive jewels, but the nobility liked to present their

significant others with such things when proposing marriage if only to make a statement about their wealth. Rings were, of course, an ever-popular selection for such gifts, but bracelets, necklaces, and even diadems weren't unheard of, either.

Leon simply replied, "It isn't."

He wasn't thinking about proposing to Elise—at least, not yet. Especially not so soon after Naiad's departure. But he still wanted to show her that he loved her and was thinking about her in a tangible way, and so he'd sprung for something shiny and expensive that he could enchant, though that wasn't how he described it to the goldsmith he'd commissioned to make the piece and had gone into great detail about what he wanted.

With some apprehension, Leon carefully opened the box. It had a small latch, and Leon almost fumbled with it as his hands shook in nervousness and excitement. This goldsmith made all of Marquis Herrenia's jewelry, so Leon knew he had to be good, but he was still anxious about taking this to somewhere other than Heaven's Eye. If he took it to the Heaven's Eye branch in the city, though, he couldn't be sure that it wouldn't get back to Elise somehow, and he wanted this to be a surprise.

He opened the lid, and instantly, all of his worries vanished. Even Alix beside him couldn't stifle a gasp of amazement.

It was a work of art, a thick bracelet of gold shaped to look like roots and leaves, while the main centerpiece that would sit right over Elise's wrist was a golden flower. And it wasn't just any flower, it was a slender lotus, with each leaf studded with a small sapphire.

When he made his commission, Leon had been worried that the smith would make the lotus too big, making the bracelet gaudy and unwieldy, but this was perfect. The golden petals were large enough to be as eye-catching as jewelry ought to be, but not so much as to get in the way. In fact, the bracelet as a whole was about as large as some small—and undoubtedly extremely expensive—magical clocks that Leon had seen some nobles wearing on their wrists of late.

"Wow..." Alix whispered as the sapphires in the lotus leaves caught the light of the shop's magic lanterns and glittered.

"It's perfect," Leon said, eliciting a smile of pride from the middle-aged goldsmith.

Leon quickly paid the man what he owed for the bracelet and then he and Alix left. The price tag had quickly diminished much of Alix's wonder at it, but she was still quite curious as to what Leon now intended to do.

"I'm not proposing," Leon said, quashing that particular thought of Alix's. "I'm going to enchant this to help Elise with her nature magic."

"Is that it?" Alix asked with some measure of disappointment.

"Yes..." Leon said as dread began to seep into his voice. "I just wanted to show her that I was thinking of her. Is it not enough?"

“Oh, no, I think that’s more than enough to get that across. I just thought that you were aiming for something more. Especially with how much it cost...” Alix grimaced as she thought back to how much money Leon had just spent. She didn’t think she made that much in a year.

“It’s worth it,” Leon said with a smile.

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“I’d say it’s barely worthy of the time it takes to look upon it, but I suppose I just have high standards,” Xaphan said as he closely examined the bracelet.

Leon had returned to his room immediately after getting back to the palace and dove straight into his soul realm. If he was going to properly enchant the bracelet, he’d need both Xaphan’s and the Thunderbird’s help, since he was next to useless when it came to earth and light magic, two of the elements that were key to nature enchantments, and in the ways of water magic, the third and final element, he was barely an amateur.

“Well I then suppose that it’s good that I’m not trying to impress *you* with this gift,” Leon shot back. “Are you going to help or not?”

“I’ll help, I can’t have you embarrassing yourself by presenting a gift that is unworthy of you. You are carrying around a Lord of Flame, after all, and I’d hate to see anyone affiliated with me fizzle and die like a match thrown into a lake over something so small. We’ll squeeze every drop of majesty out of that little band of gold, of that I have no doubt.”

Leon nodded, but in truth, he wasn’t that confident in Xaphan’s ability to help in this matter. The demon was self-professed not interested in elements beyond fire, even though Leon was sure that Xaphan was still probably more knowledgeable about earth, light, and water than he was. Or maybe just earth and light, Leon wasn’t so sure about the water.

However, Xaphan surprised him when he immediately began to mutter to himself and project a board of white light behind him, upon which hundreds of tiny runes began to form.

“I didn’t know you knew enough about light to create such an illusion, demon,” Leon said.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” Xaphan replied. “Light isn’t too far from fire, and so I have some small understanding of it. You will, too, even if you never use it for combat. No being would be worthy of the Nexus otherwise.”

Leon nodded and turned his attention back to Xaphan’s light board. He did his best to make sense of it all, but Xaphan might as well have been weaving his enchantment in a completely separate language for all that Leon was able to perceive. To an extent, Leon had gone through this period of confusion before during his experimentations with wind, water, fire, and lightning enchantments, but it had always been a slower process. He started with the basics, and in the case of the former two, had the Thunderbird there to guide him. Xaphan wasn’t trying to teach him now, the demon was just quietly doing his own thing, and from what Leon was able to tell, rather gleeful in Leon’s inability to read the enchantment he was writing.

‘The bastard is showing off!’ Leon bitterly thought as he shot a dirty look at the mass of orange flames that perpetually surrounded Xaphan’s body. Maybe it was his imagination—he was almost certain it

wasn't—but he could've sworn that Xaphan's bright yellow eyes flashed in smugness as the demon worked.

After a few moments, the demon leaned back, apparently satisfied with his work.

"There, human, all that I know of light magic is up there."

Leon studied the illusory board with great interest. His eyes darted from pattern to pattern, running along magic lines leading from one rune to the next, all flowing in and among themselves to create a gorgeous silver tapestry of swirling runes. Slowly, Leon's eyes began to see the order to the seeming chaos, the light rune leading into a projection rune into an amplification rune, and so on.

"What can the whole thing do?" Leon asked.

"It can change colors," Xaphan proudly boasted.

"... change colors..." Leon muttered to himself in confusion. And then it clicked. Xaphan was fucking with him. "Change colors?! Really? That's it?!"

Xaphan roared with laughter, his deep resonant voice practically shaking his pavilion. "HAHAHA! You should see your face, human! Of course that's all it does! Why would you ever come to a fire demon to learn enchantments that help *plants grow*?!"

Taking a *deep* breath, Leon did his absolute best not to lose his mind at his supposed partner. It was true that he'd learned a lot from Xaphan's teaching on the subject of fire, and despite all evidence to the contrary, he'd hoped the demon could have some insights into this matter.

"It seems I was mistaken..." Leon quietly muttered to himself, resolving to never seek Xaphan's assistance again for anything other than burning things. Fortunately, before Leon could start venting his frustrations, an arc of lightning thundered through the sky of his soul realm, and with it came the Thunderbird. She stood in the doorway of Xaphan's pavilion, dressed in a simple red sleeveless tunic, loose pants, and a pair of sandals, and her yellow avian eyes were locked solely on Xaphan.

"What *exactly* are you teaching my descendant, demon?" she demanded without a single hint of warmth in her voice.

"See for yourself," Xaphan said with a shrug as he moved a bit to reveal his light board to the Thunderbird.

The divine bird in human form clicked her tongue in disapproval and waved her hand, dismissing the board with ease. "Parlor tricks," she spat. "You need more if you're to make that thing something worth taking pride in."

"Actually, now that I think about it, there are some applications of that magic that could make this look a little better," Leon said, getting a bit defensive on Xaphan's behalf despite himself, though he didn't lie, either.

"We can think about form *after* we think about function," the Thunderbird said. "Now, come with me and we can work in peace." She then turned around and began walking down the mountain toward Leon's personal palace.

“Mmm, don’t mind me, I’ll just sit up here. As I have been doing. For *years...*” Xaphan grumbled.

“We’ll talk later,” Leon said as he followed the Thunderbird away from Xaphan’s pavilion. “Think about something you might need to get stronger.”

“If I get much stronger, you’d probably explode if you tried to use my power,” Xaphan countered.

“You’re stronger than you were the last time you called upon it, but you still can’t handle it. Don’t push yourself, boy, I’ve waited a long time, I can wait a little longer. Even if I bitch about it sometimes.”

Leon gave the demon an apologetic look as he left, while Xaphan went back to relaxing in the pavilion. As much as it bored the demon, he had to admit that it was rather relaxing there.

‘It’s going to be difficult to readjust to life in the Void when I return...’ Xaphan thought to himself. *‘Here, I can speak without much consideration. There... well, it’s nice to be able to vent to that boy.’*

He’d have to return to the Void eventually if only to kill Amon. But for now, he was in the mood to relax and let his power slowly recover on its own. There wasn’t much else he could do, anyway, and that one fact cooled his zeal for recovery significantly. Besides, in the Void, there wasn’t an Ascended Beast teaching her descendant who Xaphan could surreptitiously learn from.

Chapter 415: New Missions

Leon couldn’t enchant his gift to Elise right away; rather, he and the Thunderbird needed to first plan out what he wanted to do with it, and that process alone would take days, followed by weeks of preparation. And as much as Leon wanted to devote his time to nothing but that and his own training, the civil war had waited long enough.

For two months, Octavius and August had been amassing their forces. Octavius had gotten a good head start, but his allies were far more spread out across the Kingdom. August had less people loyal to him, but they didn’t have that far to go.

Logistics, as always, were a pain to figure out, and from what Leon had seen from Minerva and several other high ranking knights, he was glad he was as far away from that mess as he was. The Eastern Territories had farms, to be sure, but the amount of food they produced wasn’t enough to support the eastern population on their own. The Western Territories provided as much as half of the entire Bull Kingdom’s food supply in any given year, oftentimes more, and that it was firmly in Octavius’ hands was a big problem for the Augustine faction.

But they had their own advantages, too. The forges of the Blasted Furnace were running round the clock as August ensured his forces were properly equipped. Nearly all of the Bull Kingdom’s silver mines were in the east, too, so he was able to buy food, spells, and other equipment from merchants in Ariminium.

But food, spells, arms, and armor were one thing; the armies and allies he needed were another thing entirely. The Eastern Territories had fifteen Legions, five of which needed to stay put to keep the peace, leaving August with two hundred thousand combat soldiers. Adding to that were fifty thousand knights and men-at-arms contributed by the eastern nobles, giving August a fairly large army.

The problem was that Octavius had more than twice that that, though with a couple fewer Legions compared to August and more troops from his loyal nobles. August was desperate for something to fill that gap.

