

Storm King 421

Chapter 421: A Good Start

Leon's forces crashed into those of Duke Duronius and Prince Octavius with tremendous force. Leon himself was in the lead, and as such he couldn't tell how the entire line was doing, but around him, Octavius' levied troops were dying in droves.

He'd killed the knight who led their left wing easily enough. The knight had only been a fifth-tier mage—magically weak, but since they were in the rear and dealing with a much smaller force, Leon could understand leaving the command of this area to magically inferior knights. But those greater numbers hadn't helped the knight any; after Leon killed his horse out from under him, he was unable to recover in time to prevent Anzu from sinking his front claws into his armor and his beak into the knight's exposed throat.

Leon had been momentarily surprised that the knight had gone down so quickly; he assumed a fifth-tier mage would've put up more of a fight, but he didn't have the time to dwell on it. He simply chalked it up to inexperience and lack of killing intent and then moved on.

He urged Anzu onward as he tossed a quick bolt of lightning into the crowd of levies in front of him, disrupting their spear wall enough for Anzu to slip in. Once they were passed the spears, they began to tear into the levies with abandon. Leon's sword flashed and sparked with lightning as he swung it this way and that, killing at least one peasant soldier with every swing. Anzu got into the action as well, rending and ripping any unfortunate soul who got in his way with his claws and beak, and if they were about to be surrounded, he would beat his wings and a great burst of wind magic would push their enemies back.

And Leon wasn't the only one causing immense damage; the giants had reached the spear wall just after he did, brushing aside the spears like grass before hitting the Octavian lines like a hundred meteors. Just behind them, the noble light cavalry rode into the gap they made, taking advantage of the giants' attack to cut as deeply into the Octavian lines as they could reach.

Beside Leon were Alix and Valeria. They had fallen behind a bit as Leon and Anzu had charged, but once Leon hit the spear wall, they easily caught up. Both acquitted themselves admirably, with Alix killing almost as many Octavian troops with her blade as Leon did with his—the levies, being mostly just a massed group of peasants, were almost entirely under the second-tier, letting Alix's relatively modest third-tier strength cut through them like a hot knife through butter. Valeria's fourth-tier power and the glaive in her hand, meanwhile, sliced clean through so many levies that Leon was certain if he wasn't using his magic, Valeria would outpace him in kills.

The levies proved themselves completely unable to stop Leon and his forces. If they had more discipline, better gear, more motivation, or even just a proper reason to be there, they might've given Leon's force more trouble. As it was, all they had going for them were numbers, and once Leon hit their lines, the Octavian levies weren't able to swing the momentum back in their favor.

But that wasn't for lack of trying. A few pushes were made that could've put Leon and the others in danger, but with the support of the giants helping to keep them from being surrounded and pulled off their mounts, they repelled those counter-attacks and pushed onward.

It was over in a matter of twenty minutes. The rest of Leon's charge had been halted relatively well everywhere else down the line, but with Leon himself, the cavalry, and the giants wreaking havoc, the Octavian lines quickly collapsed as the peasant levies lost heart and began retreating.

As the lines began to break, Leon shouted, "Keep on them!" His sixth-tier voice boomed over the field, answered by the war cries of three thousand or so of his own troops and, more terrifyingly, the sound of a hundred giants roaring with the sound of a collapsing mountain. Any semblance of order in the Octavian ranks disintegrated as Leon pushed his people onward. Even in the parts of the line that had held against his unit's charge, the levies began breaking and running, regardless of their bellowing commanders urging them to hold their ground.

One such commander, frustrated at the levies under his command, began pushing his way through the crowds toward Leon. The two were quite close together, and as he got within range, he stabbed toward Anzu's flank in the moment that it was exposed when the griffin attacked someone closer.

However, before his blade landed, it was deflected by a slash from Valeria, and the knight was so surprised and thrown off balance that a quick follow-up strike from Valeria was enough to make him a head shorter.

When he realized what had just happened and that Valeria had prevented Anzu from a potentially serious wound, Leon nodded to Valeria. That one gesture communicated everything that needed to be shared, and given how she'd been looking at him recently, he wasn't too keen on prolonging their interactions.

Valeria nodded back. Leon couldn't see her face behind her helmet, but from her eyes alone he could tell she was smiling.

Taking that as a challenge, Leon launched himself back into battle, but the fight was over quickly. Half an hour after their charge, his unit had taken the hill and routed the Octavian force holding it.

"Rally!" Leon began to shout as he rode up and down the line in an attempt to keep his people from pursuing the routed Octavian force too far. He repeated his command several dozen times until most of his unit had come back under his control. A few select units, however, completely ignored his orders, chief among which was Baron Mettius Gellius, the man who had begun the charge in the first place without waiting for Leon's order.

"What should we do, Sir?" Alix asked him as Gellius' knights and men-at-arms continued to push against the faltering rearguard of their routing enemy.

Leon scowled behind his helmet. Their enemy had been driven from the field, and he doubted that they would return. It was their job now to swing around eastward to support the rest of the army, not to pursue a single shattered unit, if that unit was still thousands strong.

Leon began shouting for the rest of the subordinate commanders to assemble. It took a few excruciatingly long minutes for the rest of the nobles to ride to him during which Leon stared at the back of Gellius' people, none of whom turned back to rejoin his forces.

Once everyone had arrived, though, Leon ignored their questions and had only a single order for them, "Reform the lines and begin marching east! I'll get Baron Gellius' people back under control!"

With that, he waited for no one else, riding after Gellius with only Valeria, Alix, and a handful of giants with him. He kept an eye on his people with his magic senses, though, and he was grateful to see that his order was being followed, albeit frustratingly slowly. Now he just had to deal with Gellius.

He and Anzu rode hard, outpacing the others with them as they raced to catch up to Gellius' troops before they pursued the Octavian force too far. Anzu even flapped his wings and took off at one point, allowing Leon to quickly close with Gellius.

"HOLD!" Leon roared, his towering sixth-tier aura capturing the attention of Gellius' troops, along with a significant portion of the Octavian levies who were fleeing. It proved enough of a distraction that Gellius' people lost a bit of their momentum, allowing the fleeing levies to put more distance between themselves and their Augustine pursuers.

As he flew over Gellius' ranks, he finally located the man himself standing over his dead horse and a pair of dead Octavian levies, surrounded by his knights and men-at-arms. Leon wasn't sure what killed his horse, but fighting on foot didn't seem to be dampening his fighting spirit in the slightest. The Baron still radiated killing intent, and Leon knew before the man opened his mouth that he wasn't going to follow Leon's order.

Proving Leon's guess correct, Gellius shouted, "Keep going! We have them on the run, we can't let them get away!"

Some of his knights began to pursue again, but Leon's aura was a heavy thing, and it only grew heavier as the giants caught up, adding their own immense presence to Leon's.

"I SAID HOLD!" Leon bellowed again, this time allowing his own prodigious killing intent to pervade his aura. Normally, even his potent killing intent would barely be felt in such a large-scale battle, but now that the Octavian forces were pulling away, it allowed just enough room for Leon's killing intent to be felt by just about all of Gellius' knights and men-at-arms, freezing them all in place. "Lord Gellius, I am ordering you and your subordinates to fall back! You have advanced too far without support!"

"To the hells with your asinine orders, savage!" Gellius roared back as he pulled his blade out from the torso of one of the Octavian levies at his feet. "If you haven't the will to strike the killing blow against your enemies, then fine! More glory for me!"

With that, Gellius began pushing his way toward the front of his force, shouting the entire way for his knights to follow him. Many of them did, but others remained standing in place. With Leon and Anzu flying over them and the giants at their backs, they were a bit apprehensive about disobeying Leon's order. Besides, these particular knights could see that Leon had a point: they were advancing too far away from the rest of Leon's forces, and that would make them vulnerable to a potential Octavian counter-attack.

About half of Gellius' troops remained standing where they were, their eyes flickering between Leon in the air and Gellius like they were watching a game of catch.

Leon, however, didn't verbally respond to Gellius. Instead, he sheathed his blade and then, without missing a beat, conjured a brilliant golden lightning spear and hurled it with as much force as he could manage from Anzu's back. He didn't aim directly at Gellius, but when the bolt exploded fifteen feet in front of the fifth-tier Lord, the message was received anyway—Leon wouldn't hesitate to use force to

get him to comply, and that wasn't something Gellius was used to. The Baron couldn't help but come to a halt for a moment.

Taking advantage of the Baron's momentary hesitation, Leon directed Anzu to land just in front of Gellius, putting himself between the Lord and the broken Octavian troops, who were now beginning to disappear into the dense forests to their south.

"This is not our job, Lord Gellius!" Leon said, his voice quiet but intense and dripping with fury. "They're broken, now it's time to see to our *actual* mission!"

As he spoke, the half dozen giants that had accompanied him pushed their way to stand with Leon, and Valeria and Alix came riding around the flanks of the five hundred or so of Gellius' troops. They made it clear with their body language that further pursuit of the Octavian forces would necessitate going through them.

Baron Gellius was insubordinate and disrespectful, but that was still a bit much.

"Whoever heard of a barbarian too scared to fight?" he wondered aloud, blatantly loud enough to ensure that Leon heard him. Leon was sorely tempted to punctuate the Baron's question with a bolt of lightning, but Gellius sheathed his blade and said, "Let's go back, then. Just let these inbred bastards reform and strike us in the rear."

Leon glanced over his shoulder and, after seeing no sign of the army that had opposed their attempts to take the hill, he projected his magic senses. As they washed over the retreating peasants, he saw that they were still running away as fast as they could, completely disregarding the commands of what few knights remained in charge of them. They were broken, with hundreds lying dead or dying behind them. They weren't a threat anymore.

"Turn back," Leon growled at Gellius. "We have bigger enemies to kill right now than a bunch of scared peasants armed with little more than sharp sticks."

Gellius spat on the ground in Leon's direction and grunted in displeasure, but he did as Leon ordered, turning his knights and men-at-arms around and began making his way back to the rest of Leon's unit, which was still forming back up to make a push eastward into Duronius' flank.

Leon breathed a sigh of relief that he wouldn't have to resort to violence, but he wasn't about to forget or forgive Gellius' insubordination. But, for the moment, he could set it aside.

Besides, regardless of the Baron's actions, they had still taken the hill with relatively little cost, as far as Leon could estimate. He wasn't going to take the time for a proper headcount, putting his trust in the Lords and knights to keep an eye on their people, but it at least seemed to him that they had won this fight, at least.

It was a good start. Now it was time to win the rest of the battle, which Leon could still hear raging in the distance.

Chapter 422: The Hammer

Leon glanced around at his unit as he rejoined it. It had been about ten minutes since he had left to bring Baron Gellius' troops back under control, and in that time, the rest of the Barons and leading

knights had gotten the rest of the unit back into a rough formation. It was time for them to push east, acting as the hammer that would crush the rest of the Octavian troops that were crashing against Roland and August's anvil.

"Get back into line," Leon ordered Gellius, who was walking right beside him. The Baron glared at him but grudgingly began to shout for his knights and men-at-arms to rejoin the line. Leon was quietly grateful that it wouldn't require any more persuasion on his part, for the sounds of battle he could hear in the distance spoke to just how little time they had. Even now, Augustine knights and soldiers were likely dying, so Leon's people couldn't afford to waste time on petty distractions.

"He's still an ass," Alix whispered as the Baron walked away, her voice just loud enough for Leon and Valeria to hear her, but not for Gellius.

"At least he fell into line," Valeria said.

"Doesn't make him any less of an ass," Alix responded.

"I don't think you'll find any disagreement here," Valeria replied.

"Let's go," Leon said before the conversation could continue. "This day is far from over."

The three returned to their previous positions on the right flank, and the giants that had accompanied them rejoined their fellows in the same place. As Leon returned to position, the rest of the Barons and knights of the unit's leadership made their way over to him to give their reports.

Leon was actually a bit surprised in their actions. First of all, he didn't think they had the discipline necessary to get a good headcount of their people in the short time he'd been gone, and secondly, he didn't think they were going to offer up that information without him asking for it. Fortunately, they took the initiative to speak with him.

Their casualties were surprisingly light, more so than even the short time they were in contact with the enemy would imply. Only about a hundred of their troops had fallen, while about four hundred were injured—and of those injured, only about a quarter were debilitatingly so, leaving Leon's unit with two thousand eight hundred still in fighting condition. Leon could also see that he hadn't lost a single giant, though more than a few were sporting some new cracks in their rocky shells.

Once the brief reports were over, Leon quickly ordered them to get moving again. The hill had been taken, and now they had to push east into the flatlands on the border of the Southern and Eastern Territories. They didn't have far to go, though, only about a quarter of a mile through some relatively sparse forest.

The terrain was a bit drier than it was on their initial approach, but it was still relatively hot and humid enough that Leon could see some of the weaker mages in his unit were starting to slow down. Even he was feeling fairly terrible—he was built for the cold and the dry, and all this heat and humidity didn't sit well with him. Fortunately, it didn't slow him down as it did for the weaker levies in his unit, but it still made him deeply uncomfortable.

But they didn't have to go far before such concerns were put out of their minds. A quarter of a mile later, they reached the point they had been marching toward, a place where the trees gave way to a large open field. Upon this field, August's troops were locked in battle with thousands of their

counterparts in Octavius' army. Leon's unit had emerged from the forest just south of their position, perfectly placed to hit the Octavian forces in their exposed rear.

However, the armies that Octavius had given Duronius were quite large, and as Leon's unit started making their way out onto the battlefield and shifting from a marching formation into a battle formation, the back ranks of the Octavian forces had enough people to swing around to face the new threat behind them without taking away from the front ranks too much.

But that still left them surrounded, even if Leon's flanking unit was small in comparison—both the Augustine and Octavian forces were large enough that they extended well off into the distance, disappearing beyond rolling hills and thin forests.

