

Storm King 431

Chapter 431: Terrible Situation

Leon stared out at the broken plain before him, surrounded by dead knights and shattered giants, so far from safety. At his back were the paltry remains of his unit, barely two hundred left, and only a dozen giants. Before him were at least ten thousand knights and men-at-arms—probably more—and a mile behind was an advancing Legion. There was no escape, no way out. August's forces entrenched on their hill was too far away and beyond too many of their enemies.

This was it. They'd given everything they had, as the thousands of Octavian corpses could attest, but they had still lost in the end.

"Well... shit..." Leon muttered.

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"Well... shit..." Leon muttered, staring out across the cleared plain at the thousands of men and women laying siege to August's hill.

"You can say that again," Marcus Aeneas agreed.

The two were laying on their stomachs concealed behind a number of trees and shrubs at the edge of the siege line, at least a dozen others alongside them. And from there, they could see that the situation was terrible.

August's camp had been set up on a hill, then fortified to the point that it was practically a fortress, with stone walls and towers carved into the sides of the hill, turning it into a plateau. Or, perhaps, a cliff, since to the north and east were the hills and mountains of the Eastern Territories, leaving only the south and west for Duronius to lay siege to.

The hill was large enough to house the entire camp of almost a hundred and thirty thousand, though Leon could imagine that the barracks that had been constructed atop it were cramped and not particularly spacious. He could see in the distance the stone structures that had been built by Legion engineers—they were tall, but not nearly big or numerous enough to house everyone in comfort.

The hill had essentially become a small, extremely dense city, surrounded by hastily-constructed walls of gray stone and so thoroughly enchanted that they practically glowed with arcane light even from where Leon and the others were observing from. Before Leon had left almost a month before, the region had been heavily forested, but now, everything beyond these walls for at least two miles had been completely stripped of plant life, making way for Duronius' army to make their own camp and besiege the new city.

Duronius' army was at least two hundred and fifty thousand strong, nearly double August's—though Leon was basing that on their numbers before the battle and weeks of siege, he had little idea how many remained on both sides. Far too many to count in any respect, though. They had dug anti-cavalry trenches and built walls of their own to box in August's camp, leaving them with their backs against the mountains.

Not for the first time, Leon wondered where Charles, Henry, and Alain were. They were knights in the eastern Legions, and for all he knew, they could very well be up in that camp.

“Let’s go, I’ve seen enough,” Leon ordered. At his side were Marcus, Alcander, Valeria, Alix, and Baroness Orientis, along with several other knights. The rest of the Barons and all of the giants had been left at their own temporary camp miles away while Leon’s group scouted out the situation.

As sneakily as they could, for it was still early evening and the Octavian camp was extremely busy, Leon’s group turned around and fled. They were fortunate that Duronius was concentrating on the siege, for there weren’t many patrols to avoid.

However, that didn’t stop Leon from constantly looking around and occasionally releasing his magic senses, not that he ever saw anything of note. He could *feel* someone or *something* watching him, and it was making him incredibly paranoid.

[You’re not paranoid,] Xaphan suddenly said, as if the demon could sense Leon’s emotions.

[What can you see?] Leon replied, not wasting any time asking Xaphan what he meant.

[Nothing tangible, but there is definitely a slight increase in demonic power that has been around you, of late,] Xaphan explained. [There doesn’t seem to be anything overtly hostile, and I have no direct evidence for it, but I would remain cautious if I were you, for it seems that there’s something connected to a demon out there watching you.]

[How long have they been there? Can you tell what direction they might be in or any other specific details?]

[I’m going to have to give you a ‘no’ to all of those. The feeling is weak and indistinct. Perhaps it’s because you’ve been accompanied by several thousand people for months, discouraging attack, but I obviously can’t say for sure. Hey, boy, don’t go anywhere on your own for a while. You might not like what happens next.]

[Something violent, no doubt,] Leon responded.

[Yes, and without that support, you might be overwhelmed. Assuming whatever that is is hostile, of course, but given your history and how *completely* and *utterly* unlikeable you are, that’s probably a safe assumption.]

Leon didn’t pay much attention to Xaphan’s lazy provocation and instead focused on the task at hand. He’d been feeling like something had been following him for a while, and it hadn’t yet seemed hostile. He’d be cautious, but he had more pressing concerns at the moment.

[I’ll be careful,] he said to his demonic partner.

[Yes, that is a great reassurance,] the demon sarcastically responded. [Your track record with ‘being careful’ hardly inspires confidence.]

[I suppose it’s a good thing, then, that my continued survival doesn’t hinge on your confidence.]

[Hmm...] Xaphan grunted, and then Leon felt the demon’s attention slide away and vanish back into his soul realm.

The group quickly made their way back to the rendezvous point, linking back up with the rest of Leon's unit. The unit had waited on the highest hill they could find—which wasn't that tall—on the other side of a tributary of the Naga River. If anyone were to come north to fight them, they'd have to ford a river and fight uphill. Not that big of a challenge for higher-tiered mages, but any advantage in this situation was one that Leon couldn't ignore.

Calling the unit's leadership to a meeting to discuss their options, Leon first informed those who hadn't been present about what they now faced, using a crude hand-drawn map of the area as a visual aid. And the more he spoke, the further their faces fell. By the time Leon was done, only Lapis' seemed unchanged, the Barons and high-ranking knights were practically crestfallen.

"So... that's it, then. We're cut off, and if we reveal ourselves, we're dead," Baron Gellius murmured.

Alix rolled her eyes and couldn't stop herself from responding, "That's quite something, coming from a man who ignored Sir Leon's orders to fall back..."

"What did you say, wench?" Gellius angrily said, rising from his seat at the central table and taking a step toward Alix.

"Sit down," Leon growled in warning, his killing intent momentarily spiking. Gellius scowled and glared at Alix, but he complied with Leon's order. Satisfied with that, Leon turned back to the rest of the people around him and continued, "We're in a bad place, no getting around that. But instead of focusing on that, how about we instead focus on what we can do? What do we have?"

Most of them were silent, still caught up in Leon's explanation of their situation. Only Marcus was able to so quickly move past it that he could speak immediately.

"I'm still not entirely sure what we have," he said, "being only a guest here and all, but I do know that we at least have a messenger who managed to sneak out through Duke Duronius' lines and reach us. Perhaps he can do the opposite?"

Leon nodded while absent-mindedly spinning the invisibility ring on his finger and glancing at Anzu, who was lounging nearby. If push came to shove, he potentially had two other ways to reach August's camp, but that would also mean leaving his unit alone without him. As the strongest person there—not including any of the giants—he wasn't quite willing to do that just yet.

"We also have a hundred stone giants, each worth a company of soldiers on their own," Leon said. "We have a good defensive position right here, and we have the element of surprise. If we're able to coordinate with Prince August in the camp, then we might be able to break through the siege lines and into the camp, or better yet, break them *out*."

"I would caution against that," Marcus warned as he rested his chin in his hand in thought. "Those lines are thick, it would take an enormous amount of force to breach them. We'd need more than just the kind of coordination to break through them than we can get just sending a single messenger back once."