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“I will *not* agree to this, Your Highness!” Minerva insisted, glaring down at the proposal in her hand like it was about to turn into a snake and sink its fangs into her wrist. Actually, compared to what was in the stack of papers, having them transform into some vicious creature would be an improvement, in her opinion.

“I don’t *need* you to agree to it, Dame Minerva, I just need it to happen,” August replied, his tone calm but holding an intense undercurrent of anger.

The two were in his office with only Leon and the two Paladins there with them. The five had just left a large meeting with the Legion commanders and nobles who had pledged themselves to August’s cause where they had worked out a general strategy for moving forward. It had been decided that Brimstone and Minerva would lead six Legions northward to secure the Great Plateau and get the support of the nobles there, while Roland would take the remaining four Legions south. The noble army would defend the Eastern Territories from further attack in their absence.

Leon assumed that he would be going with Minerva since he was her direct subordinate, and so wasn’t too surprised when he wasn’t given a specific task. However, his unease grew as Minerva’s eyes kept flickering between him, August, and the stack of papers in her hand that expanded upon August’s proposed strategy.

“I have spent my *entire military career* defending our borders from military incursions by our neighbors!” Minerva loudly said, barely keeping herself from shouting in anger. “I will *never* allow Samar or Talfar troops to cross our borders, no matter the situation we find ourselves in!”

“We have little other recourse, we need allies and after the Consul of the North went to the capital, it seems that we’ve run out of domestic options,” Roland responded as he cocked an eyebrow, noticing that she didn’t call out the mission he’d planned for Leon in that plan.

“Dame Minerva, perhaps we ought to tone things down, these proposals are just that, *proposals*. Nothing has been finalized, yet,” Roland said as he glanced at August for confirmation.

“Indeed,” August said as he rose from behind his desk and walked around it to look Minerva in the eye properly, “I doubt that Sultan Harun or Queen Andraste would come to my aid, anyway. Andraste is still fighting the Han in the east, and Rashid has his own succession issues to deal with right now.”

The Prince gave a deep sigh as the anger he felt began to drain out of him.

“I was merely suggesting that we open diplomatic communications with the two. We don’t hold the capital, so *we’re* the rebels right now. If we were to get the acknowledgment of two fellow monarchs, though, it would go a long way toward increasing my legitimacy.”

Minerva frowned. The Bull Kingdom was relatively isolated, and its people weren’t the most diplomatically-minded out of those in the Aeterna. She doubted that foreign acknowledgments would sway many minds in August’s favor, but she remained silent until August was finished.

“I need more soldiers, more warriors, more *everything*,” the Prince continued. “We have a large army, but the reports I’ve been getting from the capital have me extremely concerned.”

"What reports?" Minerva demanded, since no such reports had been shared with the rest of the command staff at Ironford. As far as she knew, even the two most important nobles on August's side, Marquis Herrenia of Ironford and Marquis Aeneas of Aventino, had been briefed fully on the situation. As far as anyone was aware, they didn't have enough informants in the capital to have a good idea of how big Octavius' army was.

"Publius UMBER reached out to me a few days ago to inform me of some troubling news," August explained. "Octavius has imprisoned hundreds of nobles working in the Legions and the government who came from eastern families. He's purged thousands more who were of common heritage, leaving many of his Legions with few commanders and the palace with little more than a skeleton crew to keep things moving. He's also informed me of Octavius' numbers."

August then handed Minerva another piece of paper, and everyone in the room watched as her look of anger quickly warped into a scowl as she read the report.

As calmly as he could, August said, "We're outnumbered more than two to one. We need to find allies. That's what I was doing." August turned to Leon next, and continued, "I was actually hoping you could help me out in that regard, Sir Ursus. You've told me before that you can get me the support of the stone giants in the Border Mountains. How certain are you of this?"

"There is no doubt in my mind that they would come if I were to call upon them," Leon confidently replied.

"Then I am going to send you and your retinue east to do just that," August said.

"... So I'm *not* going north?" Leon asked, his stoic face slightly shifting into a brief expression of surprise and disappointment.

"No. I'm sure you could do a lot of good up there even though you won't let me use your name, but no matter what tactical boons you could provide, your strategic uses are far too great to ignore. Bring me those giants."

Leon froze at the mention of his name and uncontrollably released a few strands of killing intent, but once August was finished, Leon slowly nodded his agreement.

"I assume the stone giants will be welcomed better than Talfar or Samar warriors, Dame Minerva?" August asked.

"... I can't say for certain," Minerva answered, still obviously not in agreement.

"I would say the same," Brimstone added. "The eastern Lords won't be too happy about this development. They've fought the stone giants for millennia, and to see them suddenly invited into the Kingdom so soon after securing peace won't be taken well."

"I'll speak with the nobles," August said. "Many of them have family members now held hostage by Octavius. Things will be rough for a little while when the stone giants arrive, but if we free these prisoners, then I doubt the nobles will make too big of a fuss. It helps, too, that I'm not sending their knights and men-at-arms to die in the west."

“So long... so long as it’s only the giants, I can live with that,” Minerva growled through her teeth. It clearly didn’t sit well with her, but their strategic situation was just that bad. She had to compromise here and there, and she trusted Leon. “I don’t like losing Ursus, though.”

The group continued to speak for a few more minutes, but they had offensives to plan and not much time to do it in. It had been two months, after all, and Octavius’ armies were undoubtedly already on the move. If they wanted to beat those armies to their objectives, then they’d have to move even faster.

—

Leon breathed deeply of the cool mountain air. He was far away from the nearest major city, with only Valeria, Alix, Anzu, and Lapis for company. Despite the history between their families, Leon found himself relaxing more and more around Valeria, such that even this time with only her and Alix around for human companionship wasn’t that bad. The need to seek revenge for his father still burned in his heart, but the more time he spent around her, the more he trusted her and the more he thought of her as something akin to a friend.

And he had no idea how to reconcile that with the fact that her father was undoubtedly his enemy.

But such things weren’t even on his mind right now. He simply enjoyed the rough mountain landscape of the Eastern Territories, feeling right at home. The five were on their way to the Crater Tribe to recruit them into August’s faction.

Minerva, Roland, Brimstone, and their Legions moved out of Ironford shortly before Leon and the others did, bound for the Northern and Southern Territories. Leon was a bit upset that he was missing those campaigns since he wanted to be there for every blow they struck against Octavius, but since he was doing something he wanted to do, he wasn’t too broken up about it. He cheered himself up immensely by imagining the face Octavius or Earthshaker might make if he were ever to directly face them in battle with hundreds of sixth-tier equivalent stone giants at his back.

They stopped to rest several times on their journey eastward, though not too frequently. Alix slowed them down a bit, being only third-tier, but Leon wasn’t shy about letting her ride Anzu so that they could speed up their pace a bit. Anzu’s feelings were a bit more mixed, but he was starting to get used to acting as a war mount and wasn’t quite so averse to the idea of Leon’s friends riding on his back as he had been.

Moving like this, the group covered more than a hundred miles every day, stopping when rest was needed, but usually sleeping out in the wild with Lapis watching over them. They reached the western edge of the Border Mountains in only five days.

“Do you know the way from here?” Leon asked Lapis as the ground of gray stone and brown soil started to give way to clumps of black hexagonal basalt pillars.

“It won’t be too hard to find my people,” Lapis confidently replied.

“That’s good to hear,” Leon said. “Otherwise, I might’ve had to scout a bit on Anzu.”

“I wouldn’t recommend that, Leon,” Lapis warned. “Other griffins call these mountains home, and more besides. To fly through the air here would be to invite disaster.”

“Oh,” Leon said, a little disheartened. “Then I’m *very* glad that you know the way.”

Leon and Lapis carried on like this for a little longer, mostly discussing the threats in the mountains as Lapis knew them. The stone giants were the most attention-grabbing inhabitants of the mountains given their tribal organization and frequent violent clashes with the Bull Kingdom’s citizens, but they were by no means the most powerful; griffins, trolls, river nymphs, and rock salamanders could all individually grow powerful enough to pose serious threats to stone giants. Sometimes even manticores and wyverns could make their way into the mountains, beasts with enough power to immediately rise to the top of the local food chain.

Behind them, the conversation between Alix and Valeria was a lot less serious.

“I hate the mountains,” Alix muttered as the group kept ascending the gentle slope into the Border Mountains.

“Why?” Valeria asked.

“Too rocky,” Alix said with a cheeky smile. “Give me a good, flat, grassy plain any day over these gods-forsaken mountains. Better yet, give me a city where I can find a place to play cards, get some drinks, maybe go out dancing...”

“Hmm. I’ve rarely spent time in mountains...” Valeria murmured a bit absent-mindedly.

“Really? Isn’t your family supposed to be rich, your father being an Exarch and all? Don’t rich people go on vacations to exotic locations all the time?”

Valeria flinched a bit at the mention of her father—she still hadn’t received any word from him, and while she did her best not to let it show, it did weigh heavily on her mind. But she didn’t blame Alix for asking, and answered, “We didn’t get out much. When I was young, almost all of my time was spent either in Calabria or in the capital. In these past few months I’ve seen more of the Bull Kingdom than I ever did in my entire life before.”

“Oh...” Alix whispered, her tone shifting to one of sympathy and guilt for bringing up something that she was only now realizing was putting Valeria in a bad mood. “I’m sorry for bringing all of this up, I—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Valeria said. “It is what it is. I’m getting out and about now, and that’s what matters. At least I didn’t grow up being literally stuck on a single estate like Princess Cristina...”

“Yeah... I think I’d go crazy if I were stuck somewhere like that, no matter how luxurious it is... Then again, I’ve never lived in a palace before, so I can’t say that with certainty.”

“It’s not what it’s cracked up to be,” Valeria said. “You don’t have to worry about certain things, for sure, but especially for Princesses, you’re expected to act a certain way—at least, that’s what I’ve gathered from listening to Cristina’s complaints. Besides, it wasn’t just her there, she lived with the King’s entire harem. Hundreds of women, none of them with children, most of them jealous of her position. As far as I’m aware, Asiya and I were the only friends she’s made in her entire life.”

“That’s so sad...” Alix mumbled, unable to really comprehend being in a situation where the only friends she could make were her own guards.

"She's out of that place now, and she's doing a lot better," Valeria said. "She seems to have made friends with some of Marquis Herrenia's daughters, and she and I still spend a lot of time together."