Leon didn't hesitate; as soon as his people were in back in formation, he thundered, "CHARGE!!!"

There were no tactics this time. He'd learned that the nobles under his command were impatient and it was best to begin the fight immediately, but he could also see that giving the Octavian troops time to get ready wasn't in his interests. Best to hit them now while they were still under pressure from August and hadn't fully adapted to his appearance behind them.

His troops began to advance, and the Octavian knights opposite them began to march to meet them. The ground shook beneath their feet, and Leon could see their lines ripple a bit as more knights and men-at-arms were diverted to face him specifically. He might've been a bit flattered, but he doubted it was for him; rather, it was probably to face the giants with him.

"Be careful!" he called out for those around him to hear, but mostly for the benefit of the giants, Alix, and Valeria. "It looks like these guys are more disciplined and experienced than those we just faced!"

"Got it!" Alix eagerly replied as she prepared herself for the oncoming fight.

"I've got your back!" Valeria responded to them both.

"Stick together, don't take needless risks!" Leon shouted back. He could see what was being prepared across the field, and many powerful knights were gathering to counter the giants—and him, by extension, since he was so close to them.

He could hear Alix stifle a laugh, then say, "Sure thing, Sir!"

He glanced back at her. A smile played at his lips, but since they were still concealed behind his helmet, he gave her a quick head waggle to show that he was more than aware of how comical what he just said was coming from him.

The two sides closed with each other much as they did with the previous fight. This time, however, Leon knew it was going to be different. He had no archers, so the moment arrows started raining down on his marching people, his heart almost skipped a beat.

"MOVE FASTER!" he shouted as his people started dropping. "CHARGE!!!"

The Barons were only too eager to comply. The unit's quick march soon turned into a full-on run as they desperately tried to close with their enemy and use them as cover against further arrows. Many of their comrades were left behind, some dead but most merely wounded, but Leon's unit crashed into the Octavian army reasonably intact.

The battlefield was already loud with the sounds of battle and death, but when Leon's unit made contact with their opponents, they did so with a thunderous roar. Part of that was the actual thunder that accompanied Leon's opening salvo of lightning bolts along with all the other magics that were slung by his side, but another part was the giants tearing into the Octavian ranks. Each giant bore down upon the enemy lines, earth magic skewering their foes in droves, their massive limbs crushing dozens more who didn't move fast enough, all attacks that fell upon their stony bodies leaving little more than superficial damage.

Further to Leon's left, his unit fought ferociously, so much so that it was easy to forget this was a civil war. These people were fighting their countrymen, technically speaking, but there was no sign of the same hesitance that led the 2nd Legion to refuse to charge months ago during August's crossing of the Naga.

Leon himself fought savagely. Anzu darted around, ripping, rending, and tearing with beak and claw so much that while Leon couldn't use his sword too much in the fight, it also freed him up to use his magics a bit more liberally than he otherwise might. Lightning and fire poured out of him in equal turns, frying and cooking those on either side of his griffin and ensuring Anzu only had to focus on those enemies directly in front of him. Together, they carved a bloody path through the Octavian ranks.

They were only halted when a sixth-tier Octavian knight finally made an appearance before Leon by conjuring a large wave of water to sweep the two of them back into the light cavalry that had followed the hole Leon made in Octavius' army. However, the water was quickly diverted by some quick actions from Lapis, who brought a stone wall up just in time to protect Leon, Anzu, and all those behind them. Leon noticed the stone giant take a couple of hits from its own opponent for its trouble, another sixth-tier knight wielding a large war hammer, but it hardly seemed fazed by the numerous cracks that had appeared in its legs.

Leon couldn't very well let that kind of sacrifice go to waste, though, no matter if Lapis seemed to care about it or not. "Let's go!" he urged Anzu forward, up and over the chest-high wall that Lapis had created, and back into the fray from which they had momentarily been separated.

The water mage that Leon was facing off against noticed and sent a handful of ice spikes to meet Anzu's movement, but they met an intense burst of fire from Leon, vaporizing before causing any damage to the griffin.

But that still thoroughly infuriated Leon. Those ice spikes had been aimed at Anzu, not at him. That was enough to earn the water mage an impending meeting with death.

In his fury, Leon leaped off Anzu's back, taking the water mage by surprise. The squaring off of two sixth-tier mages had created something of a gap in the lines as the weaker mages made room for them to fight, and Leon filled that space with as much lightning as he could muster. The moment his feet hit the ground, dozens of small arcs of lightning erupted from his legs, most of it directed toward the water mage but with quite a few weaker Octavian mages around them taking damage.

And the water mage barely even blinked. Leon's lightning magic surged through him and half a dozen of those at his side, but he stood strong and took it. And once Leon let up a moment later, he launched himself at Leon in the hopes of closing the distance between them. However, his speed wasn't even

close to Leon's, and when he swung his blade and launched a water blade at Leon, it moved practically in slow motion to Leon's eyes despite the attack's incredible speed.

Leon, in a split-second decision, held up his hand and let loose with a great eruption of fire. He could've dodged the water blade, of course, but Anzu, Alix, Valeria, and numerous others that had followed him into battle stood behind him, and he couldn't let the jet of water hit them.

His fire almost wasn't enough. The water sliced through so much of it that it almost grazed his gauntlet and created a dense cloud of steam between Leon and the water mage, but in the end, Leon remained untouched. Without waiting to lay eyes upon the water mage again, he immediately followed this up by conjuring a lightning bolt in his left hand and slamming it into the ground, creating another explosion of lightning surging through the steam cloud.

A sharp cry from closer to Leon than he'd thought showed that he was correct not to hesitate with his next attack. The steam cloud quickly dissipated, revealing the water mage had fallen to one knee about twenty feet in front of Leon, one leg smoking from lightning burns.

But that sight engendered no sense of pity in Leon. He could sense the water mage's killing intent still towering and his aura still raging; Leon could tell he was preparing another attack despite his injuries. The water mage's grit was admirable, but Leon held up his left hand anyway and let loose with a gout of fire that completely enveloped the water mage.

A moment later, the ball of fire exploded with steam, throwing Leon back and causing everyone who was still fighting around them to back up even further or else be scalded. When the steam cleared, the water mage was revealed, though his scale armor had been completely blackened from Leon's fire and his exposed face was covered in burns.

More importantly, his aura was starting to flag, showing more than anything just how much damage he'd taken. In fact, he had almost fallen back to his knees in pain, and he was clearly struggling to stay on his feet. So injured was he that Leon felt confident enough to glance around him to check in on the rest of the battle.

Just like their last engagement, Leon's unit had been somewhat stalled in most places. They simply weren't a force that was special enough to crush their enemies everywhere.

The giants, however, were another matter entirely. They broke clean through the Octavian lines, causing a chain reaction down the rest of the line as Leon's people exploited the holes that the giants had made. Octavius' army was crumbling as the giants rampaged through their lines, closely followed by those in Leon's unit. It was only a matter of time before it collapsed entirely. Once it did, Leon's unit could link back up with August's forces and push further east, hopefully driving Octavius' army from the field.

Leon's eyes flickered back to the water mage as the man struggled to stand back up. He ripped his open-face helmet off, as it seemed to still be painfully heated from Leon's fire, and it almost seemed like he was about to continue his resistance.

But the reality of his situation wasn't lost on him. Even if he hadn't been able to project his magic senses, it was obvious enough that his people were being pushed back and killed in droves. Even the sixth-tier mage that had managed to injure Lapis had been crushed beneath the giants' massive feet.

The knight spat on the ground, glared at Leon, and then began to run. Leon almost gave chase until Valeria and Anzu came running up from behind him. Both were covered in blood—Anzu, in particular, had his snow-white fur and feathers almost dyed red from his ribs forward—but neither, fortunately, seemed injured.

“Leon! They’re breaking!” Valeria shouted, and Anzu chirped happily as Leon jumped back onto his back.

“Good!” Leon replied. “But that’s no reason to let the pressure drop! It’s time to end this!”

Chapter 423: Softly Striking the Anvil

The unit of Octavius’ army that had turned to face Leon had been broken. Leon and the giants had cracked it open, and then the rest of the knights and their followers smashed it to pieces, routing thousands of men and women who fought for Octavius.

This success then cascaded into the rest of the army, which had been preoccupied with combating August’s main force and could no longer handle Leon’s flanking action. Duke Duronius’ left flank crumbled under Leon and August’s combined pressure.

For Leon, it was quite gratifying to finally cut through Octavius’ people to reach August’s army. It might’ve been difficult under normal circumstances to differentiate the two, but the eastern forces had a tendency to wield blunt weapons, in contrast with those of the other territories, who favored swords and polearms. Once Leon saw axes, maces, and hammers in the hands of those in front of him instead of swords and spears, he knew that he had successfully completed his task.

“Sir Leon!” shouted a booming voice, attracting Leon’s attention. He looked in the direction it had come from and saw Marquis Aeneas striding towards him, a number of other knights at his side. Notably, none of them were mounted.

“Lord Aeneas!” Leon replied in greeting, his voice quite a bit lighter and happier than the Marquis’, who was as serious and dour as he always was when dealing with Leon.

“Get your people organized! We’re pushing east!” Aeneas shouted as he pointed eastward with his mace, which Leon noticed was covered in blood and bits of gore—the Marquis clearly wasn’t the sort of stay back in the rear as most commanders would.

Leon couldn’t help but feel some small bit of respect start to well up within him for the Marquis. He doubted they’d ever be friends, but he couldn’t ignore the fact that Aeneas was willing to get his hands dirty.

He set those thoughts aside for now and got back to work. And a lot of work it was, taking nearly half an hour for the entire line to be reformed with Leon’s unit back at the extreme right. Fortunately, he didn’t have to deal with insubordination this time around, but since August’s army of nobles was made up of dozens of disparate units, it was still a monumental effort to get reorganized.

Once they were ready, though, they moved quickly, swinging back around eastward like a large hook. They had driven off the forces sent by Duke Duronius to hold them back, so it was time to try and catch the main body of his army between themselves and Roland’s Legions.

"This isn't going to go so well," Valeria quietly said as they rode along. She spoke quietly enough that only Alix and Leon could easily hear her, she didn't want the others behind them to get demoralized.

"Why do you say that?" Alix inquired.

"They had a large unit waiting for us in place, and when we drove them off and appeared behind the forces engaging Marquis Aeneas, they reacted quickly, splitting off another group to try and hold us back. That would suggest that they knew what our plans were and had contingencies. I don't think they were simply reacting in the moment, they had prepared themselves for that eventuality."

"Prepared or not, they still lost," Alix pointed out.

"They have the numbers that they don't have to win every time," Valeria countered. "There's still the possibility that they have something waiting for us when we move to reinforce Sir Roland."

Adding his thoughts, Leon said, "I agree that that's likely, but we can hardly turn back now; neither do we have the time to send out scouts. Roland and Duronius are still fighting, as are a few other units on Prince August's left flank. If we wait, they may be overrun. It's best to move now, while we have the momentum and before their routed units have a chance to regroup and counter-attack."

Valeria nodded and replied, "I wasn't saying that we should wait, only that we should keep our eyes open and be cautious."

"We'll do so, it's not like we're running off with half-strung bows and our pants around our ankles," Leon said. Indeed, their marching speed was relatively slow to accommodate for the weakest members of the army—being an army primarily composed of nobles, the weakest and slowest members were levied peasants that were barely even first-tier.

Valeria glanced at Leon a bit skeptically, but she let the topic go for now. For his part, Leon couldn't blame her for being worried, he wasn't so sure about what was going to happen himself. They'd done well so far, but that didn't mean that they were going to win the battle. Their successes had put them into a good position, they just had to properly capitalize on their gains.

It seemed that Aeneas shared his views, for he kept the army moving once they finally managed to get organized and moving again. Being on the edge of the right flank, Leon and his unit didn't see much more combat for a little while. Those further left ran into the enemy before Leon's group did, but his unit had much farther to go—a couple of miles, in fact—in order to finally hit Duronius' army in the back and crush them between themselves and Roland's Legions.

They advanced as quickly as they could, and as they moved, Leon started hearing something strange—rather, it was what he *wasn't* hearing that struck him as strange. The sounds of battle seemed to be lessening somewhat.

"Something's going on..." he whispered half to himself and half to Alix and Valeria.

"What is it?" Alix asked as Valeria tensed up and readied her glaive for battle as if she expected Octavian knights to come pouring out of a hidden pit in the fields or something.

"It's... we're getting closer, but the sounds of fighting seem to be dying out..." Leon explained. His eyes darted around, but they couldn't see far due to the rolling hills and occasional clumps of trees and

bushes. He projected his magic senses in an attempt to see as far as he could—he had been training as much as he was able in these past months, and the results were that he could see a little over three miles away with his magic senses.

He directed the pulse of magic power directly in front of him, keeping it focused. Three miles was quite the distance to see, but even that was only just enough for Leon to locate a few of the reserve units held in the back of Duronius' formations, while the front lines and Roland's Legions were still beyond his senses.

But even just seeing the reserve troops was enough for Leon to get a good idea of what was going on. To his eyes, it seemed like they were getting ready to march, not towards the front.

"... I think they're getting ready to retreat..." Leon said in disbelief.

"They're... running...?" Alix asked, her tone just as disbelieving as Leon's.

"That's what it looks like..." Leon said.

"That... makes some degree of sense..." Valeria stated. "If they're in a bad position, then it might just be best to retreat and save what you can then continue on and take casualties trying to pull off a win. They haven't won so far, so why take the chance?"

"Good point," Leon responded. "Were I in their position, I'd probably withdraw, too. Better that than get caught in this flanking maneuver."