"Do we have any archers?" Valeria quietly inquired as Marcus finished.

"Not many," Leon answered.

Valeria frowned. "We could harass Duronius, but without a decent ranged solution, that will be very difficult..."

Leon nodded in agreement... and his eyes turned thoughtfully toward Lapis. "You know... we *might* have just such a solution, and more besides..."

As Leon explained his plan, the faces around him did not improve. In fact, many fell further, while Gellius furiously interrupted Leon as Leon finished his explanation, rising once more and roaring, "You want to use us as *bait*?!"

"No, I want us to pull off a proper military maneuver," Leon said.

"Horse shit!" Gellius shouted back. "You're offering us up to those western bastards on a silver fucking platter!"

As Gellius lost his noble demeanor, Marcus cringed in his seat and finally spoke up. "Lord Gellius, please, do not forget that we are all on the same side. We're all on the same side here."

Gellius seemed like he was about to start screaming at Marcus, but the much younger man didn't flinch in the slightest under the fifth-tier mage's glare, despite being two whole tiers below him in power. After a moment, Gellius scowled again and sat back down and defiantly folded his arms.

"Very well, Young Lord," Gellius growled through gritted teeth.

"Does anyone have a better plan?" Leon asked once Gellius had been dealt with. His gaze drifted across each of their faces, his stoic face and narrowed golden eyes daring any of them to speak like that to him again. "Anyone at all? Baron Gellius, how about you? Since you spoke up so vigorously, do you have any idea of what we should do? Or do you think we ought to tuck and run? Live for a little longer while abandoning Prince August and Marquis Aeneas to their fates? Please, if anyone has a better plan, speak up! I'd love to hear it!"

Leon's eyes came to a rest on Marcus. The young man was the heir to House Aeneas, a noble House famous for its military traditions. If anyone would have a better idea, then Marcus was the most likely. Plus, Marcus was also much more respected by the Barons than he was, and that meant that Marcus' support could do far more to get the nobles on his side than the duels they had fought weeks before.

"I do not," the young nobleman said as he, too, glanced around the room. He could tell that the nobles weren't quite accepting of Leon's authority, for they were all looking to him for his reaction.

He understood why; Leon may be their commander, but Marcus was the heir to Marquis Aeneas, and that made him the highest-ranked nobleman in the tent. Even more, he was a fellow eastern noble, just like them.

But he wasn't intending to usurp or undermine Leon, and so decided to throw his support behind his old acquaintance. "I think Sir Leon's plan has a real shot of succeeding. And I, for one, would be honored to fight at his side."

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"This is crazy, I can't believe we're doing this..." Marcus whispered to himself as he rode a borrowed horse beside Leon as they slowly approached the rear of the siege lines. At their backs were every

knight, man-at-arms, and levy that had been raised by the Barons, all assembled into a battle line five people deep. The Barons themselves were riding further down the line, keeping it as coherent as was reasonable given the damp forest they were marching through. Alix, Valeria, and Alcander also rode with them, with Marcus and Alcander both using weapons and armor loaned from the Barons.

The giants, however, were rather conspicuous by their absence.

"You *did* agree to it," Leon pointed out.

"I decided to trust that you knew what you were talking about. Now that we're here actually doing it, I can't help but think that we should've tried getting into contact with Prince August and my father first, or that we should've tried a night attack, or a hundred other things..."

"Too late for that, and besides, we have the initiative," Leon countered. "We need to act quickly while we still have the opportunity to do so. If we're pushed onto the defense, then we're screwed."

"I get that, but I still doubt," Marcus replied with a resigned tone. "We can still turn back, you know. Try something else."

A horn blast suddenly resounded through the forest from ahead of them.

"Sounds like we've run out of time," Leon said, smiling at the nobleman. "They've seen us."

"Finally!" Alcander almost shouted. "I've been cooped up for far too long! I need a good work out!"

"Don't go too overboard, stay with the group," Marcus cautioned.

"I know what I'm doing!" Alcander shot back.

"Do you? Have you ever been in battle before?" Valeria asked, her face remaining stoic, but a slightly cocked eyebrow and a trace of amusement in her tone showed that she wasn't being too confrontational in asking.

"I've been in battle before, yes," Alcander insisted.

"Fighting a dozen bandits with three dozen knights at your side hardly counts," Valeria countered.

"A battle is a battle, I've fought and killed before, I can hold my own!"

"You're pretty motivated to kill your own countrymen," Leon observed, quickly killing all levity in the back-and-forth.

"... They're *traitors*," Alcander reasoned, "no different from the bandits that I've fought before. I have little sympathy for them!"

"So you say..." Leon said. He wasn't going to lose too much sleep over the fighting and killing he was about to do, but he figured that Alcander would've had more connection to these people and might've been a bit more reluctant to fight. He was both gladdened and a bit disheartened to see otherwise—though certainly more the former than the latter.

"No need for that tone! I know my job and I'm going to do it!" Alcander insisted, his previously excited tone now thoroughly subdued to something more somber and serious. "I'm ready for this!"

"I suppose we're about to put that to the test," Leon said, as they finally made it through the trees and arrived at the edge of the massive section of cleared forest that Duronius had created for his immense camp and siege lines.

Chapter 432: Calerus

The area where Leon's people emerged from the forest wasn't in front of the areas that Duronius had seen fit to fortify with walls, but that wasn't to say that it hadn't been fortified. Before them were anti-cavalry spikes and ditches, not to mention quite a few guard towers.

Leon could see quite a bit of mad scrambling in the tents just beyond those fortifications as the noble retainers in this area of the camp hastily prepared themselves for what seemed to be Leon's charge. The horn signals that had been sounded on Leon's approach had alerted them, but there hadn't been enough time for all of them to assemble for battle.

However, there were still quite a few who had managed to form up just behind the fortifications. Compared to Duronius' entire army, it wasn't much, but it was still far more than Leon had in his entire force. If he had to guess, he'd have to say at least ten thousand knights, men-at-arms, and peasant levies—probably closer to fifteen or twenty—now stood between his unit and the Octavian camp.

Curiously, on their far right flank—to Leon's left—was a force of about five hundred dark-skinned men clad in white robes and armed with long scimitars and two-handed sabers that had thicker heads at the end of their curved blades.

"Who are they?" Leon asked anyone who was listening, pointing to these obvious foreigners.

"Uuuh, looks like mercenaries from Samar," Marcus replied as he squinted in their direction. They were almost a mile away, and his third-tier senses made seeing them more difficult than it was for Leon.

Leon frowned. He had little idea how those men fought, though he could hazard a guess given their choice of weaponry. To a degree, he was hoping he'd get the opportunity to cross blades with them, but he remained stoic and professional. These mercenaries and the massive force that was already standing against them weren't too concerning; he had no intention of charging the spear wall they were establishing. All he and his unit had to do was wait...

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The horns alerted the entire Octavian camp to the attack that seemed to be coming from the north. Nobles and Legion commanders moved quickly in an attempt to get ahold of the situation while still keeping the siege lines strong so that the Augustine forces couldn't exploit this attack to break out.