"All's well that ends well, I guess," Alix said, not quite believing her own words.

"Can I ask you a question, Dame Alix?"

"Oh! Uh, sure, and you can just call me Alix." Alix knew for a fact that she'd told this to Valeria before, but the silver-haired woman could be unfailingly formal at times, and it drove Alix a bit nuts.

"Could I ask you about why you're here?"

"Huh?" Alix responded, unsure if she should be insulted or not.

"I mean... why are you following Leon so... *enthusiastically*? And to such a place as the home of the stone giants?"

Alix was silent for a long moment before she answered. "... Leon and I met under some pretty extreme circumstances, you know that." Valeria nodded. "I suppose we just... I don't know... bonded over that incident. Leon was almost killed by Hakon Fire-Beard. We were both almost killed during that siege and everything that led up to it. And when he left, he asked for me to come with. I couldn't bring myself to stay, so I left with him." Alix glanced up at Leon's back, not too far away but still conversing with Lapis and not paying the two ladies behind him much attention right now. "I think that when all of that was over, we both kind of clung to one another for a while, as friends who bonded over a shared time of struggle.

"And that's it, that's why I'm still here. We're friends, and I can confidently say that we'd kill for each other. Do I need any other reason?"

Valeria lightly frowned as she thought about her own reasons for following Leon. "No," she admitted after a few moments of quiet thought. "No, you don't."

—

Guided by Lapis, the group moved quickly through the mountains, using paths and tunnels that the giants had made to travel quickly and safely through their lands. Along the way, they passed by a number of other stone giant settlements that Lapis wanted to check in with, but none were even close to the size of the Crater Tribe.

Seven days after leaving Ironford, Leon and company finally arrived at the crater that had lent its name to the Crater Tribe. It was rough going, and both Leon and Anzu had chafed a bit being stuck to the ground. Now that both could fly, both *always* wanted to fly, but Leon followed Lapis' advice and kept both himself and Anzu firmly on land.

The crater itself hadn't changed much in the years since Leon had last been there. The walls of the crater were still peppered with the vast entrances to the giant-sized trapezoidal doorways, the maze that covered the crater floor was still there, and the Cradle hadn't been rebuilt. Here and there a few giants were going about whatever business they had, but the crater still seemed a bit bereft of inhabitants—which wasn't too surprising since the crater hadn't seemed too crowded the last time Leon had been here.

They emerged into the crater from a tunnel, walking out onto one of the platforms that acted as roads leading up and down the crater walls, connecting each giant cave to each other. They were about a third of the way up from the bottom.

"We're finally here..." Alix muttered as she followed the others onto the platform. "I have to admit, I never thought we'd return."

"Why not?" Leon asked.

"They almost killed you the last time we were here, I figured that whatever promises they made, it wasn't going to be worth coming back," Alix admitted.

Leon nodded in understanding. "That's valid, I suppose. Hopefully we won't get into too much trouble this time around."

"I think that's all on you," Alix said, shooting Leon a cheeky smile.

As they spoke, Lapis walked to the edge of the platform and, to the surprise of the other four, slammed its hands together in a thunderous clap that resounded throughout the entire crater.

Reeling from the sound of the clap, Leon loudly exclaimed, "What the hells?!"

Lapis didn't respond, and instead seemed to vibrate with earth magic, sending the vibrations deep into the basalt walls.

Valeria almost pulled her glaive off her back, only refraining when Leon told everyone to wait. Anzu, meanwhile, was terrified, and protectively wrapped his body around Leon while glaring at Lapis.

Once its vibrations were finished, though, the giant simply stood there at the edge of the platform, completely unmoving. If Leon didn't know better, he could've easily mistaken Lapis for a statue.

A few seconds later, another round of vibrations came from somewhere below, closer to the crater floor. It was only after these vibrations stopped that Lapis moved again, turning back around to face Leon and saying, "Rakos know

Chapter 416: Allegiances

As soon as Leon and his party entered Rakos' palatial home, it became clear that something was wrong. Piles of stone were scattered around the main hall like rubble, and dozens of giants were frozen like statues around them. Some of these stone giant corpses seemed to Leon's eyes to have been violently destroyed.

"What happened here...?" Leon quietly wondered aloud.

"Likely a beast attack," Lapis nonchalantly explained. "As I said before, we are not the apex species living in these mountains, though we are, perhaps, the most prosperous. However, it is also about time for reproduction, the schedule for which I assume was moved up following the casualties taken by whatever battle was fought here not too long ago."

"You don't sound very worried about it," Leon observed.

“There were clearly casualties, but no catastrophic damage. The crater hasn’t suffered damage. There is nothing to be worried about unless Rakos says there is.”

Leon sighed. The sight of so many dead giants was unnerving, to say the least, and for Valeria and Alix, neither of whom spoke giant and so couldn’t understand Lapis, the feeling wasn’t exclusive to him. They unconsciously closed ranks and their hands reached for their weapons, while Anzu lowered his center of gravity until it almost looked like he was prowling rather than simply walking around.

None of the intact giants so much as looked at their group, though, which was almost as unsettling as seeing so many of their fallen kin. Leon’s group of five were the only moving figures throughout the entirety of the massive hall.

When they reached the main audience chamber, Lapis wasted no time on formal ceremony and pushed the doors open. The giants standing watch beside the doors didn’t move so much as a single pebble as the group walked into the chamber.

The spacious room was crowded with hundreds of giants, all in similar poses as those in the hall around clumps of black and grey stone. None of these piles, at least, seemed to have been torn apart in violent manners. Each clump had about four or five giants surrounding it, staring down at it as intently as a mother bird watching her eggs hatch.

The only exceptions in the entire room apart from Leon’s group were three stone giants standing in front of the throne carved from black trap rock pillars, the wall behind them sparkling with polished granite. The largest and most powerful Leon easily recognized as Rakos, with its body studded entirely with tiny rubies. Another was the short and thin giant chief that used the crystal embedded in its hand that gave Leon his understanding of giant language. The last giant was of similar size and build to Lapis, whom Leon assumed took over Lapis’ duties after Lapis itself departed the crater with Leon.

“DIVINE ONE, LAPIS, YOU TWO HAVE RETURNED,” Rakos quaked, the ground subtly vibrating beneath their feet in time with its words.

“We have,” Leon replied, “though, if this is a bad time, we can wait...”

“NONSENSE!” Rakos roared, its voice shaking the entire chamber. **“IT IS FOR YOU TO MAKE US WAIT, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND! TELL ME, WHY HAVE YOU RETURNED, HAVE YOU SOME NEED OF OUR POWER?”**

“I do...” Leon said as he glanced over at Lapis. Rakos hadn’t acknowledged any of Leon’s other companions, and only barely did so for Lapis, which Leon found rather strange. However, those questions could come later, and right now he needed to move fast. He quickly summarized August’s request for aid as succinctly as he could.

“IS IT YOUR WISH THAT WE MARCH TO WAR AGAINST THIS ‘OCTAVIUS’?” Rakos asked.

Leon briefly considered spouting off some nonsense about how he wasn’t giving them any orders and that he merely wished to have the honor of fighting at their side against his enemy, but he ended up deciding against that.

‘These giants won’t say no, not to me. I hope,’ he thought to himself.

Out loud, he simply said, “Yes, that is my wish.”

“THEN SO IT SHALL BE,” Rakos rumbled. **“FOR THE DIVINE ONE, FOR THE HEIR OF THE GODS, WE SHALL GO TO WAR.”**

—

Leon and the others—save for Lapis—were shown to the same quarters that Leon and Alix stayed in during their first stay. What few pieces of furniture were there were far too big for anyone to use, but the four got settled in as best they could.

They didn’t know how long they’d be in the crater, but given what seemed to be going on, Leon wasn’t too optimistic that they’d be leaving any time soon. Rakos had explained that they were currently in the midst of reproducing, something that made Leon feel more than a bit uncomfortable, but since neither Rakos nor Lapis seemed to care, he decided to put it as out of mind as was possible and wait for them to finish up.

What was worse, though, was that monster attacks had intensified lately, leading the giants to take a significant number of casualties defending their crater. The chief culprits were griffins, who had just entered their own mating season, leading to the previous generation—Anzu’s generation, in fact—to be kicked out of their nests and sent to find their own way in the world.

This meant that the giants had been weathering griffin attacks for the better part of a year and losing a few giants every week. Fortunately, the giants didn’t seem to be taking the losses too personally, and Anzu was as welcome in Rakos’ hall as Leon was. Or perhaps it was because Anzu was Leon’s war beast, it didn’t really matter to Leon and he didn’t press too hard as to why they weren’t hostile to his griffin.

With all of that in mind, Leon didn’t think he’d be bringing nearly as many giants back to the Kingdom as he had hoped for, though Rakos had still assured him that they would honor their oath and aid him to the best of their ability. Actually, Rakos had gone further than that, claiming that every giant would be honored to give their lives in Leon’s service, but Leon wasn’t nearly as comfortable accepting that oath as they were in making it. He wanted to march their warriors to war, not to uproot their entire civilization.

Once the group was finished getting their tents and bedrolls set up in the cavernous guest room—Valeria and Alix’s were more traditional tents, while Leon’s was large and open, allowing Anzu to cuddle up next to him while they waited—Valeria and Alix walked over to join Leon.

“I have to admit, I didn’t think this would go so smoothly, regardless of what you claimed,” Valeria confessed to Leon as she sat down on the thick fur rugs that made up the floor of Leon’s tent.

“I... had my doubts as well,” Alix admitted.

“I don’t blame either one of you,” Leon said, “I wasn’t too confident that they’d join us, either. I mean, Lapis’ loyalty is one thing, but their entire tribe? I’m still a little bit in shock that they’re willing to go so far.”

“I am, too,” Valeria said. “Is there some reason why they’re so loyal to you?”

Leon hesitated to explain, given who he was talking to. He trusted Valeria to watch his back in battle, but that didn't mean he trusted her with his secrets. He didn't even think that they were close enough yet for him to start trying to get more information about her family out of her.

Alix wasn't too clear on the details either, at least as far as he was aware, but she did know enough to make Leon nervous about her speaking up first, and certainly enough to call him on any egregious lies he might try to tell. Hells, he hadn't even told her what was and wasn't important to keep secret about that day, given just how many other people had been witnesses to it, and he wasn't even sure if he should bring it up with her in private or not.