The three started to relax a bit as they marched. Leon kept a close eye on those Octavian units he could see, but everything seemed to indicate that his initial judgment was correct, they were getting ready to retreat. It was almost too good to be true and didn't even feel real until messengers came running in from Aeneas and August informing him that Duronius' Legions were in the process of breaking away from Roland's Legions.

It seemed that Leon and his unit had seen the end of combat for the day, for they were not going to arrive in time to stop Duronius' retreat. They could've pursued, but August's message had come with explicit instructions to link back up with the Legions and to under no circumstances pursue.

Leon didn't like that. It either meant that August was stupidly letting the opportunity to crush this army slip through his fingers, or, more likely, the main battle between the Legions hadn't gone so well and it was more beneficial to halt and regroup than to pursue their retreating enemy. Either way, the eastern Legions weren't going to pursue, and without the support of those Legions, if the noble armies tried to chase the southern Legions, then they'd likely be drawn into a trap and possibly destroyed. The southern Legions hadn't been broken, after all, and were retreating in an orderly manner.

Leon began to relay August's message, and the line mostly began to slow down. Perhaps this was to give the troops a bit of a break, perhaps it was to allow those Octavian troops still between them to safely retreat, or perhaps everyone was just relaxing a bit too much. No matter the reason, as the 'hammer' of their plan, Leon felt a few twinges of regret in his heart as the armies of Duronius and Octavius slipped out before his hammer could strike the anvil of Roland's Legions, crushing those retreating troops between them.

And so, as the last remnants of the southern Legions and the Octavian nobles disappeared into the distant forests of the Southern Territories, Leon's unit finally came within eyesight of Roland's Legions. They had mostly taken a shallow ridge, which forced Duronius' Legions to charge uphill—or that had been the intent, the soft, grassy ridge had been torn asunder by magics of all sort. Enormous portions of the grass had been burned away and the ridge was covered in craters. Pillars and spikes of stone and ice dotted the ridge as well, along with deep gouges in the earth that suggested a few wind and water blades had missed their marks.

Still, the Legions standing atop seemed quite happy to see Leon's troops, and they began to cheer as the noble armies closed the distance between them, their identifying banners blowing behind them. Not even the presence of stone giants seemed to dampen their excitement, which Leon found interesting since the eastern Legions had more cause than most to fear and hate the rocky beings.

The nobles and their followers walked up the ridge, and once they had reached the top, many of the Legion soldiers embraced the knights or clasped their wrists in greeting. It had been a long day of fighting, being about three or four in the afternoon, and much of the fighting had gotten started in the morning. These men and women were glad to see their comrades, and perhaps even gladder to have won the day.

And won the day they had. To get up the ridge, Leon and the rest had to climb over so many corpses that they had practically doubled the size of the ridge. Thousands of people had died this day, and Leon could understand the relief that the rank-and-file soldiers felt at finally seeing the day coming to a close, especially with them as the victors.

"Sir Leon!" cried the familiar voice of Roland from somewhere behind the Legion battalions. Leon briefly wondered just how it was that people like Roland and Aeneas were able to find him so easily, but a quick glance to Lapis and the rest of the giants made it obvious.

"Sir Roland!" Leon shouted back as the Legion soldiers between the two parted so they could meet.

"It's good to see you!" Roland said as Leon rode Anzu forward. Alix, Valeria, and the giants began to follow, forcing the rest of the soldiers to make way even more, but Leon noted that aside from a few muttered curses, no one made such a thing difficult. Everyone just seemed too tired to care right now, regardless of their personal feelings about giants.

"I take it we've won?" Leon asked.

"That we have," Roland replied, though his expression indicated to Leon that the victory had come at great cost—Roland seemed to have taken a commander's role rather than that of a frontline soldier, so he wasn't wearing a helmet. "I suppose you should come with me right now. The rest of the general staff will meet in an hour or so once we can properly regroup, but I think August will want to see you beforehand."

Leon raised an eyebrow in confusion, but when he remembered that Roland probably couldn't see that through his helmet, he added a confused, "Huh?"

"Oh, it's nothing bad, I can assure you, but he was a bit concerned about how the giants would fare."

"... I see..." Leon said. He then turned to Valeria and said, "Make sure the rest of our unit remains organized." When Valeria gave him an inquisitive look, he followed up by saying, "You're my second-in-command. Time to do some second-in-command things."

A slight smile slowly spread across her face. She then confidently nodded and rode away, leaving Leon, Alix, and the giants to follow Roland.

Chapter 424: Stakes

"So, how did it go on your end?" Roland asked Leon as they rode along toward the camp where August had returned once the battle was over.

"Fairly well..." Leon replied, quickly giving Roland a summary of what his people had done.

"That's impressive," Roland said appreciatively. "It's not easy keeping nobles and their retainers under control in the best of circumstances, let alone with the added complexity of being the flanking element. It's good to see that you were able to keep your people in line, despite the actions of Lord Gellius."

"Don't be too impressed, I'm sure the giants did most of the work just by being present," Leon replied, easily dismissing Roland's compliments.

"If that's how you want to see it, then I guess that's how it is." Roland shrugged and the two continued onward.

"How was it on your end, by the way?" Leon asked. As soon as the question was out of his mouth, Roland's expression turned dark.

"It was... not easy. We just had to sit here for hours as Duke Duronius sent his own Legions against us time and time again. We took many casualties."

"Is that why we're not pursuing Duronius?"

"Probably," Roland acknowledged. "I made sure Prince August knew how bad of a situation we were in, and only after I did that did His Highness make the call not to launch a pursuit."

"How bad is it?" Leon quietly asked.

"I'd say roughly five thousand of my soldiers were killed, alongside probably twenty thousand wounded, but that's just a preliminary estimate, I haven't gotten the official numbers, yet."

Leon winced. Twenty-five thousand out of eighty thousand Legion soldiers in total, and that wasn't even touching on the possible casualties sustained by the nobles. It was no wonder why August wasn't willing to pursue Duronius given that the Duke still undoubtedly outnumbered them.

"Do you have any idea how long it might be before we get most of those wounded back into shape?" Leon further inquired.

Roland gave him a quick, tense smile. "I'll be honest, Leon, I'm almost as new to all of this as you are—don't forget that I'm only thirty-two."

Leon reeled so hard he almost accidentally hurled himself off of Anzu. He knew that Roland was young, but it had slipped his mind just how young the man was.

Seeing Leon's reaction brought a smile to Roland's face. "I get that a lot," he said. "I'm sure you do too, given the difference between your age and power."

"Not so much, actually..." Leon replied as he tried to think back. Most of the time he found that his status as a Valeman took precedence over his power as it related to his age. Most people heard his last name and made up their minds about him, or so it seemed.

"I'm sorry to hear that..." Roland whispered. "Have you ever considered... I don't know... changing your name? Even if other Valemens can't just change their names, I'm sure *you* can,"

Leon glanced at Roland out of the corner of his eye to see the man give him a very brief meaningful look.

"No," he unhesitatingly replied, his voice carrying a tinge of annoyance. "I am a Valeman. No use in denying it, no matter what technical arguments someone may use to try and convince me otherwise. I lived my entire childhood up there, and the Forest of Black and White is what I envision when I think of 'home'. Or, at least it *was* until I bought myself a house with Elise."

"How is she, by the way?" Roland asked. He could tell that Leon wanted to change the subject even if the young man could've said more.

"She's fine," Leon answered. "She's *pissed* though. Our home was seized by Prince Octavius after I left. Fortunately, she moved back in with her mother for the time being and, to my knowledge, has been trying to exert pressure from Heaven's Eye to get it back. Given Heaven's Eye's political neutrality, though, she doesn't have many ways she can make it happen. So, I suppose if I want my villa back, I'm going to have to make sure Prince August wins this thing."

Roland smiled, but the smile quickly turned dark. "That's rough..." Roland said. "I don't even want to think about what happened to my home, I don't have Heaven's Eye in my corner to fight for it in my absence..."

"Right, how's your family, by the way?" Leon politely asked.

"My wife and son settled in fairly well in Ariminum, along with most of our household."

"In Ariminum? Not in Ironford?"

"No. They went to Ironford first, of course, but I figured that Ariminum would be safer in case..." Roland trailed off as his eyes stared off into the distance, a look of fear on his face.

"... in case we lose?" Leon finished.

Roland nodded. "If we do lose, then they're only a few miles away from the border. If they were to stay in Ironford, then they'd be hundreds of miles away from safety. Better to stay in Ariminum, even with Octavius' eyes turned to the city."

"Then I guess it's doubly important to you to keep Duronius from seizing the city?"

"Absolutely."

Leon nodded. "It'll stay safe. Sir Constantine holds it with a Legion and one of the fleets. The city won't fall to anything short of overwhelming force of the sort that Octavius won't be able to bring to bear."

"I like your confidence."

"I wouldn't call it confidence, I would call it certainty," Leon said with a smile. "Don't forget that I spent more than a year there. Not much time compared to many knights, especially those from Prince Trajan's retinue, but long enough to get an idea of just what kind of defenses the city has. I would bet my life on saying that it would be impossible for Octavius as he is now to take the city."

"I hope so," Roland wistfully whispered, a smile of his own spreading across his face despite his worry.

The two rode on in silence after that, not speaking for a long few minutes as they approached the main camp. The first place they went to was August's tent, but some of August's aides told them that the Prince wasn't present. After a few bewildered seconds, Roland asked them where he was, and they were informed that August had gone down to visit the field hospital now that the battle was over.

A thoroughly confused Roland and Leon made their way there—along with those who followed both knights.

The field hospital was a set of about a dozen large tents, each one big enough to shelter about five hundred. Naturally, that wasn't nearly enough for every single injured person, and there were far more soldiers and noble retainers languishing out in the late afternoon sun than were inside the tents. Additionally, there were a few supply tents nearby as well as an overflow space consisting of a two hundred foot ring of open space—all of which was crammed with people—between the hospital tents and the rest of the nearby camp.

In the aftermath of such a large-scale battle, the hospital was a truly terrible place. Healers ran this way and that, the air was filled with the stench of blood and the screams of the injured and dying. The expressions on every face were those of stress, fear, and pain. Only the oldest and most experienced of the healers remained calm in such an atmosphere. Even Leon, with all of his killing intent, was struck a bit speechless at the sight of so many bleeding and broken men and women. But he remained as stoic as he could, for he could tell that Anzu beneath him and Alix beside him were far more affected by the atmosphere than he was, and he needed them to remain strong.

Leon and Roland dismounted. Anzu and Alix continued to follow Leon, but Roland left his horse with his followers, who remained outside the hospital. Their first destination was the main tent where the healers were based. Inside was a hurricane of activity as healers and their managers tried to keep up with the influx of patients still streaming in from the battlefield in the hundreds, and nowhere could Roland or Leon see the Prince.

It took about ten minutes of searching and asking around, but eventually, they found him back outside accompanied by only a few guards.

During their search, Leon hadn't known what to expect. He hadn't thought that August would've ever come down here—Leon didn't think he'd come down there either, and now that he was, he never wanted to come back. After a bit of thought, Leon figured that he'd have been helping out a bit, taking the opportunity to show himself to the troops and show them that he knew what they were doing for him and appreciated it.

August wasn't doing that. In fact, he wasn't doing much of anything. Roland and Leon found him in the most private place in the entire camp, the place where the bodies of the fallen were being stored, just staring at the veritable mountain of corpses with a look of blank shock on his face.

The area was basically just blocked from the rest of the camp and field hospital by a number of cloth walls tied to tall stakes about ten feet high. There was no ceiling, allowing the entire area to be illuminated by the sun. Near the entrance were a few priests from Lineage Hall cataloging each and every fallen soldier and noble retainer brought to them and preparing them for transport. August was near the priests but separated enough to be left alone and not get in their way.

"... Your Highness..." Roland asked as he and Leon approached. August had barely reacted to their appearance, and that greatly concerned the Paladin. Leon didn't much mind; his attention was captured by so many corpses just as August's had been.

Each body was put into a lightly enchanted linen bag that would keep it relatively preserved for several weeks. During that time, they'd be taken to the nearest Legion fortress so that transport back home could be arranged—at least, that was what would happen under normal circumstances. Now, Leon guessed they'd be sent back to Ironford or Ariminium until such a time as their transport back to wherever these soldiers had come from had been rendered safe.

But there were still bodies being brought into this cordoned-off area, and a significant number hadn't yet been bagged by the priests. It was these bodies that August was staring at, his eyes glazed over as more and more were brought in.

"Your Highness!" Roland repeated with more firmness to his tone. He reached out and laid a hand upon August's shoulder, causing the young Prince to almost jump out of his skin.

"Ah! Roland! And Sir Leon! When did you two get here?" the Prince almost cried out.

Leon was tempted to respond with some sarcastic remark about how long they'd been there, but he was hardly in the mood for it when surrounded by so much death.

"We just got here," Roland said reassuringly. "We're here to give you our preliminary reports..."

"Oh... ah, yes..." August mumbled as his eyes turned back to the corpses. In the grand scheme of things, a few thousand corpses weren't that much, but when gathered together like this, it was overwhelming, and August was having a hard time just processing what he was seeing. He took a few more seconds to burn the image into his mind, and then he silently turned and walked back toward the field hospital.

The others followed him, everyone glad to be away from the scene. But just because they had left it didn't mean that it was immediately forgotten. August didn't say a word for almost five minutes as he slowly led them through the hospital; he just watched as so many men and women had their injuries tended to, many of whom were in such pain that they were moaning or crying.

"I've always known..." August whispered, barely audible even to Roland and Leon's sixth-tier ears above the noise of the hospital.

"Known what, Your Highness?" Roland asked as he matched the Prince's quiet tone.

“The price of seizing a throne,” August said as he turned to look Roland in the eye. “And those who would have to pay it. I’ve always known, but I’ve never really *seen* it before...”