Among those Octavian commanders was Count Calerus, an ice mage of some repute back in his home of the Western Territories, but virtually unknown outside of them. As far as Counties went, his land of Turicum was rather important in the Western Territories, being powerful enough to be a direct vassal of the King himself rather than subordinate to a Duke or Marquis, and he was quite wealthy, to boot. He'd joined Octavius' army to fight for his Prince—and for the benefits that his Prince would give out to his supporters once he'd defeated the bastard and removed the invalid.

It was his retinue of eight thousand that was closest to this incursion, and so Calerus wasted no time in getting his people moving as quickly as they were able.

In barely five minutes, more than half of his people had armed themselves and run out to face their foe. Fortunately, Calerus was a relatively cautious man, and he had mandated that every fighting man and woman he brought with him to the war always wear their armor. Looking down the line as he took his place at the head of his host, Calerus could see that many other retinues weren't so prepared, for there were thousands to his right and left that only had time to grab their weapons following the horn signal.

"Fools..." muttered a familiar water mage who had appeared on foot next to his horse. This man was relatively short, but with a stocky build that made his strength obvious. His black hair was covered by a faceless helmet that had been scorched black in the battle a month previous, as had much of the rest of his scale armor, but his bright green eyes sparkled with vigor.

Ignoring his comment, the older Calerus noted, "Hmm? Ah, I didn't even see you show up! You seem to be in good health. Have your injuries healed?"

"You need to ask?" the water mage asked, lifting and flexing his right leg.

Calerus' lips curled upward into the slightest of smiles as his blue eyes were pulled to the general vicinity of the man's leg.

"Good," he stated. "When this is over, we should get some drinks. I haven't seen you in a while, we should catch up."

"Sounds good," the water mage replied as they locked eyes, a hidden message passing quickly between them as a smile played across his handsome face. They were both married men, so they couldn't be too open with their desires, but those who knew them also knew they would be doing something other than drinking when they did get together.

But that was something for later. As their respective retinues streamed in to join the spear wall—the water mage had brought three thousand fighters with him when he answered Octavius' call to arms, and like Calerus, they were all dressed in whatever armor they had—Calerus asked, "Have you noticed what's happening?"

"I have," the water mage replied.

Both were sixth-tier mages, and their use of magic senses meant that they could see exactly what the scouts and camp guards had seen: thousands of strange troops advancing on their northern flank. Since no word had been sent ahead, it was assumed that this force was hostile, something which the water mage could confirm.

"I know that black-armored knight on the griffin who's riding at the front," he said as he glanced up at his older lover. "He's the one that beat me in our last battle."

"He's the one?" Calerus asked as he directed his attention toward the man the water mage had pointed out. Even from this distance, he could sense the knight's power, which made sense given the obvious quality of his armor and his rare war beast. Calerus could easily imagine that both were far better than the armor and horse he had. "He looks strong."

"Yeah..." the water mage murmured in thought.

"What's wrong?"

“He’s the one who led the giants. I think his name is Leon Ursus...”

“Ahh, the so-called ‘Thunder Knight’ that I’ve heard so much about these past few weeks, the one who broke Marquis Quirinus’ army like it was made of cheap paper, practically winning the battle right then.”

“That’s him... but where’re the giants?”

Calerus instantly whipped his head around from the water mage and back to their marching foe. And indeed, there wasn’t a giant to be seen. Severely alarmed, Calerus’ first thought was for his people. He turned his attention to his adjutants nearby, who had given him and the water mage some respectful distance, and shouted, “Don’t charge! Something’s wrong! Hold until further orders!”

A chorus of ‘Yes, my Lord’s’ followed, and many of the adjutants began to run around to the Count’s knights and Barons to relay the order.

“You think it might be a trap?” the water mage asked.

“Who can say?” Calerus replied. “But what I *do* know is that stone giants don’t just disappear, and they’re not afraid of fighting a losing battle. If those giants aren’t here, then they’re, in all likelihood somewhere nearby, waiting.”

“Mm,” the water mage grunted in response. Leon Ursus had just emerged from the trees, about three thousand people at his back. The vast majority of them, however, were on foot, with only the leading knights and nobles mounted. Once they reached the edge of the trees, they halted and seemed to stare at the assembling Octavian forces.

They just stood there, staring, for almost five minutes, not charging, not doing anything that might be considered hostile. To many eyes, it appeared as if they were hesitating.

“HAHA!” came a booming laugh further down the line from Calerus, the water mage, and the rest of their people. “IT SEEMS LIKE THEY’RE HESITATING! THEY’RE AFRAID! LET’S GO SHOW THOSE CRAVENS EXACTLY WHAT THEY HAVE TO FEAR!”

As this voice continued, Calerus glanced over to see who was speaking and was completely and utterly unsurprised to see it was some knight or Baron that he didn’t recognize, which meant that he was no one important and likely felt the need to prove himself in battle. If he were someone who actually made decisions in the army, then Calerus would’ve seen him at strategy meetings with the rest of the upper leadership and the unknown nobleman probably would’ve been a bit more restrained.

Instead of showing restraint and acting with more dignity, this anonymous, insignificant nobleman charged, and dozens of his retainers followed. And then a few hundred more followed. And then the Samar mercenaries broke ranks, charging across the cleared field, avoiding the obstacles, howling some barbaric war cry. Other nobles then followed, and the charge cascaded down the line.

“What should we do?” the water mage asked, looking to the older Calerus for guidance.

“We can’t let them charge without support,” Calerus replied, noting that in mere moments, thousands of their noble comrades had started an uncoordinated charge. Calerus couldn’t stop it by himself, for those were the troops of other nobles, and he had no authority to command them. “Stay vigilant, stay

cautious, and above all, *stay in formation*,” the Count told his younger lover, briefly showing the water mage a look of deep concern before turning back to his adjutants and shouting, “Advance!”

He said no more, but he didn’t need to. His knights and vassals were disciplined and well-trained; they knew what he meant when he ordered them to ‘advance’ rather than ‘charge’. Slowly, and in stark contrast to the wild sortie of the rest of the Octavian line, they began to march forward, taking all the time they needed to properly clear the ditches, pits, and other fortifications that had been constructed. Calerus couldn’t help but disdainfully scowl at many other retinues that were charging faster than his, for they were leaving many people behind, some even with injuries as they were pushed over and trampled or thrown against some of the anti-cavalry spikes.

The battle with Ursus’ forces hadn’t even begun yet and already the Octavian forces had suffered a handful of casualties.

Fortunately for Calerus, though, none of those casualties were from his people. *His* people were better than that. Still, it was a bad omen, and Calerus was momentarily disturbed at its portents, at least until the Octavian troops drew to within eight hundred feet, or typical effective arrow range.

The levies making up the barbarian’s unit began to waver, even before the Octavian troops reached the halfway point between them. Calerus couldn’t blame them, not when tens of thousands of Octavius and Duronius’ fighters were so recklessly charging at them, but what left a particularly bad taste in his mouth was that many of the knights that were leading them began to waver, too, falling back into the tree line like terrified dogs with their tails between their legs. They were his enemies, to be sure, but they were also nobles of the Kingdom, and their conduct reflected poorly on all the rest of those with noble blood.