'I probably should...' Leon thought to himself as he fought the urge to scowl in annoyance. He knew that having Valeria near him would be risky, so he could hardly complain at this point.

"I'm not too sure," Leon answered. "I just broke one of their buildings, and I guess it endeared me to them somehow...?"

"You did also spar with Lapis," Alix reminded him. "I always thought that they appreciated your strength?"

"If strength was all they were after, then they wouldn't have followed *me* back then," Leon mused aloud. "In the end, it doesn't matter too much; they follow me, and that's enough."

"I... will keep my eyes open anyway," Valeria said as she cast her eyes back toward the door of their guest room. Just as she said this, Leon felt a huge rush of magic in the air wash through the entirety of the palatial cave.

Seizing on the chance to change the subject, Leon pointedly stared at the door with a curious look on his face. A moment later, a confused and curious Valeria felt the same wave of power, and Alix only a moment after her.

Leon rose to his feet, wanting to see what was happening. He could hear the sounds of the giants beginning to move as he approached the door, and the sounds of Valeria and Alix following him. Anzu remained in the tent, fast asleep, only moving enough to take more room now that the humans were gone.

To Leon, and only to Leon, what the three found outside was something akin to a horror show. Every giant corpse in the hall had been surrounded by no less than four giants, each of whom had extended their massive hands toward the corpses. Lightning erupted from their hands, sinking deep into the stone of the corpses, and as the three watched, the corpses began to move.

These movements were small at first, but as the surging magic power in the room began to concentrate above them and flow into the corpses, their movements became faster, smoother, and more powerful. Only five minutes after Leon first detected a change in the air, the first giant corpse stood up, looking little different from any other giant. And then the second rose, and then a third.

In all, about thirty percent of the giant corpses rose to their feet, while the rest simply stopped moving as the magic in the air became exhausted.

"Are they... bringing their dead back to life...?" Alix wondered aloud.

[Heh. Not a chance,] said Xaphan from Leon's soul realm.

[What's wrong, demon? Get bored?] Leon sarcastically asked.

Ignoring Leon's question, Xaphan said, [It looks like these stone giants are animated with lightning wisps. Funny, I would never have thought that just from looking at them. I had thought they were earth wisps or simply something that I'd never seen before...]

This sounded somewhat familiar to Leon; as Xaphan had explained to him before, a wisp was essentially an autonomous 'chunk' of magic power that a terrifically powerful mage could use to animate otherwise inanimate objects, like the golems in the archives beneath Teira. The stone giants had been around so long they became self-aware and more alive than those golems, though.

[See anything else interesting?] Leon asked.

[Those aren't risen giants,] Xaphan answered, [the giants don't really depend on their stony forms to live, which is why your little Bull buddies have so much trouble killing them. Those 'corpses' are the equivalent of discarded clothing for the giants. They're making new giants to fill those shells.]

[Ah,] Leon said. [And for those that aren't rising, I'm guessing there simply isn't enough power in the air to create more wisps?]

[Now there's a surprise, you said something mildly intelligent that I don't feel terrible about agreeing with,] Xaphan replied, his tone smug and provocative.

Leon bitterly smiled and turned his attention back to the rest of the giants, though they didn't seem to be doing much. Then again, he didn't think he should expect much of the 'newborns', even if they were the same size as their 'parents'—assuming those terms even applied in this situation. Those around the lifeless corpses went right back to standing motionless over them, apparently waiting for enough ambient magic to gather in the crater for them to try again.

The giants gathered around their newborns and seemed to freeze in place, trapping the new giants between themselves. They didn't move again, and neither did the newborns, so after a couple seconds, Leon's attention turned back to the ladies at his side. More specifically, he turned to the source of his initial horror at seeing the giants using lightning: Valeria. He wanted to see her reaction, and whether or not he ought to be concerned.

Valeria seemed somewhat interested, but not too engaged with what was happening. She didn't have nearly as much investment as Leon did with the giants, and so she observed her surroundings with the usual detachment that she did everything else.

Or, at least that's how it seemed to Leon. It didn't seem like any of this seemed suspicious to her, so after a few seconds, he turned his gaze away as relief coursed through him.

He didn't see Valeria's eyes momentarily turn in his direction a second later full of curiosity, wonder, and a hint of suspicion.

Chapter 417: Decision and Indecision

It was, in Valeria's mind, a strange mystery. Why were the giants so willing to follow Leon? It seemed so strange, so illogical, that after thousands of years fighting against the Bull Kingdom, they would suddenly

capitulate to the first Valeman they encountered who gave them a good fight—at least, that’s how it was explained to her.

The truth, she suspected, was much more complicated than that, even if she could understand forming a bond with someone after a good fight.

The spectacle of seeing the giants reproduce only added to Valeria’s suspicions, though. No matter how much she wanted to trust Leon, no matter how much she pushed those thoughts out of her head, they kept coming back, and each time they were harder to ignore.

There was just *something* there that she was missing, whether on purpose or not, and the longer she ignored it, the louder it became.

Following the giants’ reproduction ritual or whatever it was, Leon, Alix, and Valeria stuck around for a little bit longer, just watching. However, the giants did nothing else, and so the three eventually returned to the guest room to relax and prepare for the return journey. However, as Leon and Alix settled in for an early night, Valeria found herself tossing and turning in her tent. She just couldn’t shake the notion that there was something *wrong* here, and she had to find out what it was.

After a couple hours of restlessness, Valeria eventually rose from her bedroll and left her tent. She needed to get some air, and she was more than certain at this point that the crater was safe, so there was no need to wake the others. It was easy enough to see that Leon was fast asleep with Anzu curled up next to him, protectively covering most of the young man with a wing. The sight alone brought a smile to Valeria’s normally stoic face, despite her current mood. A quick glance and a moment taken to listen showed that Alix was similarly out in her tent.

Valeria took one last look at Leon before she made for the door and slipped out into the massive hall as quietly as she could.

Outside, the sight of hundreds of unmoving stone giants sent tremors of fear and anxiety running through her, and she couldn’t help but doubt her conviction that the crater was safe. However, it wasn’t enough to get her to turn around, and she began to hesitantly walk down the hall toward the door leading back out into the crater. She needed some air, and she hadn’t yet been convinced to turn back around.

She made it to the door unscathed; in fact, none of the giants so much as twitched, and over the long walk, she calmed down significantly.

Once outside, she found herself completely alone. There were no giants outside; it seemed they were all still inside Rakos’ hall for their reproduction rituals.

Valeria began to absent-mindedly walk along the edge of the basalt maze, thinking over everything she’d seen during the past day. Lightning. Inexplicable loyalty. Leon. His father was killed by Adrianos.

She knew what all of that could mean if put together in a certain way, but she refused to do so. If she did, it could make Leon her enemy—or at least the target of her family. Valeria knew why they were here on Aeterna. To get her mother back, Lord Kamran had sent Justin and his small family to kill the child of one of his enemies. There could be no returning to the Nexus until that happened.

‘No...’ she thought to herself, *‘there has to be another explanation...’*

As Valeria continued to walk, she found herself moving away from the maze and toward the stairs and ramps leading up to the platforms and walkways along the crater walls.

'On this plane, why would beings of elemental lightning submit themselves completely to a northern barbarian?' the logical side of her wanted to know. *'If Leon is a descendant of House Raime, of the Thunderbird, then that could explain it...'*

Again, Valeria dismissed the possibility as quickly as she could. However, this time, it simply wouldn't go away. The thought lingered in her mind, elevating her heart rate and causing her to begin to sweat in anxiety.

By the time she reached the lowest platforms, she had all-but convinced herself that Leon was exactly the person that her father had been sent to Aeterna to kill. The last shred of doubt in her mind vanished when she glanced out at the pile of rubble in the center of the crater. Her fourth-tier eyes were more than enough for her to see the remains of the Cradle, including a few statues of raptors, which now that she was thinking about it, were unmistakably depicting the Thunderbird.

Everything just fell into place, and now that it had, it all seemed so painfully obvious.

The only question now was what would she do about it, aside from confronting Leon. She knew for a fact that she'd be unable to kill him in a straight fight, and neither did she think she'd be able to kill him in his sleep. Even with her suspicion, she didn't even think she'd be able to kill him at all.

Her father was also still missing. Had he still been around, she would've had the option to consult with him—not that she would've taken it. And the more she thought about it, she remembered a few times when Justin had asked her a few leading questions about Leon.

'Did he know?!' Valeria angrily wondered. *'Where are you, Father? Why did you leave?!'*

Her legs felt weak and it was all she could do to not collapse in despair. She'd never met her mother, her father was gone, and she'd lost her position in the Royal Guard. Despite Adrianos killing his father, Leon—and Elise—had offered a purpose and a place in their home when she most needed it.

She couldn't kill Leon. She could barely even fathom making the attempt, let alone following through with it.

Valeria stood on that platform for what felt like days, staring out at the ruins of the Cradle, wondering why she felt that way. She'd never really considered it before, and up until now, she hadn't realized just how strong her feelings were. Until now, she was also content to live with her feelings and not do anything with them.

But now, with what she knew in her heart to be true, that Leon Ursus was actually Leon Raime, she had to confront herself over these feelings.

Valeria was a martially-minded woman. She loved to fight and to spar; for her, she was never truly relaxed without a weapon in hand and magic coursing through her veins. In that respect, it was easy for her to see why she liked Leon: his swordplay was mesmerizing, his bow rarely missed, and his power was intense. There were almost no wasted movements in his fighting style, and it was clear to her that he cared a great deal about his skills in battle.

Her feelings went deeper than that, though, for Valeria was noble and had grown up around people who could be described in much the same way. However, most of those people didn't have Leon's humility, and fewer still had the same passion for anything that he did for his other work. She had seen him at work in his enchanting workshop, and if anything, the sight of him scribbling runes onto a sheet of paper was even more enchanting to her than seeing him train with blade in hand.

No, she couldn't kill him, and she let loose with a deep sigh as she came to terms with that fact. And she couldn't tell her father, either, even if he were still available for her to tell.

The only thing she had left to figure out was if she should confront him about her knowledge—or rather, if she were being charitable, her *suspicion*.

'Not yet...' she thought to herself. She wanted to enjoy what little they had for a while longer. When she did confront him, she knew that everything would change. She couldn't kill him, but she couldn't say if he felt the same way about her...