“It’s a terrible thing...” Roland agreed.

“That would be putting it mildly...” August murmured as only twenty feet away, three healers held a young man down as he screamed in pain while a fourth healer pressed a spell to his eviscerated leg, telling the man to calm down and let the magic work or else they’d have to amputate the entire leg from the hip down.

“I hope it’s worth it...” Leon said as he looked from the young Legion soldier to August, catching the Prince’s gaze as August turned toward him. “Whether or not it is will be up to you.”

August nodded, ignoring his bodyguards who were glaring at Leon for speaking like that to their Prince.

“I understand...” August whispered. He then took a deep breath, straightened himself up so that he didn’t look quite so defeated, and then said, “Let’s go. We have a lot of work to do if we’re to win this war, and I’d like to get started on it as soon as possible.”

With that, he led the group out of the hospital and back toward his personal tent. Before he left, though, he glanced back over his shoulder one last time, burning the image into his mind of tens of thousands of men and women broken and bleeding and dying all for him. It was a sight he didn’t think he’d ever forget, and he had a terrible feeling that it wouldn’t be the last time he saw it either.

Chapter 425: Regroup

In the wake of the battle with Duke Duronius, August ordered the entire army to take a few days of rest and relaxation. They weren’t allowed to leave the camp unless they were on official business, but it was more than enough time for everyone to get some much-needed rest after the first major battle of the southern campaign.

All things considered, the soldiers and noble retainers performed admirably. They managed to bait a force roughly twice their size into getting flanked, then being driven off the field. Duronius and his people were still out there in the forests to their southwest, but for the moment, they weren’t doing much of anything besides sitting in their camp and keeping an eye on August’s armies.

Both sides were waiting for the other to make the next move, it seemed.

That was just as well, for the final count for August’s casualties was about nine thousand dead and almost thirty thousand injured, and they needed as much time as they could get to heal those injured men and women.

Two hundred of those dead and about nine hundred of those injured were from Leon’s unit, leaving him with barely more than half of what he had been given before the battle began. Nearly all of the giants had suffered some form of damage, as well, but they were far easier to ‘heal’ since all they needed to do was use their earth magic to seal the cracks in their bodies. Fortunately, none of the giants had fallen during the battle, so Leon didn’t consider his personal forces meaningfully reduced, even if almost half of his men and women were either dead or recuperating.

This was a bit of a callous and dismissive attitude to take toward his human subordinates, but given that the nobles and knights that he had been placed in charge of held little respect for him, he didn't see much of a reason to change his mind. Of course, they had known each other for less than a day, so he wasn't too insulted or angry, and he didn't expect that attitude to have changed much even though they had fought alongside each other during the day. At the very least, he knew that it didn't much raise his opinion of them any, so he couldn't imagine that theirs of him had improved.

In that vein, after Leon and Roland met up with August, Leon returned to the battlefield to link back up with Valeria and the rest of his unit, and he was only mildly surprised to find Valeria almost attacking the nobles he was supposed to be commanding. They were still back at the ridge that Roland's Legions had been defending, with the nobles and their retainers on one side, Valeria on the other, and the giants not too far away tending to their injuries. The rest of the army had also separated into their component groups as they were slowly organized, leaving Leon's unit mostly on its own.

"What's going on?" Leon asked as he and Alix arrived, seeing Valeria staring down the Barons with her glaive in hand as they mostly looked back at her with scorn and derision and their own weapons drawn.

"Insubordination," Valeria simply replied, not taking her eyes off the armed Barons.

"This *little girl* presumes to command her betters!" the leading Baroness haughtily replied as she spared Leon a dismissive glance.

"Explain," Leon demanded. He trusted that Valeria had been ordering them to reassemble and to prepare to return to the camp and deal with their dead and wounded, but he wasn't going to take that for granted. Besides, as much as he didn't like the nobles, he knew that it was best if he didn't blindly take Valeria's side when accusations were being made—even when they were incredibly rude and elitist.

If he did, he could easily see them attempting to mutiny against him, despite the giants on his side.

"Sir, I was trying to get them back into ranks to wait for you, but they have done nothing but insult me and ignore my orders!" Valeria complained, her tone calm but carrying a hint of killing intent.

"It's not your place to tell *us* what to do, girl," Baron Gellius spat, his brown eyes appearing almost black as his brow scrunched in an almost comically exaggerated scowl.

Valeria didn't respond verbally. No one needed to be reminded that Leon had made her his second-in-command over the Baroness, so Gellius' denial only made him a traitor in her eyes. She took a few steps toward Gellius, raising her glaive slightly as she did. Gellius didn't back down, he was a fifth-tier mage and had more than enough confidence that he could take Valeria if they came to blows—though he did assume a more directly confrontational stance than he had a moment before. Behind him, many of his knights did likewise, drawing their weapons and moving up to support their Lord, while the other Barons backed up to watch.

But neither made any further moves. Before Valeria could get any closer, a brilliant golden bolt of lightning exploded upon the ground between them, showering them and almost everyone else within thirty feet in burning sparks. A split-second later, a deafening boom hit them like a tidal wave, crashing upon their ears so hard that it caused several lower-tiered mages nearby to collapse in shock.

"None of you will be fighting with each other right now," Leon growled as he slid down from Anzu's back. Having just come from the field hospital, he was in no mood for these games. "We're returning to camp. There will be no arguments."

His aura exploded outward, inundating Valeria, the Barons, and their closest knights in a veritable ocean of killing intent. And that for the best, for it distracted the Barons from the fact that Leon's lightning and thunder had attracted the attention of nearly everyone else still on the battlefield, along with the giants. If they knew that they had an audience of tens of thousands, they might've decided to stick to their guns. As it was, with Leon's sixth-tier aura crushing them under its weight, no one said a word other than a few whispered orders from the Barons to get everyone else ready to return to camp.

"Good..." Leon drawled, a vicious smile on his face as he strode forward, placing himself between Valeria and the Barons. "Once we get situated, I'll expect everyone to come and see me so that we can work through all of this unpleasantness together. Let's get moving."

His order was carried out almost as soon as he retracted his aura. The Barons didn't stick around, eager as they were to just get away from him. If nothing else, it at least displayed that they had had their fill of fighting for the day despite their posturing and weren't quite willing to take their insubordination too far. Or maybe it was the giants slowly creeping towards them, their healing temporarily suspended in the wake of Leon's blatant use of magic and release of killing intent.

"We're good here," Leon called out to Lapis as the giant approached.

"Are you sure?" Lapis replied as it seemed to flex in an uncannily human way, the blue streaks in its stone body glittering in the late afternoon sun.

"For now," Leon said, smiling at the giant. "We'll have to see about later, but for now, we're all friends."

Lapis continued its strangely human mannerisms by turning to look at the Barons as they walked away as if it doubted Leon's word, and a moment later it confirmed its doubt when it merely said, "If you say so..."

"Now... then..." Leon said a bit awkwardly as Lapis turned its attention back to the rest of the giants, "I suppose that we ought to head back to camp ourselves..."

"You sound like you have some kind of question..." Alix stated. "There something wrong?"

"I just figure that we would probably be expected to camp next to all of these people, and I have no idea where that might be."

"I can take care of that," Alix happily said. "Give me an hour and I'll have it all set up!" And like that, she quickly began to ride back to the camp, leaving Leon and Valeria on their own amidst the giants and the rest of the Legions, who were still getting reorganized by setting up patrols and continuing to dig through the bodies by the ridge for their fallen and injured comrades.

Leon and Valeria shared an awkward look before they, too, began to meander back toward the camp, Leon astride Anzu and Valeria upon her borrowed horse. The silence was heavy to the point that even Leon, who normally reveled in such conditions, felt a bit uncomfortable, prompting him to speak up.

“So, have you heard from your father lately?” he asked her, cursing himself for how awkward and forced it sounded—he wanted to learn a bit about Justin, and he figured that now, after spending a couple of months around each other, was a good time to ask.

Valeria stiffened a bit in her saddle causing Leon to think that maybe he miscalculated, but she quickly answered, “No... I haven’t heard anything...”

“That’s honestly quite strange to me, do you have no idea where he might have gone?” Leon asked after a sigh of relief that Valeria didn’t seem too upset at him for asking the question.

“None. He just... disappeared...”

“Kind of strange that he hasn’t reached out, isn’t it?”

“Very much so...” Valeria’s tone was quiet and somber, and she clearly didn’t want to talk much about her missing father. She stared off into the distance, avoiding Leon’s questioning gaze.

“The two of you were quite close before, weren’t you?” Leon hesitantly asked. He did his best to keep his tone even and mildly curious, as he didn’t want this to sound like the interrogation it kind of was. If Valeria continued to so obviously not want to talk, though, then he fully intended to stop and talk about these things later.

But lady luck smiled upon him, and Valeria replied, “Yes, we spoke whenever we could. We had so few others here, and no one else related by blood. I’m sure you can relate, being foreign to the Bull Kingdom yourself...” As she finished, Valeria finally turned to look Leon in the eye, staring at him so intently that he suddenly felt incredibly self-conscious.

He pressed on, regardless. A little discomfort was nothing compared to finally getting around to his main reason for accepting Valeria’s request to become his knight.

“I can understand that, I think the Barons have rather plainly shown how much they respect those they think beneath them today, and foreigners will always be beneath them in their view. But you two have also lived in this Kingdom longer than I have, and the Bull King even gave Lord Justin the Exarchate of Calabria. You two were nobles where you were from, weren’t you?”

“The length of time we have lived here, or the privileges extended to us have never mattered, we’re still defined by our name,” Valeria replied, referring to her last name.

As she explained to Leon back during their time in the Knight Academy, ‘Isynos’ simply meant, ‘from Isynia’. Much as Leon had been marked as an outsider with the name of ‘Ursus’, so too had she been marked.

Valeria’s tone turned a bit wistful and nostalgic as she continued, “This Kingdom has always been my home, and it’s filled with a great many wonderful people that I will remember for my entire life. But there are always people here and there that will do what they can to ensure that this isn’t my home. Or who try to, at least. People like Asiya, Elise, and Cristina help in that regard.”

“I can agree with that,” Leon said. “It’s almost like the nobles are from another world with how they can treat me, sometimes.”

“They kind of are, they’re stuck in the past from before the Bull Kings began to limit their power.”

“What about Gaius? He seems to be quite fond of you.”

“Gaius... represents another kind of attitude. He’s a noble, but he wants something from me. Or, I suppose it would be more accurate to say that he wants *me*. Not being rude towards me has always struck me as false and untruthful since his behavior, at least until our time at the Knight Academy, was usually quite unrestrained.”

“What did your father think of him? I get the idea that he thought that he had a legitimate chance to be with you, regardless of your personal feelings.”

“His father and mine frequently spoke with each other, since Lentia is quite close to Calabria, and to my understanding, the Duke of Lentia sometimes floated the possibilities of me and Gaius getting married. My father always promptly shot those down.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

Leon nodded appreciatively while suppressing a scowl. Justin was his enemy, of that he had no doubts, but learning that the man wasn’t a card-carrying villain rankled him a bit. Killing an enemy like Tiberias was easy, the young noble didn’t have much in the way of redeeming features. Knowing that Justin cared for his daughter—or at least Valeria seemed to think so, given her slightly reverent tone as she spoke about him—would make killing him just that much harder.

“Why are you so interested?” Valeria asked, shaking Leon out of his thoughts. “No offense intended, but I’ve always gotten the feeling that you like to remain distant, I honestly wasn’t expecting you to ask me about my father.”

“You’re my knight,” Leon replied. He knew that he would be bringing this up with Valeria at some point, so he had mentally rehearsed the answer he’d give if she ever asked this question. He was quietly happy that she did, meaning that his efforts and preparations in that respect weren’t in vain. “Would you not agree that it’s my duty to worry about you and to learn what I can about you?”

“Duty is one thing, following through on it is another.”

“... I *did* wait quite a while, though,” Leon pointed out. “To be honest, I almost pushed this down the line a bit more. But still, you’re my knight, and I would like to know more about you, if you’re willing to tell me.”

“I am,” Valeria immediately replied, giving Leon a joyful smile. “In return, I hope to learn more about you.”

“That’s... fair, but I don’t think my life has been that interesting. Mostly just living in a single-room cabin in the woods.”

“Then you can tell me about those woods. I promise not to fall asleep out of boredom.” Valeria gave Leon a cheeky smile that took him completely by surprise, stunning him into silence. “So, is there anything else you’d like to know about my father?”

There was. In fact, there was quite a bit Leon wanted to know, he hadn't even scratched the surface, but with the eager way Valeria was staring at him, he knew that he'd have to pay for it with information about himself, and that wasn't a price he was quite willing to pay.

"No, at least not for now."

"That's a shame, I was hoping to grill you about yourself..." Valeria teasingly replied.

"From the looks of it, I think I might've dodged an arrow, there," Leon said with a good-natured smile, to which Valeria responded with a playful smirk.

The two returned to the camp in relative silence with the giants not too far behind. Neither of them spoke too much for the rest of the day, for the day had already been quite long and they were both tired. The first proper battle of Prince August's southern campaign had come to an end, and it was time for them to get some rest.

Leon knew they'd need it, for he now had to deal with the Barons, and the sooner he did that the better.

Chapter 426: Taking Control I

The day after their first clash with Duronius' army was one of rest and recovery. Both sides watched each other quite closely, but neither made any significant moves against the other.

Since it seemed like nothing interesting was going to happen for a while, Leon decided that morning to take care of some business now that he had a unit of his own: assert his authority. Twice had he been defied by the Barons placed under him, and he couldn't have it happen again. They'd worked out both times, but a third could end with them all dead on the battlefield.

He had to deal with this problem of insubordination.