Were those *his* knights, Calerus would’ve had them in stocks in a heartbeat—not that his knights needed that kind of encouragement since he’d already had most of their rebelliousness beaten out of them during their training at his personal knight academy.

“Hold! Hold, damnit!” the black-armored Ursus shouted, but to no avail. His right and left flanks, both composed of peasant levies, were already collapsing. There was little helping it, and the more the levies broke and ran, the more Ursus’ knights did likewise.

The water mage, still quickly marching next to Calerus, said in disbelief, “They’re running? I can’t believe it...”

“That’s what it appears to be,” Calerus said, momentarily glaring down at his horse as it carefully worked its way through the camp’s fortifications.

“These guys smashed through thousands of our people just a few weeks ago, they shouldn’t be running like this!” the water mage insisted, his tone growing more suspicious with every word.

“Do you think it’s a trap?” Calerus asked.

“It might be. Those giants aren’t here...” the water mage repeated.

“It’s possible the giants abandoned them, and without that support, the rest of them aren’t as motivated to continue fighting as they were...” Calerus mused aloud, not that he put much stock in the possibility. “Let’s just assume that those giants are still around here somewhere. Better to watch for an ambush than to assume it’s not coming.”

"I'll keep my eyes open," the water mage replied, though he pointedly nodded his head towards the thousands of other Octavian troops that were charging forward so quickly and with such wild abandon that there was no way in any hell that they were staying as vigilant. "At least if there is an ambush, it won't be triggered by *us*."

"Don't assume that," Calerus warned. "Ambushes are just as likely to strike at those in the back as those in the front."

"I got it," the water mage replied, sounding playfully annoyed, quickly winking at Calerus.

"I hope so..." Calerus whispered as he turned his attention back toward Ursus and his people. By now, only a few hundred of the most powerful of Ursus' people were still standing in formation at the tree line, and it was clear to Calerus that they weren't going to stay. They hadn't the numbers to stand against this charge—not that they had the numbers to begin with, but it was much clearer now that they were screwed if they stayed. As a result, Ursus shouted for everyone to turn around and retreat.

It made Calerus wonder just what Ursus' intention was in leading his people here in the first place, and his suspicion of a trap only grew stronger. But it wasn't yet strong enough for him to turn back. If he had the opportunity, he would utterly crush Ursus and his people before they could make any trouble.

Chapter 433: The Lion's Prey

Arrows flew through the trees, occasionally accompanied by blasts of elemental magic. Ursus' people continued to fall back, with their most powerful mages moving in a far more orderly fashion, while their weaker and less disciplined troops left them behind.

The situation on Calerus' side wasn't too dissimilar, though, which kept him from feeling too superior. His retinue marched with iron discipline, staying as in formation as the forest allowed. However, this slower advance meant that the less organized forces they were marching with soon outpaced them.

This also meant that the startlingly accurate arrow fire from Ursus and several of his people didn't harm those that Calerus actually cared about, and for this he was grateful. He wasn't too interested in winning glory in battle, so he wasn't in nearly as much of a rush to confront Ursus as the rest of his fellow nobles.

He was also extremely wary of a trap or ambush. Ursus' giants still hadn't been seen, and they had pushed the barbarian's people almost a mile into the forest. Calerus didn't think stone giants would be too easy to hide, though, so while he was keeping his eyes open and his magic senses projected, he wasn't too worried about not seeing a trap coming.

And yet, the further the Octavian forces pushed, the more he started to doubt his conviction that a trap had been laid. He could sense that there weren't any additional troops coming in from Duronius' camp, but that hardly mattered since they had a force of fifteen thousand at least going up against Ursus and his three thousand, so the fact that they were moving farther and farther away from support wasn't concerning.

Despite his attempts to maintain his caution, Calerus found himself relaxing in his saddle as his horse did its best to follow Ursus' fleeing unit through the dense, wet forest. In fact, he started to find that he was growing more concerned over losing a horseshoe in the sucking mud and marshy soil that they were often struggling through than he was about walking into a trap.

There were no doubts in his mind that they would catch and kill Ursus. He was only a barbarian, after all, and those who were following him were relatively small in number. Without the giants, even his startling strength and personal skill wouldn't save him.

"Keep moving!" Leon shouted, urging his people to continue moving back, though his words weren't entirely necessary. More than ten thousand of Octavius' troops were bearing down upon them, and few of his people needed the reminder to fall back. Even the Barons weren't arguing with his orders right now.

Leon fired an arrow from the back of Anzu as they slowly retreated. His aim was true, his arrow striking a fourth-tier knight in his exposed inner thigh. Not an immediately fatal shot, but certainly debilitating. Beside him, both Alix and Valeria were firing arrows, though neither were comparable to his skill—then again, of the fifty or so people who had bows and enough arrows to shoot, no one could match Leon's skills, even if Marcus came surprisingly close. Still, in Leon's own, admittedly biased, estimation, he was the best archer in their unit, and from the way the few archers pursuing them shot back, he was better than any archer that their pursuers had, too.

So far, he was astounded at how easily it had been to get the Octavian forces to attack and follow them. It was almost surreal. He had to slow himself down quite a bit so that their pursuers didn't lose them in the forest, but otherwise, keeping Octavius' nobles on their trail was staggeringly simple.

This went on for about an hour, with Leon's people remaining just close enough that the Octavian forces refused to give up the chase, despite how long it had been going on, the slow accumulation of casualties they had been sustaining, and the further stretching of what passed for their marching column. Fortunately, their destination was only about five miles away from the camp, though in the dense underbrush, it took almost an hour and a half to get there.

But when they did, any fatigue Leon's unit felt vanished as they took up their positions, and Leon himself began to smile in anticipation beneath his helmet.

Calerus scowled as Ursus' unit finally vanished out of sight. They had led the Octavian forces into a low-lying patch of incredibly dense forest, where the tracts of dry ground were in the minority compared to the mud and standing water, severely impairing their ability to move. The section of forest itself was located in the valley of several gentle, heavily forested hills that had been carved by a river that ran right through the middle, which right now was stagnant, green, and filthy.

In other words, it was the perfect ambush location; far enough away from the camp to prevent reinforcements from easily reaching them, and the terrain was rough enough that it would make escape difficult. But those facts weren't what made Calerus nervous, it was the fact that most of Ursus' unit vanished within—he couldn't see any of them with his magic senses!

"Halt!" he called out, raising his fist in a stop gesture.

"What is it?" the water mage beside him asked, looking up at the older man curiously.

"Have you been tracking the savage's troops with your magic senses?" Calerus asked, not taking his eyes off the shallow river valley before him.

"... Yes..." the water mage said, and though Calerus believed him, the water mage's tone made it clear that he hadn't been as diligent about it as Calerus had been. The expression of surprise he showed just a moment later confirmed Calerus' suspicion.

After a long sigh, Calerus tenderly took his eyes off the valley for a moment, glanced at the water mage, and said, "You really should be paying more attention. This is war, I don't want anything to happen to you..."

The water mage remained silent out of shame. It was fortunate that his three thousand troops stopped along with Calerus because otherwise, they might've left him behind.

"Any idea where they went?" the water mage asked.