—

When morning came, the stone giants had barely moved. It was explained to them that the entire reproduction period for stone giants could last for months, and even though they were well into it, they were likely not even close to being finished. Leon couldn't wait, though, but neither could he ask the giants to drop what they were doing to march off to war. He got the feeling that Rakos would probably agree if he were to ask them to do so, but still, it wasn't something he was comfortable doing.

In the end, he led his group back west with what could be spared; one hundred stone giants ranging from fifth to the sixth-tier were at his back, including Lapis. In fact, Leon had already made sure that Lapis was known as their commander. Their force of one hundred stone giants had gotten quite a few nervous and terrified looks from the villages and towns they passed—especially in Aventino, but Marquis Aeneas had issued the requisite orders so that they wouldn't be stopped by the guards—not once did violence break out.

Throughout the journey back west, though, he caught Valeria giving him strange looks when she thought he wasn't paying any attention to her. Few of those looks were ever the same; some were apprehensive while some were downright fearful. On the other hand, sometimes she looked at him with a kind of passion that reminded him strongly of Elise when she wanted to drag him to bed, while other times Valeria seemed far more thoughtful.

Leon honestly had no idea what to make of this other than that things were probably coming together in her head. She wasn't stupid, he knew that, and seeing the giants using some kind of lightning magic undoubtedly tipped her off to some things that Leon didn't quite want her to know just yet.

On the other hand, the possibility that she had found out wasn't entirely terrible to him, and one that a part of him hoped had happened. He didn't know how to deal with her, so if she made the decision first, then it would make his job easier.

That, too, carried heavy risks, but if he weren't willing to take those risks, he never would've brought Valeria to the crater in the first place.

'At least she doesn't seem violent...' Leon thought to himself after musing over her unusual behavior. He was ready for her to try and kill him, and he was surprised and rather happy when she never once made the attempt.

So, for days he endured these looks as he tried to figure out a way to address them in a way that wouldn't seem threatening or particularly suspicious. Eventually, when they were still about a day or so from Ironford, Leon decided to just ask her what was bothering her and see if he could clear up any ambiguity.

"Hey..." Leon awkwardly said as he fell back a bit from the front of their marching column. Valeria had been walking directly behind him, with Anzu and Alix behind her, then Lapis and the rest of the giants behind them.

"Hey," Valeria replied with her standard neutral tone and stoic expression. She seemed so normal that Leon almost decided to just stop right there and chalk up the strange looks as his imagination, and he just barely managed to force himself to press on.

"I, uh, couldn't help but notice something," he said as he looked everywhere except at Valeria.

'By my Ancestors, I'm terrible at this...' he thought, mentally scolding himself for his awkwardness.

"What did you notice?" she politely asked.

"You've been looking at me strangely since the crater," he explained, finally glancing up to look her in the eye for a split second before averting his gaze again. "I just wanted to check in with you since you seem... I don't know... more distant than usual?"

"Do you think I'm distant?" Valeria unexpectedly asked, flashing Leon a quick smile that surprised him so much he almost tripped over his own feet.

Silently swearing at himself for his reaction and trying not to listen to Xaphan's sudden raucous laughter in his soul realm, he said, "I suppose. Maybe distant isn't the right word... how about 'composed', or 'dignified'?" Valeria's smile grew a bit wider. "Whatever, you seem a bit out of sorts. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Leon," she whispered.

"... Right," he responded. "Well, if you need to talk about anything, don't be afraid to speak up..."

"I won't be," Valeria responded. The two stared at each other as they walked for a little bit longer until Leon finally felt too awkward about the whole affair and sped back up to walk at the front of the column again.

'I hate this...' he thought. *'I should just confront her first, and do it soon, before she gains more power. But if she is still in contact with Justin, then that could backfire terribly... She could easily bring in reinforcements...'*

Wracked with indecisiveness, Leon couldn't come to a conclusion that he felt satisfied with, and above all, wished that he hadn't brought Valeria to the crater in the first place. Or accepted her as his knight. Or met her at all. A big part of him liked her, and that was what brought out his indecision, and he just wanted to forget about all of it.

But a bigger part of him demanded answers and bloody vengeance for his father's murder, and as he grew in power, it was growing more insistent. These two parts of him weren't quite at war in his head, yet, but he felt like the longer he was in contact with Valeria, the more intense that conflict was going to become.

He sighed as he realized that, despite needing to come to a proper, final decision about where he and Valeria stood, it would not be made on this day. But putting all of that behind him—at least for the time being—wasn't nearly so easy, for the demon within him was still laughing like a madman.

[Find that funny, did you?] Leon asked Xaphan.

In between gasps for air, Xaphan replied, [Ah... yes... that was... amazing!]

[Good. That's what I'm here for, I suppose, to entertain you,] Leon said sarcastically.

[Oh don't be like that, boy. You did fine. In your own way, of course. Could someone else have done it better? Of course, but you're not them. Do what you can and deal with what you can't.]

[Huh... that almost sounded... *deep*!] Leon cried in faux-surprise. [Are *you* doing all right, Xaphan? Because making crude comments and talking big to mask your fragile ego is more your speed...]

[I am old and wise, young human. So, you should listen to me in all things. Everything I say has a purpose, whether you're smart enough to see it or not.]

[Uh huh. Sure. So that light enchantment that does nothing but change colors was part of some grand purpose?]

[Yes!]

[Really?]

[Obviously. Ugh, it's painful how much of this is flying over your pitiful human head.]

[How about this then, demon? Oh, great and mighty Xaphan, Lord of Flame and demon among demons! Enlighten this young and foolish human who could not see what was so obviously paraded before him!] Leon's words dripped with sarcasm and mockery, but Xaphan didn't mind. He already had his answer ready, and it came immediately.

[The purpose was for my amusement. No greater purpose can there be than to entertain me.]

Leon groaned, and the two bickered good-naturedly for a little while longer. For what it was, Leon actually enjoyed it. He knew that as soon as he and the group returned to Ironford, it would be back to war, and it was good to get in these moments when he could.

Especially when they distracted him from his more *personal* issues.

Chapter 418: Immediate Deployment

There was no time for Leon and the others to rest once they reached Ironford. A group of one hundred stone giants was hard to miss, especially with so many panicked messengers from eastern towns and villages bringing word of their march west, and so when Leon arrived at the eastern gates of Ironford, a runner had been sent by August to bring him directly to the palace for a debrief.

Walking into the palace, Leon found that the entire place was practically jumping with excitement, and not the good kind. Assistants, lower-ranked soldiers, and secretaries were running every which way, carrying stacks of papers with harried looks about them. As Leon walked further toward August's offices, he found the level of activity only increasing.

"Ah! Sir Leon!" cried someone from amongst the hordes of scurrying assistants. At the sound of their voice, however, the crowds parted, revealing Publius, the King's Spymaster. He was standing off in an alcove near August's personal office apparently waiting for his turn to speak with the Prince.

"Sir Publius!" Leon exclaimed in surprise.

Publius walked over with a beaming smile on his face. "It's good to see a familiar face!" he said as he clapped the younger man on the shoulder. "How have you been? I've heard you arrived with hundreds of giants at your back!"

"I suppose that's accurate to say, though it's only 'hundred' singular, not 'hundreds' plural."

"Oh. That's still hardly a shame, I'm sure that Prince August will be—"

"Sir Leon!" August shouted from the doorway to his office. "And Sir Publius! Please, both of you, come in!"

Leon and Publius walked into August's office where a few of the Prince's secretaries were clearing out some documents on his desk.

"Your Highness..." Leon hesitantly said while glancing meaningfully at the secretaries.

"Oh?" August said in momentary confusion. "Right, sorry. It's a bit hard to remember that you've been gone two weeks given everything that's been going on lately."

"Good stuff?" Leon asked, though, given the way everyone else he'd seen in the palace had been acting, he wasn't too hopeful for a positive answer.

"Uh, you could say that, I guess," August replied, though his tone indicated that the truth was more complicated. "On paper, we've been doing very well..." The Prince trailed off a bit as he waited for his secretaries to leave, but once they were gone and the door was closed, he seemed to deflate and collapsed into a nearby chair. "Minerva and Brimstone successfully occupied most of the Great Plateau," the Prince explained. "All that's left is to take Clear Ice Fortress, and Brimstone has already put it so siege."

"What's the problem, then?" Leon asked.

"I may know," Publius offered. "I'm assuming this has to do with recent events in the capital?"

August nodded.

"I thought so," Publius continued, giving the Prince a nod of solidarity. Leon, however, stared at him, silently awaiting an explanation. "Much has happened in the past month, Sir Ursus," Publius said. "Sir Arellius has been relieved of command of the 2nd Legion, and the only reason they didn't immediately rebel or desert is that the Earthshaker Paladin has been keeping an eye on the rest of the Legion knights commanding them."

"Where is Sir Arellius now?" Leon asked. He remembered the lightning mage who commanded the 2nd Legion rather fondly, even if he didn't conduct himself as well as he would've liked in their brief duel.

"I'm not sure," Publius replied, eliciting a look of extreme skepticism from Leon. "I've been relieved of my post, as have many more of my colleagues. The Chancellor is now Countess Floriana of Lindinis, while Duke Decimius has been made the Steward. Sir Avidius was also relieved of his post as Consul of the Central Territories after the failure to take Ironford, and was summarily replaced by Duke Duronius of Valentia, Prince Octavius' maternal grandfather."

"Is that even legal? I thought that landed nobles weren't allowed to hold such high offices," Leon asked.

"No, but Octavius secured a special dispensation from the advisory council," Publius said.

"Who replaced you?" Leon inquired. "And what's going on with the Sapphire Paladin? I can't help but notice that no one's mentioned her, yet."

"Not sure who replaced me, I left before the post was filled. I was the last of King Julius' administration to be let go," Publius replied. "However, the Sapphire Paladin I do know about; she's remaining in the capital at Octavius' side. I don't think she'll move unless something truly devastating to their side happens."

"None of that really matters, now," August said as he straightened up a bit. "Duke Duronius wasted no time organizing Octavius' forces to counter our offensives. Roland down in the Southern Territories managed to halt their attempts to take Ariminium by land, but the fleets are amassing for an obvious attack on the city. What's worse, Roland is outnumbered and has been losing ground to Duronius for several days."

"The new Central Consul is in the south? Why not leave things to the Southern Consul?" Leon asked.