To that end, he had Alix and Valeria running around the camp all morning delivering messages, including summoning the Barons to his tent. He toyed with the idea of calling them to him before breakfast as a power move, but in the end, he decided against it. He didn't lack for ways to lord his authority over them, especially with a hundred giants on his side, and figured that they'd be less irritable and more willing to listen if their bellies weren't grumbling during their meeting. Besides, he needed that time to make some other preparations.

Leon fully expected there to be resistance given the actions of the Barons during and immediately after the battle, so he also sent Valeria and Alix with the message that if he had to summon them a second time, it would be Lapis who would be coming to retrieve them.

It seemed to work, for the Barons began to arrive only slightly after the appointed time. Leon hadn't expected them to arrive on time, so he wasn't too surprised, but he definitely took notice.

As everyone arrived, they took seats around the table just outside of Leon's tent. As the commander, he had a fair bit of room in front of his tent for just this sort of thing, but the nobles had brought enough of their retainers to fill up just about every available square inch of space in his assigned section of the army camp. Leon couldn't help but notice a rather disproportionately high number of these knights wielding hammers and clubs—crushing weapons that were generally more effective against stone giants than swords or spears.

The Barons made small talk amongst themselves, mostly ignoring Leon as their colleagues arrived one-by-one. Leon was content to remain silent, letting nothing more than a light smile grace his face as each of the five Barons appeared and subsequently barely even glanced in his direction. He did listen to their conversations, though, hoping to get a better grasp of their names than he currently possessed, for in the day or so since he'd been assigned the unit, he'd only managed to memorize Baron Gellius' name.

It wasn't until all five had arrived that he finally spoke up.

"Thank you all for coming," he loudly said as he stood up from his chair. He couldn't help but notice a few of the knights that the Barons had brought subtly reach for their weapons once he made his move, but he felt nothing more than some mild amusement at the idea that they'd attack him. He was a sixth-tier mage, easily the strongest person present, and he had the giants standing by not too far away. He wasn't invincible, and Alix, Valeria, and Anzu near the entrance to his tent were a bit more vulnerable, but he wasn't going to be cowed by a bunch of provincial knights trying to act tough.

Leon continued, barely even pausing as he started to slowly walk around the table behind their seats, "I'm sure all of you are wondering why I called you here, especially when you could be all curled up in your fancy tents resting."

He heard a few groans from the crowd of knights as he got going, and he was sure they were doing so because it seemed he was getting ready for a long speech.

"Well, I figured that since Prince August personally assigned all of you to me, that we ought to get some things straight. Namely, that the insubordination that you five have shown to me and my subordinates will stop. Today." Leon paused as he stood behind Baron Gellius' seat, the Baron himself not even turning to look Leon in the eye. It was all Leon could do not to pick the nobleman up by his neck and slam him back down into the table, but that wouldn't be conducive to a good working relationship.

After Leon's statement, he heard a few incredulous chuckles from knights who couldn't control themselves well, but the Barons mostly remained quiet, though he noticed Gellius and Baroness Gaia Orientis—the noblewoman who led the largest contingent of fighting men and women in his unit—smile mockingly at him.

"Of course, I'm not so naïve as to think this declaration alone is going to change many minds," Leon continued as his slow walk around the table resumed, "and so I'm going to offer all of you a chance. Or, perhaps more accurately, a *challenge*. I will face each of you myself, and if you can beat me in a duel, then I will not only go to the Prince and resign this commission he's given me, but I will also recommend the person who defeated me be given command of this unit."

Finally, that got a positive reaction. The Barons froze in their seats as greed and pride flashed across their faces. Leon smiled and decided to make his challenge just a little bit more enticing.

"Hells, I don't even have to face you mighty nobles personally, I'll even allow you to send out champions if you don't wish to sully your blades with my *barbarian* blood."

Leon suppressed a smile as he watched the Barons wrestle with the opportunity he just presented them. On the one hand, it was a sanctioned and legal way for them to assert their authority over the others in the unit while also being able to punish the barbarian who thought himself better than them, but on the other hand, Leon was a sixth-tier mage who proved his power the day before.

He wondered which would win out, their greed and pride, or their caution and reason. He was pretty sure he knew which of these traits were stronger.

“What are the rules for this duel, and who will officiate?” Baroness Orientis asked as a smile played across her lips.

Leon’s smile grew wider. The Barons weren’t the only people that he had Valeria and Alix delivering messages to that morning, he’d also been in touch with August and Roland. August was sending a couple of prominent knights to preside over the duel, while Roland would be coming to watch in person and to lend his own influence to ensure that the rules were upheld.

“Sir Roland and a couple of Prince August’s representatives will be our neutral witnesses,” Leon replied, reveling in the shock on the faces of Gellius, Orientis, and a number of watching knights. The guests that were coming effectively cemented Leon’s challenge as legitimate.

“I will fight you!” Gellius roared as he almost leaped to his feet. “When I’m done, barbarian, you’ll wish you never left that festering wasteland you came from!”

“Hold on, Gellius,” Orientis said, freezing her fellow nobleman in her steely gaze. “The rules, Sir Leon. I believe you were just about to get to them?”

“I was,” Leon light-heartedly replied, acting as if Gellius hadn’t just insulted him and the Northern Vales in front of dozens of watching knights. “First off, no killing or causing serious injuries; no reason to weaken our side in the middle of a civil war. Secondly, you can fight me yourselves, or you can send out a single champion. I will allow any gear you deem appropriate for this duel, no restrictions at all.” He saw a few smirks at this blank check he just gave the Barons, but he trusted in his skill and the weapons he had at his disposal to see him through whatever strange weapons and items that the Barons might bring out. “We will fight until there is a clear victor. Finally, each of you may only challenge me once. If I defeat you or your champion, then you have lost. If I defeat all of you, then you will follow me without complaint. If you do not challenge me, then you will follow whoever wins these fights without complaint, whether that’s myself or one of your noble comrades. Any questions?”

“Simple and reasonable rules, I don’t think anyone here will have any problems following them,” Orientis replied. “Where will we be doing this?”

“Should I assume that this means you’re challenging me, My Lady?” Leon asked.

“Where are we doing this?” Orientis repeated as she flashed Leon a predatory smile.

“Right here. We can move the table.”

All of the Barons immediately stood up, and several knights moved the table to the edge of the gathering space between the tents. As they were getting ready, however, Roland and August’s two proxies arrived, and they disagreed with the location.

“I’d rather a fight between mages capable of elemental magic doesn’t happen in the middle of the camp, and I’m sure His Highness and Lord Aeneas would agree,” Roland said as he strode into the gathering space.

“Where should we go, then?” Leon asked.

"Follow me," Roland replied, and he led Leon, Alix, Valeria, and the Barons across the camp, a distance of more than a mile, toward a designated mustering area for the Legions. It was a wide, relatively flat open field that had been further smoothened by earth mages. "We can do this thing here," Roland said. "Plenty of room for everyone to watch and for the combatants to go wild a bit."

"It's perfect," Leon exclaimed.

The group began to get set up, which mostly consisted of the knights forming a large circle around Leon and their Lords. Valeria and Alix, however, stuck around Leon for a moment longer.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Alix asked, worry written all over her face.

"I am," Leon confidently replied.

"But—"

Interrupting Alix, Valeria said, "The nobles respect martial strength. If Leon defeats them, then they will have less cause to defy him. This is a good way to force them into line, at least for a little while."

Alix frowned, but she relented, and she and Valeria began to move to join the watching knights, though Valeria paused just long enough to share a nod of solidarity with Leon, which he reluctantly returned.

Leon was left standing alone in the center of a ring of watching knights, but that didn't last long. Baron Gellius pushed his way forward, appearing in front of Leon with a look of gleeful anticipation on his round face, his beady eyes squinting slightly in the midday sun. The nobleman didn't spare Leon a word, simply following up on his earlier challenge by summoning a suit of gleaming white and gold armor from his soul realm.

The white of the Baron's armor came from beautiful, immaculate white silkgrass, which Leon knew must've cost a fortune. Emblazoned upon his chest was his family's sigil, a fist grasping three arrows rendered in dark red dye. Everything that wasn't covered by the long silkgrass tabard was protected by enchanted golden plate, including his gauntlets and helmet. The helmet itself was almost diamond-shaped, with the faceplate forming something like a cross with only a pair of angled eye slits cut into it. It was gaudy and looked hard to breathe in, but Leon could see how it might appeal to someone who greatly valued appearances.

He could also see—and hear—why the nobleman didn't wear the armor the day before, as it added quite a bit of bulk to his already fairly wide frame, and with every movement, Gellius made a distinctive clinking sound that proved he was heavily armored beneath the brilliant white silkgrass and glittering golden plate.

'Turtling up, huh?' Leon thought derisively as a wicked grin spread across his face. He summoned his sword and black Magmic Steel armor from his soul realm. He felt the enchantments he'd placed upon it activate, granting him great protection from fire and lightning magic, while also increasing the potency he already possessed with those elements. A few smaller enchantments gave him additional protections from the other elements, but they weren't nearly as effective as the fire and lightning enchantments.

"Are you two ready?" Roland asked as he stepped forward to take the position of referee. Leon noticed the other two knights that August had sent in his stead were also standing by, one of them each watching Gellius and Leon like hawks.

"Yes," Leon and Gellius said in unison.

"Then you may begin," Roland said as he lightly stepped backward, moving so quickly back to the edge of the watching crowd that he almost seemed to teleport.

Gellius immediately surged forward, a large single-bladed ax appearing in his hand, its curved blade shining with bright white light. He raised and swung the ax in a downward strike with a fluidity that spoke volumes of how much he'd trained with the weapon, and his thick aura of killing intent showed that he wasn't holding anything back in his attack, despite Leon's stipulation that they not strike to kill or cause debilitating harm.

But Leon didn't care too much. Gellius was moving extraordinarily fast, but Leon had no trouble tracking the nobleman. As Gellius drew close and began his swing, Leon drew his blade, swung in a powerful horizontal slice, and deflected the oncoming ax all in one smooth movement.

Gellius had overcommitted to the strike, so as Leon's blade sent it swinging wide, he wasn't able to stop until the glowing ax sank into the dirt, leaving him wide open for an easy retaliation from Leon.

With a complete lack of sentimentality, Gellius let go of his ax and threw himself backward, expecting a vicious follow-up from Leon after the Baron had so clearly struck to horrifically maim or kill. And so, when Gellius managed to fall back a few paces without so much as a single half-hearted attack from Leon, he and many of the spectators were struck almost dumb with surprise.

Leon simply stood there in a stance so sloppy that he could only be deliberately mocking Gellius' attack.

Gellius roared in anger at Leon's derision. He extended an arm and tiny white lights began to dance around his fingers as he called upon his power. These lights coalesced into a glowing orb of roiling white light, and with a grunt of exertion, a beam of light erupted from it aimed right for Leon's chest.

And it missed. Leon seemed to vanish like he wasn't even there, reappearing ten feet to Gellius' right with a deafening clap of thunder, his legs sparkling with golden lightning magic. The beam then dissipated harmlessly upon a wall of white light that Roland summoned to protect the rest of the watching knights, with August's two proxies standing by just in case that wall failed to stop the beam.

"You're going to have to do better than that..." Leon mockingly said, the smile on his face hidden by his helmet but revealed by his tone.

"Filthy savage!" Gellius shouted back. He snapped his fingers, sending a dozen tiny motes of light hurtling toward Leon faster than just about anyone could see, but again, Leon vanished with a blast of thunder, although this time he didn't reappear far away from the Baron, but right upon him.

He was within sword range of Gellius, but before he lunged forward, he hit the Baron with as intense a pulse of killing intent as he was able. The result was a wave of killing intent so potent that Gellius' legs practically turned to jelly, and the Baron began to collapse, his magic failing him in that brief moment.

But Leon knew that he only had a second or two before Gellius recovered, so as the Baron fell, he swung his sword like a bat and clipped the edge of his helmet. As soon as it made contact with the golden metal, lightning surged into the nobleman's armor and his head whipped to the side fast enough to audibly crack his neck. Leon's lightning tore through the armor's enchantments and coursed through his entire body, causing his muscles to seize and his golden armor to be scorched an ugly mud brown.

Gellius dropped like a bag of rocks, and he didn't get back up. Leon's lightning had caused his silkgrass tabard to catch fire, and the only reason this didn't cause Gellius terrible burns was that Leon had doused the flames with a snap of his fingers almost as soon as they appeared. He could sense that Gellius had been completely stunned and was in no position to defend himself even from mundane fire.

The Baron lay in the dirt completely motionless, curled up as his magic fought off Leon's lightning.

Leon stepped back as Roland leisurely stepped forward. Gellius' aura was strong enough that it was clear Leon hadn't seriously hurt him, but it was also clear that Gellius had lost. Still, Roland checked the Baron anyway and helped Gellius' seizing muscles to relax with a few waves of his hand that sent orbs of white light into Gellius' body.

"Now, then," Leon loudly said to the watching crowd as Roland saw to Gellius. "Who's next?"

Chapter 427: Taking Control II

"Now, then," Leon loudly said as Roland saw to Gellius. "Who's next?"

"I'm... not *done yet!*" Gellius shouted as he tried to struggle back to his feet. Roland pulled back a bit as the Baron began struggling to rise. A couple of his knights rushed forward to help their Lord, but he waved them away.

Once the Baron managed to struggle back up, he assumed an aggressive stance and began to channel his magic power in preparation to continue his duel with Leon. However, he swayed on his feet and his breathing was pained. A moment later, he pulled his charred golden helmet off of his head and tossed it aside, putting the vein-like burns on his face on display, along with his somewhat dazed expression.

Leon smiled back at the man and adopted a defensive stance. It was clear to everyone that Gellius was essentially done, but if the man himself didn't quite get it, then Leon was happy to *show* him that he'd lost.