"No, they must have anti-magic sense wards set up all over these woods," Calerus replied, immediately slipping back into his noble demeanor.

"What should we do, then? We can't just leave things here..." the water mage replied, meaningfully nodding his head at the thousands of other Octavian troops that were continuing to charge into the valley with wild abandon, though a few here and there were glancing worriedly in the direction of Calerus and his halted retinue and slowing down.

"No, we can't let that barbarian and his band of bandits get away just like that," Calerus said. "We just have to take things a bit slower." The Count turned his head toward his knights and vassal nobles who were waiting for further instructions. "Spread out and move slowly!" he ordered. "Sound the alarm if you see anything suspicious!"

After a chorus of 'yes, my Lord's', Calerus' unit began moving again, but the time they spent motionless was enough for most of the rest of the Octavian troops to put some distance between them, with nearly all of them quickly disappearing into the deeper forest.

Their formations began to thin and spread out, taking as much space as they could as they descended into the dark valley and began to sweep it for any sign of the vanished Ursus and his unit.

After five minutes, they had found nothing. Many of Calerus' retainers were on edge as they entered the dark valley. The sun was blocked by the leafy canopy, leaving many of the weakest levies stumbling blindly through the underbrush, while the clumps of trees grew denser and denser, interfering with their formations and giving many of Calerus' followers an almost overwhelming sense of claustrophobia.

Calerus slowed them down even further so that this wouldn't affect their battle line, though he noted that few of the other units that had gone ahead had done likewise. As a matter of fact, several of the units seemed to have completely disintegrated upon entering this section of forest, with the more powerful mages leaving their weaker comrades behind, with Calerus running into them as he and his retinue pressed on into the dark. Some of the mortal and first-tier people were even absorbed into Calerus' unit as it marched past them since they had little other recourse than turning around and abandoning their leaders.

Like this, they struggled along. The forest floor was a little drier with all the dense vegetation, but that wasn't saying much; many mages still slipped and fell in the mud, while the roots and vines caused others to trip. Just pushing deeper into the forest through the trees and underbrush started becoming a chore, even with them following the lead of those who'd run ahead.

And then a tremendous clap of thunder boomed throughout the entire river valley, echoing in everyone's ears and bringing Calerus' entire line to a halt as they prepared for battle. No enemies charged at them through the trees, but they heard the sounds of battle further on. Or, more accurately, they heard screaming and the sounds of dying men and women.

"Keep moving!" Calerus shouted, his voice sounding strangely muffled by the surrounding flora, and his unit began to advance again, though at a slightly more cautious pace than before.

After a few minutes, the sounds of fighting died down, leaving the forest in a state of eerie silence—or, as silent as it could be with thousands of men and women marching through it at once. Still, it unnerved those who were paying enough attention to notice. Clearly, one side had ended the fight, and since they couldn't hear the sounds of celebration, it seemed to them that Ursus' unit had probably come out the victor.

And then, in the distance, the forest began to thin out, allowing a few beams of sunlight to peer through the canopy, shedding light onto what appeared to be their destination.

It was a scene of carnage, and it only grew more so the closer that Calerus' unit drew. Huge boulders studded the area between the trees, and between them were hundreds of corpses. Calerus recognized a few sigils here and there emblazoned on the tabards of the fallen knights, and he even saw a few bodies of the Samar mercenaries that had so recklessly charged forward. The bodies themselves were mangled beyond recognition, leaving their clothes as the only way to identify the fallen.

It also became clear why this area seemed a bit clearer than the rest of the forest around it: Calerus could see many fallen trees around that had probably been knocked over in the brief battle that had been fought here.

However, it wasn't the bodies, the obvious remnants of elemental magic having been used like a few small fires and long ice spikes here and there, or the strange boulders scattered around, each as large as a small house. Instead, what truly unnerved him was that his magic senses couldn't penetrate at all into this section of forest, as if someone had created a ward that scattered magic senses over miles of forest. He couldn't imagine how complex that would have to be, how much time and effort it would've taken to create something like that.

"They're in there," he said to the water mage.

"Yeah..." the water mage replied, his tone deadly serious and extremely apprehensive. "We're going to get them?"

Calerus glanced around at the bodies that they were finally starting to pass and both he and the water mage could see the damaging effect it was having on the morale of his retinue, even as disciplined as they were. Many were recoiling at the carnage, while a few of the weaker and younger of their number failed to hold onto their breakfast.

“Yes, yes we are,” Calerus responded. He then addressed his people, his voice booming out into the forest and yet still sounding strangely muffled. “Stay vigilant!” he ordered. “Watch the boulders! Watch for *anything* out of the ordinary!”

This time, his order was met with quite a bit less enthusiasm than his previous orders that day, but his people were professionals and they continued on. The stragglers they picked up along the way, however, were less professional and committed, and many simply stopped moving or turned back altogether.

They were all obviously peasant levies, and he couldn’t blame them for doing halting in their tracks. Their leaders left them behind and then went missing in the forest or died at the edge of this relatively thin grove. The blame was with those leaders for those levies losing heart and backing down.

Calerus’ people would not lose heart. They marched at his side as he slowly steered his horse past the first boulder.

His eyes strained in the dark, looking for any sign of the forces that had killed the several thousand fighters that had charged ahead of him down to a man. All he saw were more bodies scattered around the trees and rocks. He even stared at the boulders themselves, as if expecting them to crack open and reveal Leon Ursus there with a horde of savages at his back.

But nothing moved. Further into the grove his people pressed, many jumping at every gust of wind and snap of a twig, their anxiety growing more and more as nothing happened.

Until something did happen.

The earth beneath them suddenly cracked open, sending hundreds of stone spikes tearing through their formations. In an instant, more than five hundred of Calerus’ retainers lost their lives, while hundreds more were gravely injured as the spikes grazed their bodies. Calerus himself barely noticed as a stone spike had erupted from right beneath his horse, impaling it and hurling him upward.

Fortunately, his horse had been armored and was a fairly powerful beast besides. This kept the stone spike from penetrating all the way through the animal and impaling Calerus’ groin, but it left the animal mortally wounded and shrieking in pain. Calerus himself was thrown from the saddle and down into the mud.

He was barely able to roar, “BRACE!” as he felt the earth beneath him rumble. All around and within their ranks, a hundred stone giants appeared, emerging from the ground like they were bursting up through water. The boulders then snapped open, justifying Calerus’ earlier fears as they revealed themselves to have been hollow the entire time, and Ursus’ barbarian sympathizers came streaming out, crashing into Calerus’ people both from within and without, taking complete advantage of their surprise and suddenly disrupted formations.

Calerus, meanwhile, managed to push himself back to his feet just in time for the boulder ahead of him to burst open, revealing Ursus and his most powerful mages. They charged at him, their auras and killing intent soaring.

Desperately, Calerus drew his blade and readied himself for the fight of his life as all around him his retainers lost their lives.

Chapter 434: Leon's Campaign I

Leon had to stifle laughter as he and his people got into position. The levies had reached their ambush point first, and the giants had helped them into their assigned boulders. Once Leon and the rest of the leadership followed suit, the giants submerged themselves into the wet earth of the forest and waited.