"He's still there, but Octavius gave Duronius overall command," Publius answered.

Leon nodded in thought. "And I take it that all this is why you're preparing to go?" Leon asked as he pointed his thumb over his shoulder toward the door, where the sound of assistants and secretaries hurriedly packing could be heard even through the sound-insulating enchantments of the office.

"That is my plan," August said with an appreciative smile. "I'll be bringing thirty thousand of our noble retainers to reinforce Roland. Marquis Aeneas will be leading the force, but I've decided not to sit by and wait for victory to be won on my behalf. I will ride out with my loyal vassals and fight alongside them."

Leon cocked an eyebrow at the Prince. "I didn't expect that from you, Your Highness, I have to admit."

"Well, I kind of have to do so. The eastern knights almost turned on me when I told them what you were doing, so I'm going to have to go with to show solidarity and improve my relations with the eastern Lords and their knights if I want to keep their loyalty. I can't just order them to march west while I stay here in safety, especially now that you've arrived, and they'll be fighting alongside the very giants that precipitated this crisis."

"So I'm not going north?" Leon asked, the disappointment evident in his voice.

"No, I need you and your giants in the south," August answered, but when Leon pursed his lips a bit and looked more than a bit reluctant, August quickly added, "Of course, if you believe that you would be better assigned back under Minerva in the north, then I... *can* make that happen..."

His jaw stiffened as he spoke those words, showing just how reticent he was to make that offer, and he practically stared at Leon like a puppy about to be abandoned.

"... No, that's fine, I'll go south," Leon said, though he waited a moment to allow the words past his lips. He hadn't actually been planning on defying the Prince's order to go south, especially since he'd been gone for two weeks and wasn't quite up-to-date on the strategic situation. But he didn't like how August had just decided for him to go south when he wanted to go north—he saw it as a perfect opportunity to secure the rest of his family's archives, but given their defenses, he wasn't seriously worried about losing them to this conflict. "There apparently isn't much happening in the north, anyway. Is there?"

"No, no there isn't," August answered, relaxing now that he saw Leon wasn't going to fight him on this deployment.

"When will we be leaving? I would like the opportunity to wash up a bit..." Leon raised his arms a bit to show his relatively dirty clothing, but given that he was at least competent enough in the use of water magic to wash on the go, he wasn't nearly as filthy as he was following the operation against Gaius' army—he hadn't wanted to waste the magic power back then on something so trivial, but when he was on the road, it was no matter.

"Of course, right now it's looking like we'll be marching out in about three hours."

"That should be enough time."

"Wonderful, then I'll see you at the western gates in three hours."

With that, Leon departed the office, leaving August and Publius to have whatever meeting that Publius was waiting for when Leon arrived. He hurried back to where he left the rest of his followers and informed them of the news. Alix and Valeria weren't too happy, but Anzu and Lapis were about ready for anything. The rest of the stone giants, too, had nothing to argue.

And so, Leon, Valeria, and Alix spent their three hours getting what little food they could shovel into their mouths followed by a long bath, and then it was back on the road. August and a number of other very important looking people were waiting for them when they arrived—along with a mass of people outside the walls that Leon knew to be the army August was going to lead to Roland's aid—and Leon noted more than a few sour looks at the sight of a hundred giants walking in a rather disorganized mass behind him.

He might not have cared, but some of these people unable to hide their displeasure were in the fifth and sixth-tiers, so he made sure to note their faces in case they tried to argue against the giants' presence with more than just words.

"Sir Leon!" August called out in greeting, and Leon gave the Prince a stiff bow. Most of the leaders were on horseback, and Leon could see many of the higher-ranking knights were mounted as well; it seemed that this army would have a higher cavalry-to-infantry ratio than he was used to, as much as a third of the entire force if his estimation was accurate.

“Let’s not waste any more time!” August called out as Leon fell in beside the Prince. Most of the leaders bowed to the Prince and scattered to their retinues, while only a single man stayed behind.

Leon easily recognized this man despite having never interacted with him before in any meaningful way; he was the Marquis of Aventino, the father of Marcus Aeneas and the brother of the Legate of the Knight Academy. He was tall and broad-shouldered, though his waist was a bit soft compared to most fit mages that Leon had seen. His hair was a deep brown, he had a strong chin, but a thin face and small nose. The Marquis was handsome in his own way, but he had a more cerebral look about him than being classically pretty or rugged—which Leon found rather appropriate for the head of the House that had quite literally written the most well-known books on basic strategy and military tactics in the Kingdom. For a thousand years, House Aeneas had been keeping the northern stone giants from heavily raiding the Eastern Territories, and in that time, they became one of the most experienced noble families when it came to commanding an army.

“Sir Leon,” he said with a rigid nod of the head. Leon could detect scorn in his eyes, but he was too used to seeing that from higher nobles to care.

“So,” Leon said as he drew parallel with August, “how’s things? Anything else change in the past two weeks that wasn’t mentioned a few hours ago?”

He could feel Aeneas’ gaze boring into his back—possibly for being a Valeman, but Leon also knew that he wasn’t showing August the proper respect and deference that a subordinate ought to. If he held more respect for the noble ceremonies of the Bull Kingdom, he would be behind the Prince, not beside him, and he wouldn’t ask questions so freely.

August, however, didn’t seem to care, and Leon was having too much fun by so publicly flaunting the guidelines for noble behavior to stop for any other reason. The only thing he stopped—and which only exacerbated the issue—was to quickly hop onto Anzu’s back.

“Gaius Tullius was ransomed back to the Duke of Lentia,” August said. “His Grace was actually surprisingly quick to send payment for the release of his younger brother.”

“Ah...” Leon replied as he thought about the young nobleman. He had to admit that after interrogating him, he had started to feel some amount of grudging respect for the soul-crushing duties he had to shoulder while working under Octavius, and a part of him wasn’t too upset that Gaius was so quickly released to go back home. “That’s good to hear. By the way, Your Highness, would you or your people happen to have a pair of horses to spare?”

August cocked an eyebrow at him in confusion; Leon already had Anzu, so August was momentarily at a loss as to why he was asking. But then Leon gave him a meaningful look and glanced backward at Valeria and Alix, who were still on foot. Leon hadn’t realized they’d need horses since they were relatively strong mages and didn’t strictly require them to keep up, but it was more a matter of prestige than practicality. He couldn’t very well ride his own war beast and force them to walk.

August nodded in understanding, and in less than five minutes, a pair of spare horses were loaned to Leon’s two knightesses.

During that short time, August and Aeneas struck up a short conversation about the goings-on in the capital, and Leon learned from listening in that the Legate of the Knight Academy had been replaced,

and the Legate that Leon knew from his time in the Academy had been arrested. Aeneas was irate that his brother had been so treated, and even more so because he hadn't even received a request for a ransom. He didn't even know if his brother was still alive.

But that anger paled in comparison to the fact that he hadn't heard from his son in a while, and he feared that Marcus had been arrested as well. The last time he heard about his son, the Legion he'd been assigned to had been moving into the Southern Territories more than a month ago, and then not a word since. It wasn't a stretch for him to assume that Marcus had been taken into custody just as his brother had been.

"We'll get them back, My Lord," August reassured the Marquis. "I can't imagine that Octavius would do anything to them while in captivity, assuming he even has your son. The nobles on his side may see your kin as an affiliate to a rebel Prince, but they're still noble. How Octavius treats them would show the rest of the nobles how much respect he has for their rank and station. I'm sure it will be little more than house arrest at the worst."

"If my brother is not returned to me... If he touches a *single hair* on my son's head..." Aeneas growled, his voice so deep that Leon was almost shocked that it wasn't shaking apart the horse beneath him.

"Octavius has many crimes to pay for, my Lord," August reassured his vassal. "*Many* crimes. He'll be made a head shorter before this war is done, on that you have my word."

Chapter 419: Three Battalions

It wasn't an easy path for August and the reinforcements that accompanied him to reach Roland in the Southern Territories. First, they'd have to march west along the Iron Road, but turn off of it and go south once they passed the castle that had defended the pass from Octavius' Legions months ago. From there, it was backwoods paths and unpaved roads for more than a week before they reached the northeastern edge of the Southern Territories.

Along the way, Leon tried to avoid Marquis Aeneas as much as possible. It was clear enough to him that the nobleman didn't care for him, and by the time they reached the Southern Territories, the feeling had become mutual. But the Marquis was given tactical command of the army—though August still dictated their strategy—and that meant that interacting with him was unavoidable for Leon.

And it was about to become even more so.

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"You don't like my decision?" August asked the Marquis. Both had met in August's tent after the sun had gone down and the army had stopped to make camp. The rest of the command staff had met up about an hour before to hear the reports of the scouts, but since they had been on this path for days, there wasn't much else they needed to iron out, so the meeting was short. There were, however, a few holes in their leadership that could use filling, and August had asked Aeneas to stay a while to discuss how they should go about filling these positions.

Of course, this being a noble army, most of the command structure followed the feudal model, with lower-ranking knights and nobles given less authority, while those of higher ranks granted greater authority. But there were still a few thousand knights and men-at-arms that didn't have a clear

commander between themselves and the command staff, and their inability to choose one from amongst themselves now left the decision up to August and Aeneas.

August had suggested Leon fill that role, making him one of the most powerful people in the entire army, with a full ten percent of the fighting men and women placed under his command.

"I don't, Your Highness," Aeneas responded honestly. The two were alone, so August hadn't felt the need to continue with being overly formal; they were relaxing in comfortable armchairs, and August had asked Aeneas to be completely honest with him.

"Why not?" August asked though he felt like he knew the answer already.

"No barbarian should be placed above our own people, especially not when those are men and women of nobility and good breeding. They won't respond well to being ordered around by a savage, no matter how well he might dress."

"What about to a powerful mage and talented warrior? And what about to the man who not only played a key role in brokering peace between us and the stone giants but also got them to commit a hundred of their giants to our cause," August countered. "Do not forget, my Lord, that Leon is still only twenty years old, and already he's a sixth-tier mage. Does that count for nothing in your considerations? I should think it ought to deserve a great amount of respect, even if you look down upon his heritage."

Aeneas scowled, his thin face contorting in displeasure as he was forced to admit that Leon's power was both real and shocking for someone so young, and while he wasn't thrilled about fighting alongside stone giants, they had been quite peaceful and accommodating during the past week. Still, he had to disagree with his Prince on this matter.