Fortunately for Gellius, as he stood there taking labored breaths and barely able to stand, reason won out and some measure of clarity returned to him. His eyes focused on Leon and Leon's aura, which hadn't meaningfully weakened since the fight began. Gellius found it painfully obvious that defeating him hadn't taken much out of the younger man, and so he swallowed his pride and began to wordlessly hobble back to the edge of the crowd. The nobleman was extremely conscious of everyone else's eyes upon him, but he did his best to act with whatever dignity that he could muster.

Leon was tempted to call after him about how 'he wasn't done yet' but decided that the man had been humiliated enough—he wanted the Barons cooperative, not bitter and resentful. So, he stood there in the center of the crowd and raised his arms in an open invitation. Any of the other four Barons who were willing could come forward to challenge him for control of their unit.

Without delay, a large, hulking knight stepped forward dressed in shining steel plate armor. His chest was covered in a light green tabard with the blue sigil of one of Leon's subordinate Barons. The Baron in question called out, "This man shall be my champion!"

"Very well," Leon said, smiling. The champion was a fifth-tier mage, but he was extremely heavily armored, and from what Leon could tell of his aura—it was sinking and spread out into the ground more than through the air—he was an earth mage, and one that was probably specialized for defense. In his

right hand was a short sword not even three feet long, while in his left was a large tower shield that protected the champion from shin to neck.

Before beginning, Leon wondered if the Baron was trying to tire him out. After how handily he defeated Gellius, he couldn't imagine any of them thought that this champion could defeat him, but if he could last long enough and demand enough of Leon's power, then one of the other Barons might have an easier time. He noticed that the Baron whose champion he was fighting made brief eye contact with Baroness Orientis several times as Leon and the man's champion prepared themselves to fight, but he also acknowledged that he could just be paranoid.

"Ready?" Roland asked the combatants as they assumed their positions opposite one another.

"I am," the champion replied.

"Yes," said Leon.

"Then begin," Roland said.

Leon, unlike his fight with Gellius, moved first. He didn't wait for the champion to make the first move, for if he was correct and the man was only there to tire him out for another Baron, he had to get this fight over with quickly. He had decidedly more power than any single Baron, but if the next two or three fights were prolonged too much, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to last until the fifth.

So he attacked, trusting in his family's lightning arts and powerful offensive fighting style to carry him to victory. He blazed with lightning, arcs of it flashing across his entire body as he thundered toward his opponent faster than just about anyone else could see. In an instant, he was upon the champion, raining blows upon the weak points of his armor, striking fast and hard and darting back before any counter could be made.

Leon struck again and again, first at the champion's wrist holding his sword, then moving around the champion to strike at his left shoulder, and then at the back of the left knee.

Leon's first blow was successful; his blade failed to penetrate the champion's armor, but his lightning magic did, causing the champion to lose control of his arm from the elbow down and drop his blade. Leon's subsequent blows were less effective, with the champion remaining on his feet and with shield in hand.

But Leon didn't let that stop him, and he continued to spin around the champion, striking every vulnerable spot he could. The champion managed to harden his skin into stone, confirming Leon's guess that he was mostly defense-focused, but that wasn't enough to save him. Eventually, the champion fell to his knees, his less-armored joints bleeding from Leon's attacks, and much of his armor blackened by lightning burns.

When all was said and done, the duel lasted less than a minute, and Leon wasn't too much worse for wear. That being said, he could feel the strain of using his power so intensely, even if it wasn't yet a problem.

Playing off what little fatigue he felt, Leon spread his arms in a welcoming gesture and shouted, "Anyone else?!"

Almost immediately, another of the Barons stepped forward. He was clad in heavy armor much like the last Baron's champion, and unless Leon's senses were failing him, this Baron was an earth mage, too.

Leon suppressed a sigh. It seemed that his guess was proving true; the Barons were going to wear him out—probably so that Baroness Orientis could take charge if she could beat him when he was tired.

'But things aren't going to go that way...' Leon thought to himself as a smile broke out across his face. This sort of thing—testing his martial skills against worthy opponents—was one of the things he honestly couldn't get enough of. He wasn't that fond of killing, but fighting was another story, and this challenge that the Barons were giving him was one that he relished.

"Begin!" Roland shouted, and Leon sprang into action. Instead of charging this time, he conjured as powerful a lightning bolt as he could without turning his power silver-blue and hurled the bolt like a javelin as hard as he could.

The bolt traveled with characteristic speed, exploding upon the Baron's chest plate before the man could react. Showered in sparks and with Leon's magic power ravaging him outside and in, the Baron wasn't able to respond before Leon appeared before him with a flash and a clap of thunder and snapped his fingers in front of the Baron's face.

Fire erupted from Leon's fingers, enveloping the Baron's head and shoulders. Silence fell upon the watching knights as, for just a moment, it seemed like Leon had just murdered the Baron. But as the flames died down and the Baron fell backward, everyone breathed a sigh of relief; the Baron's aura was still strong enough to prove that he still walked in the land of the living, though it was also weak enough to prove that Leon had beaten him handily.

It also proved that Leon wasn't playing around anymore as he was with Baron Gellius. He'd held back enough to not kill those he was fighting against, but other than that one concession, he was fighting to win.

Naturally, when all eyes turned toward the fourth Baron—for everyone could see what was happening as clearly as Leon could—he paled a little, but he, with all the courage and dignity that he could summon... sent out one of his subordinates to fight Leon in his stead.

Of course, just because the Baron wasn't willing to face Leon personally, that didn't make his choice a poor one. Like the previous two combatants, this champion was another earth mage, and he began to solidify his skin before he even began to walk into the ring. Much like the previous two, the man wore the heaviest, most protective armor he possessed, cladding himself head-to-toe in dark green scaled armor, beneath which was grey mail and thick cloth padding. Leon could even sense magic flowing through the armor, showing that it had been enchanted, though he wasn't able to tell what, specifically, the enchantments did. And, like the first champion, he possessed a sword and shield, though this shield was a smaller kite shield rather than a massive tower shield while his sword was about a foot longer.

Regardless, he decided to shake things up for this fight. He summoned one of the prototype weapons that he'd been working on in his spare time before the civil war began. It was a weak thing, a bracelet that could only fire a few wind blades before breaking down, but it required much less of Leon's magic power than did a lightning bolt or fireball.

“Begin!” Roland shouted again, and Leon moved faster than the mortal eye could see, appearing in front of the champion as he did the previous Baron.

The champion had anticipated this, though, and had begun to raise his shield before Roland had called for the fight to begin. As his eyes registered Leon’s presence, the champion charged forward with all the speed that he could bring to bear, which compared to Leon’s wasn’t much. He put all of his weight behind his charge, trying desperately to put on a good showing before the inevitable happened.

He hit nothing but air. Leon had deliberately baited him out like this, appearing in front of him only to provoke a reaction. Once the champion started his charge, Leon nimbly dodged to the side, raised his arm with the wind bracelet, and let loose with every shot that the bracelet could handle.

Half a dozen wind blades were conjured by the enchantments in the bracelet and were hurled with great speed into the champion’s exposed flank. Most of the wind blades splashed harmlessly across the man’s armor, but Leon managed to hit behind the man’s knee with one well-placed shot. Unfortunately, it didn’t have much effect apart from staggering him a bit, while the bracelet loudly snapped in half from the magical strain and fell to the ground.

Leon frowned and felt a little dismayed at the lack of punch that the bracelet had, but it was, in the end, just a prototype, and he didn’t feel too terrible about it.

As the champion turned to face Leon, Leon charged at him, eschewing elemental magic in favor of physical might. The champion had been thrown off his balance a little by the surprise of Leon’s unexpected attack and the hit to the back of his knee, so his shield wasn’t raised in a good position. Leon consequently barreled right through his defenses, crashing into the champion with enough force to dent his scale armor and lift him off his feet.

And he did not come back down. Instead, Leon held him up almost as easily as he might hold a doll. The champion was so shocked and winded that he dropped his blade, though he managed to keep ahold of his shield. This didn’t help him, though, for Leon only waited just long enough for the reality of the champion’s situation to dawn upon him before slamming him back to the ground hard enough to almost bury him in the relatively soft dirt.

The champion may have had stonewall, thick padding, and tough armor, but the force of that impact still cracked a few bones and forced all of the air out of his lungs, leaving him gasping for breath and unable to move for the pain. He was also barely able to process Leon standing over him, blade in hand and pointed down at his exposed throat.

After a moment of silence that was broken only by the champion’s wheezing, the watching knights began to get very uncomfortable. Leon had won another fight and had again done so with completely different tactics than what he had used before. Slowly, all eyes began to turn in Baroness Orientis’ direction. The Baroness herself did her best to maintain an aloof smile, but the blood draining from her face told Leon and all the rest all they needed to know. Leon’s show of strength had been more than effective at least as far as she was concerned.

“Yeeeah!! Good job, Sir!” Alix called out, waving her hand in the air in triumph while also shooting dirty looks toward the defeated Barons. She then turned to Valeria and loudly asked, “How do you think he’ll

beat Lady Orientis? With lightning? Fire? Maybe he'll just bend her over his knee like a child and give her a good spanking. You want to bet?"

Leon almost chuckled at his former squire's antics—while also internally cringing at the provocation—and glanced at Orientis to see how they'd been received. The Baroness herself seemed at a complete loss as to how to respond. On the one hand, Leon had just beaten her colleagues so handily that it would be a huge risk to challenge him. On the other hand, her noble pride wasn't going to listen to her fear and reason and demanded that she follow through with her challenge.

Leon watched as these thoughts warred in her mind and across her sharp features. He personally thought that she would follow her pride's demand—she was in front of all her knights, after all, and she wouldn't want to lose face.

He was then shocked speechless when, instead of summoning her armor or sending out a champion, Orientis slowly walked forward a few steps and said, "I think I will refrain from challenging Sir Leon. Good Sir, you have certainly proven your strength to me, and as agreed, since I will not be challenging you here, I will not challenge your orders from here on."

She then took a few steps back to rejoin her knights, leaving the rest of the crowd—and especially the other four Barons—utterly flabbergasted, gobsmacked, and otherwise confounded.

After picking his jaw up off the ground, Leon almost sheepishly said, "Well. I guess that's that, then." After taking a moment to shake himself, pull his gear back into his soul realm—including the broken bracelet—and regain his poise, he loudly said for the Barons and all their knights to hear, "I hope that this settles the issue of command. I will forgive Baron Gellius' and everyone else's previous incidents of insubordination, but I will tolerate no more from *any* of you. Got it?"

Chapter 428: Independent Mission

August calmly regarded Leon as the younger man entered the command tent and gave the Prince a short, almost curt bow. Leon was usually a rather reserved and quiet individual, but now he was moving with a confidence that August hadn't ever seen in him.

"Sir Leon, I hear you ought to be congratulated on your victories," August said as a smile broke out across his thin face.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Leon replied as a smile of his own graced his lips.

"Tell me about it," August said with interest, leaning forward in his chair while wordlessly inviting Leon to sit across the small table from him.

Leon acquiesced, narrating the events of the previous hour as well as he could, and only boasting a little bit about how easy the fights were. He had to restrain himself a bit, despite his joy, for the fights weren't entirely fair, him being sixth-tier and all of his opponents being of the fifth.

Still, it was an accomplishment that he took pride in, and it showed in his demeanor.

"Wonderful, simply wonderful," August said in obvious praise as Leon finished. "Nobles, especially those of the lower landed ranks, aren't usually so used to taking orders from 'lesser' knights. I'm glad that you dealt with the issue so quickly, barely even a day after they were assigned to you."

"I doubt the issues have been totally fixed, Your Highness," Leon responded. "If all it took to solve problems like these were a few minutes in a fighting ring, we wouldn't have problems."

"It's still a good start. At the very least, they can't now complain that they didn't have their chance to take charge. Should make them less likely to be *overtly* insubordinate, though that may make them a bit more dangerous, too."

"So long as they follow my orders in battle, I don't care what they say behind my back," Leon emphasized. "Well, that's not *entirely* true, but so long as I don't hear about it, I won't go looking for rumors and the like. I just don't want something to happen again like when Baron Gellius refused to fall back when I ordered him to."

"Right."

As they spoke, one of August's secretaries quietly entered the tent and whispered something into the Prince's ear.

"Ah, it seems that the reason why I called you here is ready, Sir Leon," August said. He then turned back to the secretary and ordered, "Please show her in."

The secretary bowed, then went back outside. Leon gave August a questioning look—they were the only two people in the tent, which was strange in itself, but now the Prince was acting a bit coy and deliberately mysterious.

A moment later, a young woman walked in dressed in terribly dull clothing, looking like nothing more than an average traveler. However, Leon could sense a few strands of her aura that she had failed to completely hide, revealing her status as a fourth-tier mage and thus, as far more than just a simple traveler. He took a closer look at her, taking in her dark, somewhat greasy hair, her round face, her clothes that were just a bit too big, her face and arms that had been heavily tanned from time spent outdoors, and her bright, blue eyes that glittered with intelligence. She looked the very picture of a relatively impoverished woman who had been traveling on foot for a long while without much of a chance to stop and rest, though she at least didn't smell like that's what she'd been doing.

"Sir Leon, this is one of Sir Publius' informants," August said, saying no more about the woman's identity.

"A spy?" Leon asked as he remembered Publius, the, until very recently, Kingdom's Spymaster.

"I'm no spy," the woman growled, clearly taking offense to Leon's statement. "I'm an *investigator*."

"I see, my mistake," Leon replied with an apologetic look. "I apologize, I didn't mean to insult. I hope you can understand the mistake, Dame...?"

"I'm not a knight, either," she said, though her expression had softened into something resembling curiosity after Leon apologized for the unintentional insult. After Leon's expression and demeanor failed to change after she revealed she wasn't a knight, that look of curiosity deepened. She didn't, however, properly introduce herself.