There were some concerns that what they were doing could be seen by the mages following them, but Leon had brainstormed a ward to scatter magic senses the night before and had the giants create and bury hundreds of long stones inscribed with the enchantment on the southern end of the ambush grove. Any magic senses projected from the southern side of the grove would be scattered upon reaching that enchanted stone boundary line. The stones 'lines' had even been layered, so not even passing the first few stones would allow their enemies to use their magic senses to locate them.

And so, Leon and his unit concealed themselves in as much peace as they could with thousands of Octavian troops on their tail. They had a good head start, but it wasn't much given how strong the mages following them were.

As they waited, Leon felt Valeria slide up next to him. He momentarily tensed up, remembering how strange her behavior had been recently. He instinctively feared that she might try to make an attempt on his life, but he forced himself to remain calm and placed his trust in his armor and the fact that she hadn't made any moves yet, despite having ample opportunity. Fortunately, Valeria continued that pattern, and a moment later, the boulders cracked open, revealing hundreds of dead Octavian troops, and thousands more motionless from surprise and rising terror as the giants rose from the earth.

Leon didn't bother ordering the charge. Instead, he opened up with a bright bolt of golden lightning, its accompanying clap of thunder echoing through the entire forest and illuminating the immediate surroundings.

The next several minutes were a blur of intense violence, with almost a dozen falling to Leon's blade alone. In the confusion and surprise of the ambush, the Octavian forces stood no chance, especially as the giants emerged from the ground from among their ranks. Perhaps they might've been able to rally against Leon's forces, but with the giants quite literally below their feet, they stood no chance.

Once the vanguard had been dealt with, Leon's people quickly returned to their assigned boulders. Leon noted that many of the weaker levies had to be treated quite roughly by their knights in order to comply with the plan and to not loot the fallen, but he was gratified to see them moving in something that approached order.

"Everyone good?" Leon asked as their boulder was sealed back up by Lapis and the rest of the giants sank back into the ground.

"Good to go!" Alix cheerfully replied, the blood that covered her armor and weapons creating a strange dissonance with her upbeat attitude.

Alcander, fired up as much as if not more than Alix, was the next to respond. "You even need to ask?!" he practically shouted, his abundant energy and enthusiasm almost overwhelming despite his status as only a third-tier mage.

Anzu was next, and the young griffin nuzzled up to Leon in a show of health and affection, though this also had the added effect of smearing much of the blood that covered his white fur and feathers over Leon's black armor.

The Barons seemed to be fine, but they waited for Marcus to respond next.

"I'm fine," the young nobleman responded to Leon.

"As am I," Valeria said, both her and Marcus significantly more subdued than those previous.

The Barons confirmed their statuses next—none had been hurt in the brief fight.

"Good to see everyone came out all right," Leon said. "The next fight will be bigger. They're coming in with more discipline and organization. Ready yourselves, this one's going to be the proper fight!"

Once that was acknowledged, silence descended upon the boulder. They couldn't see out, but Leon and the Barons were all strong enough to use their magic senses. Generally, magic senses had a difficult time penetrating solid matter, but if enough magic power was put into their projection, the relatively thin boulder could be seen through. This would shorten the range, but their enemy was coming to them, so they didn't need to see far.

Everyone else both in the boulder and in the rest of the unit had to make do with feeling the rumbling of the earth that signaled the approach of more than ten thousand Octavian troops, enough to outnumber them four times over at least. What had just happened was only the appetizer, this would be the main course.

Leon felt the earth quake as the giants hidden below began to tear and rend the ground beneath the feet of the Octavian warriors, and with his magic senses, he could see those warriors rising into the air, held aloft by the spikes that impaled them, or fall, vanishing into the pits that opened at their feet.

In an instant, hundreds died, but more importantly, their lines were disrupted. Only a moment later, the boulder once more cracked open like an egg, and Leon and his people spilled out into the dark forest. Their enemy was before them, and Leon wasted no time shouting, "CHARGE!" as his killing intent spiked.

With sword in hand and comrades at his side, Leon sprinted forward. The Octavian lines weren't far, perhaps a hundred feet or so—might as well have been nothing with his lighting magic flowing through his body. He targeted one of the most ostentatiously dressed knights, stabbing forward with all of his strength and weight behind the blade. This was the most important moment, the opening of the battle; he had to use everything he had if he wanted to fully take advantage of the element of surprise.

The knight barely had time to react, but he just managed to raise his blade and deflect Leon's sword enough to glance off of his plate armor. But the Adamant metal backed by Leon's power meant that this wasn't enough; bright golden sparks of lightning burst from the blade with deafening cracks of thunder, sending the knight reeling as Leon's lightning coursed through his weapon and sword arm.

The knight dropped his weapon, but as Leon closed in for the kill, he noticed that the few exposed bits of the knight's skin were hardening into stone.

'Not good enough...' Leon thought, admonishing both himself and his opponent. In one fluid movement, he raised his blade and brought it down on the knight's shoulder, biting deep into the tiny gap between his pauldron and neck, slicing clean through the stone skin and sending a jet of blood flying through the air.

Leon's blade sank through the knight's collarbone and highest rib but was stopped before digging in too deeply into his lung. But that was enough, and Leon sent what felt like an entire thunderstorm flowing through the blade and into the knight.

The knight's body seized up, what little of his face that could be seen through his full-face helmet locked in an expression of pain and anger and lightning surged throughout his body.

Leon felt a brief attempt by the knight to counter his magic, but he was just too slow. His earth magic rose from his heart to try and block the surging lightning, but it was too little too late. The knight had simply been too slow. Leon's lightning hit this earth magic, was held for a moment, then broke through to the knight's heart and utterly ravaged his soul realm.

The knight fell limp, and Leon slowly pulled his blade from the knight's shoulder and took the briefest of seconds to glance around at what everyone else was doing.

Similar scenes had just played out across the battlefield. The giants had emerged from the ground and were rampaging throughout the forest, killing almost indiscriminately. The most powerful Octavian mages had been closer to the front, leaving the back ranks of their force to the mercy of the giants, something which they seemed to have none of; with rocky fist, foot, and spike, the giants tore through the back ranks of the Octavian warriors.

Leon's human contingent was performing admirably, too, cutting down the stunned Octavian warriors like frenzied beasts, riding high on their successful ambush despite the cautious approach of their enemy. Meanwhile, Valeria, Alix, Alcander, Anzu, and the Barons were tearing into the enemy as much as they were able. They were all magically weaker than Leon, and so concentrated more on the weaker members of the Octavian forces. Marcus, however, kept to himself in the back, picking off vulnerable targets with his bow, sending a bolt of competitiveness surging through Leon's mind.

But he wasn't able to switch weapons, for in the brief moment that he spent checking up on his people and surveying the battlefield, he felt a sharp pulse of killing intent wash over him, and he instinctively fell into a defensive stance and raised his blade to block.

His sword got into position just in time, stopping another sword mere inches from the face of his helmet. The force of the strike was tremendous, but Leon managed to absorb it enough that he only had to take a single step back.