"It's not a question of his power, Your Highness. He's a barbarian, and barbarians are inherently untrustworthy. They hold no loyalty to this Kingdom, no sentiments. From what I've been able to tell about Sir Ursus in this past week, he is no exception to this. How can we trust him to fight with us?"

"My uncle trusted him," August simply stated. "Honestly, that's enough for me. However, I've also interacted with Sir Leon quite a bit more than you, and I think he'll surprise you. He may not have the Kingdom's interests in mind, but he's a good man who, if pressed, possesses a profound sense of right and wrong. He just doesn't have the motivation to display that sense."

"And you think that giving him command of several dozen nobles and their three thousand retainers will be enough for him to suppress his savage nature?"

August grimaced as he fought the momentary urge to tell Aeneas who Leon really was. It wasn't a serious consideration, of course, but he wondered what Aeneas' reaction would be to learn that not only was Leon not a Valeman barbarian, but his 'breeding' was actually superior to that of Aeneas'. "I don't think Leon's as savage as you might think. Valemens have a nobility of their own. Leon Ursus has displayed that to me before, such as when he protected a gladiator from being executed on the whim of my brother."

Trajan had ordered Leon to do that, but August wasn't about to mention that part.

Aeneas didn't seem to be swayed. He still glowered at the thought of giving Leon a place in their hierarchy, regardless of his personal achievements in the magical arts. August could see that, but he

wasn't going to back down. Leon was the last living heir of House Raime, and the day would soon come when he decided to reclaim his birthright—or so August thought. It was best to give Leon some experience and prestige of successfully commanding a sizable unit at war before that happened.

"I understand your concerns, my friend," August said in a conciliatory tone, "but this is something that will only aid us in our endeavor to defeat my traitorous brother. We aren't exactly blessed with high-level mages, anyway."

For a moment, Aeneas stared off at nothing in particular, lost in thought. When he looked back at August, though, his features were set in grudging acceptance.

"I will reserve judgment about the savage. For now."

August nodded in gratitude, not minding the incredibly disrespectful way that Aeneas accepted. The Marquis was a landed noble who lived on the edge of the Bull Kingdom. He was unused to dealing with people higher ranked than he was, and as a landed noble he had certain privileges besides. In fact, August was secretly thrilled that Octavius had been purging the eastern nobles from the courts, for that alone cemented their placement in August's faction; if the Marquis' brother hadn't been arrested or his son hadn't fallen out of contact, August wasn't sure if Aeneas would've fully committed to supporting him.

The two stayed awake a little while longer, discussing battle plans and other knights and minor Lords they could elevate to commanding positions. August made a few concessions for some of Aeneas' friends in return for Aeneas withholding his objections for Leon's appointment.

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Leon stood, utterly stunned, before the Barons and hereditary knights that August had just put him in charge of who had gathered just outside his tent. Nearly all of them were glaring at him like he was something they had stepped in and tracked into their homes, but since none were of the sixth-tier, they were all silent. Which only made it that much more awkward for Leon, for he had no idea what to say to these people. The only reason they hadn't immediately deserted, he thought, was because of that power—and probably because it was a direct command from August that gave him this authority.

Or maybe it was the stone giants standing behind him like a hundred massive, crudely carved stone statues, guarding him against danger. It was a toss-up, really.

"Uhh. Hmm. So..." Leon stammered, not quite sure where to begin.

"How about introductions?" Valeria quietly asked from right beside him. As she spoke, she drew some of the attention away from Leon, and he couldn't help but notice quite a few of those hard gazes soften when they landed upon her.

"Right!" Leon quickly asked for said introductions, but he was so anxious and in his own head about it that the second the last person finished, he couldn't remember a single name. "Well, uh, I'm Leon Ursus..." Leon said, noting many of the nobles around him scowl when he said his last name.

As Alix and Valeria were introducing themselves, Leon took a deep breath and then did a quick headcount. There were five Barons and twelve hereditary knights in his new unit, most of them fourth-

tier and only three fifth-tier. He guessed that most of the knights and men-at-arms that followed them were on the weak side, too.

These were not going to be knights of the quality he was used to, he quickly realized. Trajan had high standards, but these were rural nobles, even if they had the money to bring three thousand fighting men and women with them.

Once the introductions were out of the way, Leon had gotten his head back on straight. He ordered the nobles to tell him the composition of their personal armies so that he knew what he was dealing with.

The reality of his situation was even more depressing than it had first appeared. It started fine when the first person—A Baroness at the fifth-tier who he assumed was the most politically powerful of his new temporary subordinates—said that she brought a hundred knights and two hundred men-at-arms. But then she proudly declared that she had levied hundreds of her peasants for the war effort, three hundred of which would be fighting alongside them.

The rest of the Barons brought similar numbers, while the hereditary knights only brought about a dozen mounted men-at-arms apiece. In total, of the three thousand men and women that Leon had been assigned to lead only about fifteen hundred were professional warriors—of those, about five hundred were mounted on horses, though few had heavy armor. That left him with fifteen hundred peasant levies and about two thousand camp servants that no one ever really counted—though he supposed that he didn't need to worry about the latter, their Lords would be responsible for them.

"All right, well, I've got nothing else for all of you, so see to your people and I'll send for someone to get all of you if the need arises," Leon said in a clear dismissal, but while the knights took their cues to leave, the five Barons stuck around. Noticing that they weren't leaving, he asked, "Something you all need?"

The first to speak up was the first Baroness, the one that had brought the most fighting troops.

"Out of curiosity, Sir *Ursus*," she began, putting an infuriating amount of emphasis on Leon's name that in itself emphasized the fact that he was foreign to the Kingdom, "who will be your second-in-command?"

The Baroness stared at him in expectation, her radiant green eyes shining like dull emeralds and reminding Leon a great deal of Elise and sending a ripple of sorrow and loneliness through him. He did *not* enjoy being away from his lover, and now that he was thinking about it, he couldn't help but think about Naiad, too.

A year living with both of his lovers, and now he wasn't even sure if he'd see either one of them again. That would all depend on whether he survived the war or not—though, he liked his chances.

Pushing that out of his mind, at least for the time being, Leon turned his attention back to the matter at hand. And he had only one answer for the Baroness, and he held a strong suspicion that she would hate it.

"Dame Valeria Isynos will be my second-in-command," Leon declared, surprising all of the Barons and even Valeria herself—she was already his second in his retinue, but second-in-command of all the people he was in charge of was something else entirely.

“Sir...?” she quietly whispered, utterly shocked, flattered in his faith in her, and all kinds of other emotions she had no names for fluttered in her chest.

The Barons, however, were less than thrilled at his declaration. He saw it in their scornful faces, their looks of derision, and the way they stared at him as if he were a rabbit caught between them. He almost drew his blade until he realized that he wasn’t feeling any killing intent. It seemed the giants that backed him or his power as a sixth-tier mage was keeping them from mutinying at this apparent insult.

Of course, Leon knew that picking Valeria wasn’t the best choice—she was only twenty, the same age as him, and had even less experience in war than he did. Besides, if he picked one of the Barons, it could’ve been seen as an olive branch extended to them, showing them that he respected their positions and nobility.

Except that he didn’t respect those things, and he had no intention of pretending that he did. He wasn’t about to play the game of politics with these people. If they didn’t do what he wanted them to do, then he would either make them or dismiss them. It was that simple.

They’d either fall in line, or they wouldn’t. Either way, he still had a hundred fifth and sixth-tier stone giants, so a few thousand peasants and low-ranking knights didn’t quite have the same allure that they would’ve if Leon had been given this responsibility during the war with Talfar.

“Very well,” the Baroness replied, her face easily sliding back into a mask of complete serenity. “We serve at your pleasure, Sir,” she said as she turned around to leave, the other Barons following suit despite Leon not dismissing them again.

Not that he minded, he didn’t want to deal with them. He’d have rather been assigned some professional Legion soldiers to work with, but it was over and done with. He only had what he’d been given by Rakos and August, and he’d make do with what he had, no matter what they ended up deciding on.

Once the nobles were gone, Alix whispered in dejection, “Oh yeah, this is going to go *great*...”

“You have such confidence in me, it’s truly heartwarming,” Leon sarcastically replied.

“If I ever had confidence in your social skills, that display just killed it,” she replied with a cheeky smile. “I should get going, we have to make sure that we have a clear line of communication between us and them, and since your staff is basically just me and Valeria, the two of us now have a lot of work to do.”

Alix then began to pull Valeria away from Leon and into the camp. The younger woman glanced back over her shoulder, her clear blue eyes finding Leon’s for just a moment before turning away. It was a look of confusion, of gratitude and joy, and of apprehension and even a little bit of fear.

All of that Leon could understand. He felt much the same way, and Valeria was now likely feeling the pressure that came with command.

Leon took a deep breath and then made his way toward where August and the rest of the command staff were meeting—their scouts had located both Roland’s army and the army loyal to Octavius that was pursuing him, and they were all going to meet very soon. And before that happened, they’d need to prepare for a battle.

Chapter 420: The Lion's Charge

Roland and August's forces established contact when they were about a days' march apart from each other—about twenty-five miles or so. Their scouts had also managed to find Duke Duronius' forces shadowing Roland's about five miles further west, encamped on a large hill surrounded by wet, marshy forests.

The general landscape of the Southern Territories was awful by most standards—worse, in Leon's opinion, than the rough hills and valleys of the east by far. The Naga River branched off into numerous smaller rivers, each of them added to by countless tributaries, creating hundreds and hundreds of square miles of thick, swampy forest. It was wet, it was hot, and it was humid.

They were relatively close to the eastern-most branch of the Naga River where they were, leading to a serious amount of swamp in their way, but they were also far enough away that there were more than enough places to deploy large-scale troop formations if they wanted to fight a pitched battle.

They'd need that room, for Roland had with him four full Legions, about eighty thousand soldiers in total, not including the battalions of medics and support soldiers he also had. August was coming to reinforce him with thirty thousand noble retainers.

However, Duke Duronius had a reported five Legions and fifty thousand nobles with him, leaving the prospect of fighting out in the open risky at best. Fortunately, the numbers on both sides were large enough that they had done little more than skirmish a few times between their scouts—if either side committed to a pitched battle, they'd each be savaged by the other.