After a moment of awkward silence, August said, "Our friend here has been sent by Sir Publius with a message. Perhaps she would like to repeat the message for Sir Leon to hear?"

"Yes, Your Highness!" the woman replied as Leon cocked an eyebrow in interest. If the old Spymaster had sent someone all the way here, then it had to be worthwhile. The woman began with the most relevant information, "We found Sir Marcus Aeneas."

At that, Leon sat up much straighter and focused all of his attention on the woman. He knew Marcus relatively well and had a good opinion of him after their time together in the Knight Academy, but more importantly, Marcus was the son of Marquis Aeneas, who was leading August's noble armies. Marcus had disappeared not long after August fled the Central Territories, so Leon knew that if they had found Marcus and were telling him about it, then it meant only one thing.

"I'd like to task you with his rescue," August informed Leon as he carefully watched the younger man's reaction.

"Sir Aeneas is being held at a prison in the territory of Baron Capetti, a vassal of the Duke of Lentia," the woman continued her explanation with barely a glance toward August for the slight interruption. "He isn't alone, either. More than a dozen other young nobles with ties to the Eastern Territories are being held in the same location, alongside a hundred or so common-born knights."

"It's a prison?" Leon asked.

"It can be thought of that way, sure," the woman replied. "It's hardly an uncomfortable place, from what I hear, though. It's more like being in an inn that you can't leave rather than a dungeon or a more conventional prison."

"It must be quite a large place to hold so many people," Leon observed.

"It... it's a bit crowded, I think that the conditions are only passable where the nobles are concerned," the woman admitted as a light sheepish look graced her otherwise professionally stoic face for just a moment. "The rest of the knights are being held in cramped conditions, and I doubt that it's particularly sanitary."

"Tell me more about this place," Leon said as he sat back in his chair in thought, wondering how an assault on this not-prison would work out. "What are the defenses like? Guards? Do we know the layout? How about specific knowledge about enchantments? I can't imagine the place would hold so many knights if it weren't adequately guarded and warded, especially if it isn't a dedicated prison..."

"It's an old countryside villa that Baron Capetti wasn't using," the woman explained as she rummaged around in a satchel at her waist.

A moment later, she pulled out a roll of paper, which she then laid out on the table, showing Leon a blueprint of the building complete with a graph and scale, showing that it was an official government document. It was a large place, with around a hundred rooms built in four wings around a big central courtyard. Crucially, though, the blueprint ended only a few relative feet from the edge of the paper, meaning that it only showed the main building. Leon could guess that a villa of its size probably had other buildings, too, like guest houses or other guardrooms.

"Most of the prisoners are being held here in the old storerooms and servant's quarters..." the woman said as she indicated the western wing, which had the most rooms, though they were quite small compared to some of the others. "the guard barracks are over here..." She then indicated the southern

wing, where what Leon could only guess used to be dining halls and ballrooms. "The northern and eastern wings are mostly reserved for the Baron, who's residing in the villa currently to keep an eye on the prisoners, and for the guard's common areas."

"Is there anything else to the property?" Leon asked as the woman finished her explanation.

"There is," the woman said as she pulled out a second map, this one much less formal and clearly hand-drawn, though no less exact in its measurements. It showed the villa and its attached property, including an outer wall, extensive gardens, and a huge open field on the southern side. In the north-western corner was a wooded area, taking up about a fifth of the entire property and cut off from the rest of the gardens by a river that ran right through the estate's grounds.

"One of the Naga's tributaries?" Leon asked, tapping the river. "Or is it purely decoration that was built and maintained with magic?"

"Natural and feeds into the Naga," the woman replied. "It looks a lot more impressive on this map. In reality, it's not very deep, and most of the time it's still and stagnant. More a creek than a proper river.

Leon nodded as he took it all in.

"Do we have another map showing its location?" Leon asked.

This time it was August who laid out the map on the table, showing most of the Southern Territories. They were close to the eastern edge, while the Duchy of Lentia was north-west of their location, almost at the northern tip of the region. The Barony that was their target was outlined, while the villa-prison itself was marked with a dot.

Leon nodded again as he built a proper picture in his mind of what exactly the prison was, where it was located, it's layout, and how he would crack it.

Interrupting Leon's thoughts, August asked, "Should we take this to mean that you'll do the mission willingly?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, I'll do it," Leon said. "But what are all of you going to do while I'm gone? I can't imagine that fighting off Duronius' army will be all that easy without the giants. I can even see that they might attack if they realize that they're gone..."

"If you move quickly, then it won't be a problem," August said. "Besides, we can take a strong defensive position and wait them out. Attacking us if we fortify our location will be a tall order, so if you accomplish your task within a couple of weeks, then there shouldn't be anything to worry about."

Leon nodded a third time as his eyes turned back to the largest map. If he pushed his unit, he could be at the villa in eight to nine days. Double that for the return journey, and then probably add another couple of days for the assault on the villa and to accommodate for any slowdowns.

"I'll be gone almost a month," he said. "Three weeks minimum."

"We can hold out for three weeks," August said with a smile. "Don't worry about us, just get those prisoners out of there."

"I understand," Leon responded, briefly wondering what August's motivation truly was—either a selfless desire to save these people or it was a political maneuver to win points both with his loyal nobles and with other nobles who might see the act and open themselves up to be coerced into joining August's side.

'Probably a mix of both...' Leon thought to himself as he closely observed August as subtly as he could.

"How did we get this information?" Leon asked when he turned his attention back to the woman.

"We were tipped off by one of Sir Publius' contacts," she replied. Seeing Leon's stoic face start to turn into a scowl, she quickly added, "I don't know anything more than that, I'm afraid."

Leon shrugged. It could be a trap, but he wasn't going to back down just because of that. The thought of someone like Marcus stuck in a prison wasn't one that appealed to Leon, despite how little they knew about each other. Still, Marcus had always acquitted himself with more honor than Leon had expected of a Kingdom noble, and he had to admit that he kind of liked the man.

He'd free Marcus and the rest from that prison. He wouldn't allow any other version of events to play out.

After a few more questions, Leon had all the information he thought he needed, and so he departed August's tent to start setting up for the march to the villa. Logistics had to be worked out, routes had to be planned... he was in charge of thousands of people now, and a hundred giants. There was a lot of work he had to do now to make sure that they were properly supplied.

—

"You're sure the message was received?" Duke Gratian asked his younger brother.

"I'd stake my life upon it," Gaius replied as the two gazed out from a terrace of the palace in Lentia's capital city of the same name. To their west, they could see the Naga River, and just north of the city were the plantations that grew the reeds that would eventually be turned into spell paper of decent quality. To the south of the city, however, were some of their family's vassals, including a relatively wealthy Baron with a country estate that was more than willing to lend it out for their purposes.

"Good, then we should prepare our welcome for when they come," Gratian replied.

Chapter 429: March to Lentia

Leon's unit got ready with little complaint. It seemed that his display with the duels had cowed the nobles well enough that they didn't question it when Leon informed them of the mission that August had tasked them with. The giants, as always, were rather silent and followed Leon unfailingly.

It gave Leon no small amount of pride to see his unit moving so quickly and without so much as a hint of discord in their ranks. Of course, it was still early, so there was still plenty of time for the Barons to get some fire back into their hearts and become insubordinate. Leon figured that it would take his leading them for months before they would truly become loyal to him, and he doubted that the war would continue for that long.

Well, he hoped it wouldn't. He didn't think he'd be able to stand to be apart from Elise for that long.

For now, though, Leon's biggest concern was the unit's logistics. He and the Barons were carrying all of their requisitioned supplies, and they had to properly manage it since they and the main army would be separated for weeks. If any of the Barons were to fall in battle or start to refuse to comply with Leon's orders, they could withhold significant amounts of the unit's food as a way of gaining leverage.

Part of this was by design. Leon had known this when he had tasked the Barons with this duty. In his childhood, Artorias had taught him that showing trust was a good way to instill some amount of loyalty immediately following a display of strength or dominance, and for Leon, giving the Barons most of their supplies was his way of showing trust.

He found himself remembering quite a few of Artorias' old lessons in the past two days, most of which had been largely forgotten since he hadn't a group of people of his own to protect and lead. Now that he did, it was all starting to come back, and he hoped that it would prove useful. At the very least, he didn't think he'd ever have handed over those supplies if Artorias hadn't taught him that such a thing could be useful.

With their supply situation worked out—at least, for the time being—their primary logistical issue turned toward the path they'd take. They could've turned directly north and taken the Gold Road close to Lentia and been there in a week, but Leon decided that they'd take a more scenic route, marching through the countryside of the Southern Territories. Given that they were almost three thousand strong—most of the camp servants being left behind so they could move faster—plus a hundred giants, they weren't going to be inconspicuous no matter what they did. Still, Leon judged that they'd have an easier time maintaining whatever subtlety they had by sticking to the forests.

But that also meant they had to cross dozens of streams, creeks, and swamps, meander through dense, hot, and humid forests, and ford half a dozen large tributaries of the Naga River. The giants and earth mages in their party were able to make bridges past the rivers, but the swamps and forests they had to trudge through on their own.

It was slow going, and it took a couple more days for them to reach their destination than Leon had initially estimated when meeting with August. He could only hope that August, Roland, and Aeneas would be able to hold out for the extra time.

The Duchy of Lentia was fairly small compared to many other noble territories of the same rank. Before the First Bull King unified the region, Lentia's enemies and neighbors had eaten away at much of its former territory, but the old Lentian royalty had readily surrendered to the First Bull King, allowing them to keep the lands they still held. But they had lost much of their most valuable resources to their neighbors, and so most of the Duchy's income these days came from spell paper production—decently lucrative in and of itself, but the Duchy's economy was almost completely reliant upon that one product.

What that meant for Leon, though, is that before he and his unit reached the villa where Marcus was being kept, they had to make their way around some of the plantations that grew the reeds that were processed into that spell paper. It was a relatively wealthy rural region, with frequent patrols by the Lentian Duke and the other nearby nobles to make sure that the wealth wasn't being stolen.

Leon and the others would have to avoid those patrols as much as they could, and with thousands of people and a hundred giants, that wasn't going to be easy. Still, their route had kept them far from the

roads, and they managed to reach a staging area about five miles from their destination with little trouble.

Now, they just had to assault what was sure to be a heavily guarded compound and extract its prisoners.

—

Leon rode out on the back of Anzu, the griffin's gleaming white coat extremely eye-catching in the light of the full moon. Behind him rode Valeria and Alix, still on their borrowed horses, and the few hundred light cavalry that the unit had flanking them. Most of the infantry would follow, but their task was to secure a few strong points on the way to the villa, with Baron Gellius supervising them.

The other four Barons would be accompanying Leon in the main assault with their knights. For a task this sensitive, Leon wasn't going to rely on peasant levies, which was why they were being kept out of it. Besides, after the rough march, most of the relatively weak levies were tired, but the more powerful knights were still in much better fighting condition.

Similar to the levies, the giants peeled off and waited at the nearest of these strong points to the villa, a hill that they immediately began to fortify. From there, they'd be close enough to assist Leon if he needed them, but he also wouldn't have to worry about them causing too much collateral damage. The giants were weapons that he wanted to use with some restraint rather than trying to solve every problem with them. Besides, he'd asked them to leave their reproduction rituals and join a war that they had no stake in, which only made that much more reluctant to commit them to battle unless they were truly necessary.

Like that, Leon and about five hundred knights and nobles surged out across the nearby farms and toward their villa at the top of a gentle hill.

Their approach went unchallenged; not even a horn blast greeted them as they came barreling out of the trees to the south. This confused Leon more than a little, and he almost called the charge off right then. However, as he looked backward and saw that the stone giants were still waiting there, his confidence soared and he let the charge continue.

Unfortunately, the villa itself was warded against magic senses, but the outer wall was much flimsier than expected. As the unit thundered across the reed plantation south of the villa, Leon and a couple of fire mages surged forward and started hurling fireballs at the wall, breaking right through the weak stonework.

The knights and their mounts poured through the breach and into the gardens of the villa. And yet, there still wasn't even the slightest hint of an armed response. No alarms, no guards, nothing.

Now thoroughly disconcerted, Leon released his magic senses once again—now that he was on the other side of the wall, the pulse of his magic power wouldn't be scattered before he saw what was within.

And as soon as he did, a deep scowl appeared on his face and he slowly lowered the blade in his hand.

"Sir Leon!" Baroness Orientis cried out as she rode to his side. "We ought to retreat, this is clearly a trap!"

"Do you sense any guards or an army nearby?" Leon quietly asked as he stared at the villa further up the gentle hill with a dark look in his eyes.

"No, Sir," Orientis replied as she flicked her hair almost dismissively.

"Then we're fine," Leon said. "Secure the villa. You know what your job is."

And with that, Leon and Anzu sped toward the villa, Alix, Valeria, and a dozen other knights in tow. The remaining knights, meanwhile, followed their Barons in securing the compound. Not a single one of them found so much as a hostile rat, let alone armed guards.

The lack of violence, however, didn't stop Leon's party from crashing into the central courtyard of the villa with blades drawn and magic channeled. There they found only a handful of people sitting around a table in the center of the courtyard. The table was in a gazebo surrounded by a small garden, seemingly having a nice, pleasant chat in the moonlight.

"Ah, you've arrived!" one of them called out as he rose from his seat and gestured toward Leon's group. "Please, whoever leads you, come join us! We have much to discuss!"

"Sir...?" Alix asked, looking to Leon for orders as the other knights began to spread out in the courtyard, surrounding the gazebo.

Leon sighed, recognizing several faces at the table, and turned to Valeria. She glanced back at him, clearly recognizing those same people, too.