"YOU!!" shouted the wielder of the blade, whom Leon quickly recognized as the water mage he'd fought against in the previous battle. He sounded furious and wore an expression to match, but Leon stood firm as the water mage pushed against their locked blades.

And then Leon shifted his weight, disentangled his blade from the water mage's, and hurled himself to the side just in time to avoid a jet of water bursting out of the ground beneath him. The jet of water carried so much power within it that Leon was certain if he were hit by it, his armor would've been penetrated in a few places, especially in his more vulnerable undercarriage.

"I think we ought to have a rematch, don't you?" the water mage asked, his expression morphing into one of glee and satisfaction, though still carrying a trace of anger.

If he were honest, Leon barely recognized the man—their duel had been next to meaningless to him, as was the water mage himself. Leon didn't even know the water mage's name, nor was he curious to learn it. Deciding to screw with the guy a bit, though, Leon replied, "Rematch? Who are you?"

The water mage's expression froze in surprise, which was exactly what Leon wanted. With his body sparking with lightning, he lunged forward, clearing the space between them before the water mage could blink and raised his blade as if he was preparing an overhead strike. The water mage reacted quickly, instinctively raising his own sword to block the expected attack, but instead of bringing his sword down, Leon tapped his foot into the wet, swampy mud they were fighting in. A blast of lightning exploded from his leg, countless arcs of lightning reaching up to lick at the water mage's exposed midsection.

Much of Leon's lightning was blocked by the water mage's heavy armor, but what few bits of his armor that had been left shiny and grey after their last fight was left blackened and charred. A few arcs of Leon's lightning managed to avoid being blocked and ravaged the water mage's body until he was able to circulate his magic power and fight it all off.

The water mage managed to survive Leon's unexpected assault, but the shockwave of the lightning still blasted the two about a dozen feet apart and showered the surroundings in dirt and mud. Fortunately, as was commonly the case when two high-tiered mages fought, those weaker than they were had given the two plenty of room to duel. No one wanted to be collateral damage in such a fight, no matter how restricted and claustrophobic the rest of the battlefield was.

Leon, not willing to give up the initiative, quickly closed the distance between them in a single leap, aiming a stab at the water mage's heart.

Reacting as quickly as he was able, the water mage conjured icy armor around his scaled armor, causing Leon's sword to bite deep, but not quite get through his armor.

But Leon then rendered most of that effort obsolete when, with barely more than a thought, he switched from lightning to fire. He took his non-dominant hand off of his sword, moved it an inch, and enveloped the water mage in orange-hot fire.

The water mage screamed in pain as Leon wound up for one more strike. Without missing a beat, Leon switched from fire to lightning so that he wouldn't lose too much speed, and then lunged at the water mage once more. His blade moved faster than the mortal eye could see, cracking through what little remained of the water mage's armor and skewering him upon it.

Leon pushed lightning into the body of his foe, letting it surge through his chest and into the water mage's heart, where, in a feeling that was now growing familiar, he felt the water mage's soul realm be annihilated.

The water mage collapsed, his body still burning, and go still. His aura dissipated in mere moments, leaving nothing but a lifeless corpse behind. Leon didn't even know his name, considering him relatively insignificant despite his sixth-tier power.

Leon had won, but he spared only the time he needed to make sure that his opponent was dead before turning back to the battle. Two sixth-tier mages had fallen by his hand, but there were still thousands of Octavian warriors that needed to follow suit.

Chapter 435: Leon's Campaign II

Things went poorly for Calerus' people from the instant that Ursus' ambush was set off. For all their caution, they were still taken almost completely by surprise, and it cost them dearly. The giants alone ripped hundreds of Calerus' knights, men-at-arms, and levies apart—especially the levies, for they weren't trained all that well.

To many, it made a lot of sense why the thousands that had pursued Ursus ahead of them had been so handily slaughtered, for the same was happening to them. They just didn't have the space to reform their lines, and so Ursus' warriors rampaged through them without much to check their progress. Every time a powerful mage tried, a stone giant would appear and almost invariably kill them.

All of this by itself would've profoundly affected Calerus, for while he did not love his people, he didn't hate them either. But it was the water mage's death that truly laid Calerus low.

After his horse was killed out from under him, Calerus had risen back to his feet and prepared to meet Ursus' charge. Ursus himself wasn't too far away, and neither were those that followed him. Those were the targets that Calerus chose.

Unfortunately, Ursus' people didn't choose him, instead attacking a part of the line that was closer to them. Ursus himself killed one of Calerus' top knights so quickly he made it look easy, but Calerus himself was too busy fighting a giant with blue streaks along its stone body to notice.

But the water mage noticed, and he'd shouted to his older lover, "I have some business to settle! I'll be right back!"

"Wait!" Calerus shouted after him. He'd have run after the younger man, but the blue-tinted giant pressed in during his moment of distraction, and it was all Calerus could do to avoid its enormous limbs, let alone the spikes that constantly burst from the ground or the fissures that frequently opened beneath him, threatening to swallow him whole.

The Count was barely able to leap to safety, barely dodging a swipe from one of the blue-tinted giant's massive hands. At this point, Calerus had long since called his sword back into his soul realm, replacing it with a heavy single-bladed great ax. It wasn't the best weapon for fighting something like a stone giant, but he had no crushing weapons and it was better than a sword or spear.

The blue giant swung at him again, and Calerus leaped into the air, using his sixth-tier strength to easily clear the height of the giant. The rocky arm missed, and Calerus came down on the giant's elbow ax first.

This didn't do too much damage to the giant to Calerus' eyes, but the arm had been decently cracked, and the giant pulled away as if it had been badly hurt. Trying to press his advantage, Calerus lunged forward, raising his ax for another swing at one of the giant's legs, but a wall of stone spikes erupting from the ground barred his way and forced him back.

As Calerus prepared to jump over the spikes, he took the opportunity to check in on the water mage, and what he saw froze him in place.

He saw the barbarian standing before his lover, blade buried in the water mage's torso, lightning crackling all around him. A moment later, Ursus pulled his blade from the water mage's chest, and the water mage fell, his armor charred black from their battle.

In an instant, all of Calerus' killing intent faded as despair settled over his mind. All desire to continue his duel with the stone giant vanished as the water mage's body hit the forest floor, sinking half an inch into the mud between the tree roots. Fortunately for Calerus, it seemed that his blow to the stone giant had been far more effective than he'd thought, for it didn't try to exploit his inattentiveness and moved on to easier prey.

This was less fortunate for Calerus and the water mage's retainers, but for the moment, Calerus had the space he needed to struggle over to where the water mage fell. Ursus had moved on, joining the rest of his people in their slaughter of Calerus' unprepared forces, leaving the Count almost miraculously alone as he fell to his knees at the water mage's side.

The water mage was dead. There was no changing that, no denying it, but it was such a surreal thing that Calerus could do nothing but kneel there, staring at the water mage's corpse. Nothing else seemed to matter.

After what seemed like hours, but was probably less than a minute, one of Calerus' subordinates, a fifth-tier knight, appeared at the nobleman's shoulder.

"My Lord! We must retreat and regroup!" the knight shouted, kneeling at Calerus' side.

"... Huh...?" Calerus asked, momentarily confused.