And so it had been for days, reportedly. Roland kept Duronius from marching east, while Duronius kept Roland from marching west. But a tipping point had to come, and it seemed like August's arrival was just the catalyst they needed to finally commit to a fight.

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Roland arrayed his Legions out in their standard checkerboard pattern, with those in the front ranks drawing their swords and those further back equipping their bows. This was an immense risk, he knew that, but he followed August's order anyway and prepared to face Duronius.

The two had been denying each other battle for a while, now, and with him in formation in a relatively open field—though, there were a few tree groves and small bogs between him and Duronius' last reported position—that was as perfect an opportunity for Octavius' grandfather to bring his numbers to bear as he was likely to get in the Southern Territories.

Somewhere to his northeast was August, marching his way with his reinforcements. They were hoping that Duronius would take the bait of seeing Roland finally ready to fight and commit to fighting him long enough for August to get into a flanking position.

As Roland heard the sound of Legion horns coming through the forests on the other side of the field, he knew that they were about to see if their plan worked.

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Leon's heart raced in his chest. Barely a few hours beforehand, he'd been given command of three battalion's worth of noble retainers, and now he was supposed to lead them into battle. What was more, Aeneas had given him and 'his unit' the most important position on the right flank!

So, as Roland formed up in a rough line along a low ridge running from north to south, they'd be facing against Duke Duronius' Legions and retainers coming in from the west. August would then try to come in from the north and hit them in the flank, while Leon would on the westernmost side of that line; he had to go further than even August, trying to hook around the edge of Duronius' line and come in from the west—from *behind* them.

Leon didn't much like that plan. For one, he hadn't had the chance to properly establish his command authority among his people—and he could feel their stares upon him when he wasn't looking, along with a few tiny hints of killing intent—so he wasn't completely confident that he could properly lead such an attack.

For another, if Duronius held any Legion soldiers or retainers in reserve—and given his numerical superiority, there was no reason to assume that he wouldn't—then Leon's charge could be easily countered. Making matters worse for him, it was almost guaranteed that Duronius' scouts had seen them, allowing him to enact some counter-measures to their flanking maneuver.

But even if Duronius' scouts hadn't seen them and he had no idea that Roland had reinforcements only a few hours' time away, in the end, they were still trying to surround and outmaneuver a force much larger than theirs, but August and Aeneas had agreed that the risk was worth it. They couldn't have Roland's Legions tied down as they had been for the past few days, but neither could they allow Duronius free access into the southern reaches of the Eastern Territories.

And so, Leon found himself riding out into the damp, humid forests of the Southern Territories astride Anzu, Alix and Valeria at his sides on borrowed steeds, and the rest of the cavalry that his nobler subordinates had brought at his back. Further to Leon's right were the giants, while to his left were the noblemen's infantry in his unit. He was leading from the extreme right, with his subordinate commanders spread out along the rest of his line.

He didn't quite trust them, but Lapis and the rest of its kith did a great deal to assuage his anxiety. Even if he couldn't count on the nobles, he could count on the giants; and powerful allies they were, for he was certain that his hundred stone giants were easily the equal of the rest of his force.

They trudged along as best they could through the soft, muddy earth and the dense forest. The giants had to make their own path several times, mostly by directly ripping a few thick willow trees out of the ground. They made a ton of noise, but there was no way that their three thousand men and women and one hundred giants were going to be stealthy, let alone the entire thirty-thousand strong force; Leon focused on speed, they had to get into position before the battle was over, or else there was no point. It had been hours since he'd last seen August or Aeneas, and it was entirely possible that Duronius and Roland's Legions had already met each other on the battlefield. There was no time to lose over concerns of too much noise.

A few times, though, they did slow down when Leon sensed powerful creatures in the forest. He wasn't overly cautious since they were still close enough to the waterways of the Southern Territories that all

the most dangerous beasts in the regions had been rendered extinct, but he didn't want to lose people before they had even encountered Duronius' line.

Waiting only just long enough for these occasional inhuman magical presences to realize just how many people were coming through the forest and vanishing, Leon pressed on. A few times, though, he thought he felt someone or *something* watching him. Unfortunately, he hadn't the time to investigate, but he did feel Xaphan's attention a few times, too, and he hoped with all that he had that the two weren't related. He could *not* afford to fend off a vampire attack at this juncture.

Eventually, they reached roughly where they needed to be. There was a gap between their force of three thousand and the next unit to the east, but that was because of a small river. They weren't made vulnerable, but they were, for most intents and purposes, on their own. If they were attacked, it could take as long as an hour for an earth or water mage to allow another unit to come and reinforce them.

'Just another damn thing stacked against us...' Leon thought to himself. He didn't waste time lamenting the situation, though. If he learned anything from Trajan, it was that he needed to be aggressive and decisive when it came to leading soldiers into battle. He gave the order to advance as soon as he could see the other units close to them begin their own advance.

As they moved forward, Leon could vaguely pick up the sounds of battle in the distance. Sound didn't penetrate the forest all that well, not to mention the relative highlands in front of them where the battle was taking place, but the sounds of war were unmistakable. It seemed that battle had been joined somewhere, but the battlefield was damned large, and Leon had no idea where it could be.

All he could do was to continue pushing forward through the trees, across filthy ponds and bogs, through green, stagnant streams, and finally up a gentle hill. They were close, now.

Finally, *finally*, after hours of grueling movement, of Anzu's paws getting stuck in mud, of knights and men-at-arms up and down the line stumbling through roots and wet earth, they saw their enemy.

And Leon's heart sank.

Duronius clearly knew they were coming and had laid out a welcome carpet; thousands of warriors waited for them at the top of the hill, mostly brandishing various polearms, like spears and pikes. There wasn't much uniformity to their equipment, with many men in the front rank—and it was almost entirely composed of men—not even wearing a helmet, let alone any other armor. They were led by several dozen mounted knights in front, perhaps half a mile away from Leon; more than close enough for Leon's sixth-tier eyes to pick up on a few key facts.

First, none of the knights wore Legion colors, nor did any of those standing in the horde behind them. These were peasants levied from noble lands, not professional soldiers. Leon almost laughed until he remembered that half of his own force was composed of similar people.

Second, only three of the knights were sixth-tier, compared to the two dozen Leon had on his side between himself and the giants.

Third, Leon saw that this force sent by Duronius was much larger than his, perhaps by as much as three or four times. That fact alone had him gritting his teeth and keeping himself from celebrating their magical advantage too much.

Lastly, he could see the looks of confidence and bravado on the faces of many of Duronius' knights begin to vanish as Lapis and the rest of giants began to appear from amongst the trees. Leon could also see ripples of panic moving through the ranks of the levies behind them, too, and their rough spear wall began quivering as Leon's force slowly crept its way forward.

Leon didn't call a halt to their movement. If he didn't have the giants, he would've absolutely done so, but as they were, he felt like they had a good chance of pulling this off.

They drew closer and closer to Octavius' army, huddled at the top of the hill. Duronius' people remained up top, either unwilling or unable to move, just waiting for Leon's troops to climb up past the dense forest below and up to the relatively bare hilltop. They weren't giving up their height advantage, but it seemed they were going to give Leon some time be a bit more thorough about this.

He had a few minutes to think before they drew to within arrow range. He figured that the best way to play this would be to use an oblique attack, with him, the giants, and the cavalry on the right wing charging first. They needed to smash this force in front of them, for the river to their left that snaked around the hill wasn't going to allow—

Suddenly, from the center of Leon's line, a loud horn blast sounded, and about five hundred knights began to sprint out of the line and toward the Octavian force atop the hill. The man leading them was one of the Barons that Leon had been assigned, and he rode his horse like a man possessed, waving a two-handed claymore above his head like it weighed nothing at all and roaring a guttural, almost *bestial* battle cry as his horse thundered ahead of his charging knights.

Leon had not given any order to charge, he was doing so on his own.

Leon clenched his jaw for a moment in frustration, swore under his breath, and then said, "Sound the charge. We can't let them attack without support." The tone of his voice was grave and the killing intent it carried caused many of the knights behind him to shiver.

As his order was being carried out, he heard Alix vocalize exactly what was on his mind, clicking her tongue and muttering under her breath as she stared at the charging Baron's troops, "What an ass."

From the way Valeria glared at the Baron's charging form, Leon knew that he and Alix weren't alone in their anger.

"Who is he?" Leon growlingly asked. "I'll admit that I haven't had the time to really learn everyone's names, yet..."

A knight behind him helpfully said, "That would be Baron Mettius Gellius, Sir."

"Ah, yes. Him. Thank you," Leon replied as the horns up and down the line began to sound off. "I'll definitely remember him now..." he murmured as he ran his fingers through Anzu's feathers, giving him the signal to begin charging.

And charge Anzu did, bolting out ahead of the rest of the unit as if he were afraid he'd miss out on all the fun. Valeria, Alix, and the light cavalry behind them struggled to keep up, but the giants with their massive legs managed to stick with Leon. They were fast enough that even though Baron Gellius charged first, Leon and the giants came into arrow range first.

Leon prepared to shield both himself and Anzu from the expected arrow fire, channeling his fire magic and making a few last-second adjustments to his armor, but not a single arrow was loosed, to Leon's immense surprise.

'Do they not have archers?' Leon thought. That his side didn't fire any arrows either occurred to him, too, and he made a mental note to get a better idea of the composition of his unit after the battle, assuming they survived. He couldn't believe that he hadn't checked beforehand.

They closed to five hundred feet. The Octavian knights shouted for the spear wall to be reformed and discipline maintained as the levies were wavering at the sight of a hundred powerful stone giants thundering up their hill.

Four hundred feet. Leon switched from fire magic to lightning, and his left hand began to spark and crackle, the black metal of his gauntlet flashing with lightning magic.

Three hundred feet. Leon could see the whites of the eyes of the knight he was targeting through the man's visor. His eyes were wide enough that he seemed to be panicking, but he wasn't running away.

Two hundred feet. The knight was only a fifth-tier mage, and he could doubtlessly sense the power of Leon and the giants, yet he stood firm against them. Leon couldn't help but admire the man in this last moment before all the hells broke loose.

One hundred feet. Leon let loose with a bolt of lightning. With a golden flash and thunderous boom, the Octavian knights' horse was ripped apart beneath him before he could even muster a defense.

And like that, the very first large-scale open battle that Leon had ever participated in began.