Marcus was there, his clothes fine and clean and not even one black hair out of place. He did not look like someone who had spent weeks in prison, though Leon figured that a noble of his station wouldn't have been kept in squalor.

Next to Marcus was Alcander, the tall and heavily muscled nobleman who had acted as Marcus' second-in-command during their time at the Knight Academy. He'd pestered Leon on more than one occasion to duel and had only given up after their squireships had ended and Leon's power was revealed to have completely eclipsed his. Leon didn't even know that he'd been taken prisoner, so seeing him here was quite surprising.

The third and final person that Leon recognized was Gaius Tullius, his golden-blond hair shining in the light of the moon and the villa's magic lanterns, his cool blue eyes regarding Leon with little emotion. They flickered toward Valeria a few times, but Gaius managed to remain stoic and expressionless.

None of these people were the man who had risen and invited Leon to join them, however. That man was tall, with hair that matched Gaius' in color, a square jaw, and a prominent nose. He was classically handsome and held himself with the confidence of a man who was in total control of the situation, despite Leon's knights swarming over the villa.

Alongside these four were four more, two men and two women whom Leon didn't recognize, but given who they were with, he could make a couple of guesses. He figured one of the men was the Baron who owned the villa, but both were too well-dressed for him to tell which. The women, too, were impeccably well-dressed, showing that they were probably nobles of some level, and both had sigils on their tunics that were unfamiliar to Leon.

“Be on guard for anything,” Leon growled to Alix and Valeria, and they both nodded in response. He then leaped down from Anzu’s back and began walking forward.

“Is that Sir Leon?” Marcus asked as Leon drew close. Leon removed his helmet in response, showing Marcus that his guess was accurate. “I thought so, you’ve a rather unique aura and air about you...”

“Are you all right?” Leon asked, glancing at both Marcus and Alcander.

“We are, we haven’t been mistreated in any way,” Marcus replied.

“Indeed, we’ve been treated with nothing less than honor and respect,” Alcander added, smiling and nodding first toward a man who appeared—at least, as far as his looks were concerned—related to Gaius, and then to one of the other men.

“What about the other prisoners that were supposed to be here?” Leon inquired further.

“They’re here—” Marcus began, but he was cut off by the blond man who appeared to be in charge.

“So, you’re Sir Leon?” he asked. “Please, we have much to discuss, would you care to join us?”

“I’ll stand,” Leon replied as he conspicuously adjusted his grip on his sword. That this man seemed to have heard of him wasn’t something that Leon relished, and, in fact, put him quite on edge.

“Have it your way, then,” the man replied good-naturedly and with a wide smile. “Seems like a way to get tired feet to me, but to each their own, I suppose.”

“What did you want to talk about?” Leon asked, his tone grave and brokering no levity or familiarity.

The man finally seemed a bit taken aback at Leon’s straightforward and almost excessively formal attitude, but Leon didn’t care. In this situation, his heart was furiously beating, and he was bathing the villa in his magic senses, alert for any sign that this was, indeed, a trap. At the very least, he spared a few moments to watch as Baron Orientis found the others imprisoned in the villa, all of whom had been brought to one of the ballrooms as if awaiting Leon’s arrival.

“Getting right down to brass tacks, huh?” the man asked as he slid back into his seat. “I can appreciate that. Allow me to introduce myself, then. I am Gratian Tullius, Duke of Lentia, and I would like to negotiate. What I want from *you*, specifically, is to take my request to Prince August and impress upon him that I do not willingly support Prince Octavius, and that if he would have me, I would like to support him instead.”

Chapter 430: Gratian’s Offer

“You... want to defect to Prince August...?” Leon asked as he narrowed his golden eyes in confusion.

“That’s a rather *strong* way to put it... but I suppose it isn’t inaccurate...” Gratian said with a look of general distaste followed by one of reluctant acceptance.

“Why?” Leon asked with more than a hint of suspicion in his tone.

“I’ve never much liked Octavius,” Gratian said. “I don’t think he’s going to win this war, not with the way he’s been steadily alienating so many people in the capital. I *could* support him for the promise of expanded noble privileges benefits and other personal boons, but if he loses, then what benefits are

there to be had? And from what my younger brother has told me of his time as a *hostage* with the Prince..." Gratian nodded to Gaius, "... Octavius is depraved and morally bankrupt in his personal life, too. Adding to all of this, His Majesty didn't make him the sole regent, meaning that not even the King himself thought that Octavius would make for a good ruler on his own. And that's not even getting into what a farce that trial for Prince August was.

"So, tell me, Sir Leon, without personal, practical, legal, or moral grounds to stand upon, how should I justify supporting Prince Octavius, if that is, indeed, what you think I ought to be doing?"

Leon shrugged. "It's what so many of your fellow nobles are doing, I figured that there was simply some reason that I didn't know about that had all of you supporting him. Or maybe all of you are just blinded by the greed or arrogance that so often festers in nobility, I don't know. Regardless, I'm fairly certain that you're the only noble that has offered to switch sides."

Gratian looked more than a little pleased as Leon finished his statement. He knew that it was best to switch sides early and in so doing, instill a bit of gratitude within August. If he waited until it was clearer that August would win—and Gratian was all-but-certain that August would be the victor in this conflict—then he would be seen as an opportunist and despised for it, rather than respected and thought wise and moral.

But Leon wasn't a mind reader and had no idea what Gratian's true intentions were. Still, if he was willing to release so many prisoners, then that counted for something.

"I will relay your request to Prince August in return for your release of the prisoners," Leon said.

"Thank you," Gratian responded. "I have troops in Duke Duronius' army, and I am currently mustering more to reinforce them. I'm sure that we can inflict some serious damage together if we wait for the right time to make this official..."

"How many troops do you have?" Leon seriously asked as his hand momentarily tightened on the hilt of his sword, taking the statement as both offer and threat. Gratian could either continue putting pressure on August, or he could alleviate some of that pressure, instead.

"Ten thousand with Duronius, and another four thousand mustering in Lentia," Gratian answered.

"And your troops will turn on Duronius at your command?" Leon skeptically asked.

"They will," Gratian responded without a shred of hesitation.

Leon was silent for a long moment, but in the end, it wasn't his place to judge Gratian's intent, he was only being asked to relay the message. So, as his way of ending the conversation, he simply said, "I guess we'll see about that."

He then gestured to Marcus and Alcander, wordlessly telling them to get up, which they made to do. However, just because Leon was done with the conversation didn't mean that Gratian was, too.

"I understand your mistrust, Sir Leon, I do," the Duke said, his words giving Marcus and Alcander some pause, and they sank back into their seats. It was only polite to stay when a Duke was speaking, after all. "But I will show you that my intentions are honorable."

Leon nodded, but he said nothing more. Despite his people flooding throughout the villa and getting the prisoners ready for evacuation, he felt extremely vulnerable so far from support and so deep in territory that he still felt was the enemy's. He wanted to leave as quickly as he could and let August sort all of this out.

But he had a question or two that he wanted answered, first.

"I can't help but wonder how Sir Publius got word of this place, in light of your stated intent," Leon said, giving Gratian an accusatory look.

"No need to wonder, I purposely leaked it," Gratian explained. "I was hoping that someone would come to try and negotiate for the release of the prisoners, as is most common. I honestly didn't think that an armed party would come by, but I have to admit that I'm grateful you've been so accommodating..."

Leon raised an eyebrow as he stared at Gratian—the Duke was perfectly calm, sitting in his chair with perfect noble posture but also no obvious anxiety or concern showing in his body language or expression. "You hardly seem like a man worried about being in the same place as five hundred knights that, for now, at least, are still enemies of yours..."

"I do have *some* contingencies, I'm not *entirely* trusting myself, my brother, and my associates to the whims of fate," Gratian said with a mysterious smile. "Fortunately, I haven't seen the need to invoke any of those contingencies."

Leon frowned again. He couldn't sense anything nearby, and the power levels of Gratian and his people weren't overly concerning, but that didn't stop Leon from wanting to play it safe and fall back. He had hundreds of people to look out for, now, and that was forcing him to reign in his recklessness.

As Leon began to make it more and more obvious that he wanted to leave in light of this conversation, the Baron who owned the villa suddenly spoke up. "You don't have to be in such a hurry to leave, you and your people are more than welcome here as my guests."

"Yes, please stay for at least a little while, I'd like the chance to speak with you for a little longer," Gratian cheerfully added, acting as if he and Leon had just been discussing the weather rather than subtly threatening each other. "I've heard a great deal about you over the past year, and I would love to know if your reputation is accurate."

"Reputation...?" Leon asked, his face awash with confusion. He didn't think he had one of those outside of Trajan's old retinue, but now that he thought about it, Gratian had earlier acted a bit like he'd heard Leon's name before.

Picking up on Leon's confusion, Gratian, with a seemingly strange amount of enthusiasm, said, "A knight who stood toe-to-toe with Sertor Arellius and even pushed him back, who held off a force greater than his by an order of magnitude for a week, who rode into battle just a couple weeks ago at the head of a host of stone giants? Yes, people have spoken of you with the same breath that they utter names like 'Brimstone', 'Roland', and 'Minerva'. To be honest, since I heard all of these things, and what Gaius has told me about you, I have been hoping we could meet for a while now."

Leon suppressed a scowl. Fame was all well and good, but he wasn't the sort to revel in it. Still, it could be useful if he were in the mood to take advantage of it, but it was also more than a little risky. The

more people knew about him, after all, the more likely it was the other people would be able to guess who he really was. Already, too many people knew his real name, and he figured it was only a matter of time before it became more widely known.

But that in and of itself hadn't too much bearing on why Gratian had heard about him, and Leon couldn't help but feel a few twinges of pride as his immediate reaction of distaste settled down. He didn't think himself a prideful person by nature, but he still felt relatively good about himself when people mentioned that they'd heard about him.

Keeping his expression as neutral as he could, he said, "Those reports are accurate enough, I suppose. They sound a lot better when spoken aloud than they were in reality."

As he said this, he noticed a mildly insulted look appear on Gaius' face for a moment, but the rest of the people at the table, including Marcus and Alcander, were staring at him with interest and curiosity.

After Leon was silent for a moment, Alcander loudly exclaimed, "You can't leave that as your only statement! What is this about you leading giants?!"

"Right, I can't believe that the eastern Lords would allow stone giants to walk through their lands unmolested," Marcus whispered half to himself. "At the very least, I wouldn't ever imagine that my father would allow them to enter the Kingdom, let alone fight at his side..."

Leon shrugged again. He wasn't here to convince them, just to bring them back to August's camp.

"As much as I'd absolutely *love* to talk about myself, we should get moving," Leon said, giving Marcus and Alcander an almost threatening look. Turning back to the Duke and the other nobles, Leon summoned all of the politeness that he was capable of and continued, "My Lord, Your Grace, thank you for the invitation, but we will not be taking you up on it. I will relay your offer to Prince August, and we will continue on from there."

The Duke gave Leon a bitter smile and replied, "Fair enough. I hope to see you again, Sir Leon, and as friends and comrades in arms. Until then, farewell."

Leon nodded and then escorted Marcus and Alcander back out of the villa. From there, it only took a few more minutes for the rest of his unit to reform and depart the villa's property with all the prisoners in tow.

Throughout the evacuation, Marcus and Alcander pestered Leon almost nonstop for more information about his actions during the war and of the current situation in general, but Leon repeatedly brushed them off. He didn't want to discuss those things so close to the enemy. But as they pushed back into the hot, humid forests, linking up with all of the people they'd left behind as they went, Leon wasn't able to continue putting that off. So, he began to calmly explain the situation to the two, finishing up by about the time they returned to camp.

They weren't followed as far as Leon could tell, but he kept the stone giants on watch throughout the remainder of the night. Fortunately, the giants didn't need sleep, and the unit was kept mostly safe as they began the long march back to the Augustine camp.

—

“What now, brother?” Gaius asked Gratian once the two were alone. Leon had left with his unit only a few hours before, and in that time, Gratian and Gaius had linked back up with their force of three hundred hidden knights waiting nearby and returned to their palace.

“Now, we hope that August takes our offer,” Gratian replied as he stared out of the nearby window as if he could see Prince August in the distance. “If he doesn’t, then... we’ll have to take matters into our own hands for dealing with Octavius, which is much more prone to failure.”

“I figured as much, but is there anything we can do right now?”

“If you’re looking to get back out there, then there is certainly something you can do.” Gratian smiled at his youngest brother, and Gaius smiled back. Too long had Gaius been beholden to Octavius, and now that Gratian had made his offer known to Leon, Gaius was more than eager to put it into practice. “Get your gear together,” Gratian continued. “We’ll ride out in three days.”

—

Much like the journey to Lentia, Leon led the unit on a somewhat circuitous route back toward August’s camp. However, he learned a bit from the previous march, and prioritizing speed over subtlety, he allowed them to take a few side roads as they moved. This shaved off a couple of days from their return journey, but it seemed it wasn’t enough.

As they got within three days’ march of the camp, a messenger sent by August found them and was brought to Leon at the front of their marching column.

“What is it?” Leon asked from astride Anzu as he approached Baroness Orientis near the center of the column.

“Bad news,” she said, nodding to one of the people surrounding her, a dirty young man with a harried look about him as if he’d been running for days through some of the worst terrain in the Southern Territories, which Leon guessed he had been.

“Sir Leon!” the man cried out, recognizing Anzu. “I bring word from His Highness! Duke Duronius has surrounded the encampment and has put it to siege!”

“Shit...” Leon swore under his breath. This was always a possibility, especially since about three weeks had passed since Leon had left, but if the camp was under siege, then it would make linking back up with August almost impossible to do.

In other words, they were miles behind enemy lines and cut off from almost all support. Between them and their comrades were hundreds of thousands of enemy soldiers and noble retainers.