"The retinue is falling apart, my Lord!" the knight shouted in a pleading tone. "We have no answer to the giants! If we do not retreat, then we will all die here!"

Numbly, Calerus began to look around. He was vaguely aware that, with the fall of his sixth-tier subordinate and the water mage, his side had precious few sixth-tier mages left. As a result, Ursus' giants were tearing through his people with abandon.

The loss of the water mage was crushing, but Calerus was a powerful noble, and he was more than a century old. He pulled himself together, picked up the water mage's body, and told his knight, "Sound the horn, we're falling back."

—

Leon stared in amazement as the Octavian forces began to withdraw following a loud horn blast. It was almost surreal, seeing so many people fleeing from so few. He had half a mind to order the stone giants to stop the retreat, but he refrained. He doubted they'd be able to create a ravine in the earth big enough to stop the enemy mages from passing in time to make much of a difference, and besides, even with all the casualties they had taken, the Octavian troops were still numerically superior, and he wasn't keen on putting their backs against a wall and forcing a decisive confrontation.

They'd done enough, it was best to let the enemy retreat. They needed to regroup, get a good accounting of their casualties, and then start planning a new strike.

Or try and get in contact with August. That was something Leon knew he should be trying to do, but it was a difficult thing to prioritize when his enemy was closer.

“Hold!” Leon shouted as his people began to make moves indicating they would like to give chase. “Stay here! Don’t pursue!”

His order was relayed to the senior knights and Barons, and they—reluctantly, in many cases—complied.

“Grab our dead and injured!” Leon continued. “They’ll be back once they regroup, so let’s get moving!”

Again, it didn’t make him the most popular commander, but the troops obeyed, gathering the dead and injured as quickly as they were able.

Leon, meanwhile, began wandering the battlefield with Anzu at his side, both surveying it and leaving a few surprises beneath the corpses of the Octavian troops. When the enemy unit returned for their dead, they’d be adding a few more to that number despite Leon’s unit hopefully being long gone by then.

“Sir!” Alix called out as she quickly caught up with him about fifteen minutes after he gave his orders. She had the look of someone there with purpose, not just to be there for him if he needed to relay additional orders.

“What is it?” Leon asked, noticing her slightly harried look.

“We’ve taken a great many prisoners and the Barons have started arguing over what’s to be done with them,” Alix answered.

Leon rolled his eyes, then turned in the direction of the nobles in question. Indeed, all five Barons and most of the senior knights had gathered close to the center of the battlefield, within which were hundreds, perhaps as many as fifteen hundred, of Octavian warriors who had been too injured to flee with their comrades.

“All right, I’ll deal with it,” Leon growled as he hopped onto Anzu’s back. With only a quick verbal command, Anzu trotted on over, easily pushing through the small crowd that surrounded the prisoners. “What is this?” he demanded of anyone who would answer.

Gellius was the first to respond, and Leon was easily able to see why: the man was fired up about something, with his face flushed with anger and passion, his arms wildly gesticulating, and a hint of killing intent still in his aura despite the battle being over.

“Sir... Ursus,” the Baron said, hesitating long enough that Leon was certain he wanted to say something else, something probably more demeaning and insulting, than his name, “we were just discussing how to treat these prisoners...”

Without wasting a beat or waiting for anyone else to speak, Leon asked the crowd, “And what’s everyone’s opinions on the matter?”

His golden eyes scanned the crowd, seeing little but anger and bloodlust on the faces of the senior knights. Adding to that was the amount of killing intent he felt from them—not even close to what had filled the air during the battle, but more than noticeable now that the battle was over. Leon felt like he already knew what most of the knights in his unit wanted to do, and he couldn’t say he disagreed.

"Many of these people are nobles," Orientis explained, "we should take them prisoner and ransom them back to their families!"

"I say kill them here! They're traitors and enemies!" Gellius roared, suddenly tempting Leon to reexamine his stance to avoid agreeing with the man.

"We are not savages!" Marcus shouted, his voice quieting all the others despite the difference in power. "These men and women have surrendered! Are we beasts who kill our enemies without thought? Or are we thinking, feeling people?! Who have the capacity for mercy and empathy?!"

The young nobleman's eyes traveled around, reaching every knight and Baron present who seemed even remotely likely to call for the execution of the prisoners and staring at them accusingly, shaming them into silence. Finally, his eyes landed upon Leon, who just watched with the barest hint of an amused smile on his face.

No one else spoke for an almost painfully long moment, and soon enough all eyes were turned in Leon's direction, waiting for his decision. He didn't last long in such an awkward position, and so slid out of Anzu's saddle and strode over to where the Barons and the other important people in the unit had gathered, including Marcus, Alcander, and Valeria.

As he walked, he could feel more than just the eyes of his people on him; those Octavian prisoners stared at him with both hope and dread, knowing that their fates rested in his hands. Leon noticed more dread than hope, though, and he remembered the Duke of Lentia mentioning that people had been talking about him after his actions with the giants a month before. He had the feeling that these people knew who he was and figured that they were going to die, for he was a barbarian, barely above an animal in their eyes.

Or maybe he was just being cynical and letting his preconceptions go to his head.

'Hardly matters at this point, I suppose...' Leon thought to himself.

It took him a minute to reach the others, and in that time, no one else offered their opinions. It took him a bit by surprise, but he figured that since Marcus had made his opinion known, none of the other nobles were going to go against him, not over something so relatively trivial.

Everyone waited with bated breath, many expecting Leon to make some speech that might justify the tension that his walk over had built up. However, when he arrived, Leon simply said, "Let them go."

He could practically *feel* the relief in the air as the prisoners relaxed, while he could also feel the angry stares of many in the crowd surrounding them.

"Are you sure, Sir?" Valeria asked, clearly picking up on the same anger that Leon had.

"We haven't the resources to hold them for ransom, and I can grudgingly admit that Sir Marcus is correct, we're not animals," he said, eliciting a nod of acknowledgment and gratitude from Marcus and, strangely enough given his usual attitude, Alcander. Even Baroness Orientis looked somewhat grateful for his decision. "We're not killing them, and we won't keep them as prisoners. We'll let them go. If they can't leave of their own accord, then we'll leave them here for their people to find."

“What about medical attention to those who need it?” Alix asked, her eyes shining with both hope and trepidation.

“If we can spare the supplies, then give them. If not, don’t bother,” Leon said. “We don’t have much time, anyway, how’s the collection of our own casualties going?”

“We should be ready to leave in the next few minutes,” Valeria reported.

“Then it hardly matters,” Leon muttered, glancing back at the prisoners. “Let’s see if we can speed this up, I want to get out of here as soon as possible.”

—

It took Calerus’ people a quarter of an hour to get the unit back under control from their hasty retreat. A rough headcount put them at eight thousand remaining, which wasn’t that bad considering that they had started with something like twelve to thirteen thousand, including all those who weren’t in Calerus’ retinue.

But that still left them with horrendous casualties from the ambush, and though Calerus would mourn all of his knights, none quite matched the loss of the water mage in his arms. His handsome face had been burned and torn apart by Ursus’ lightning, his armor destroyed, his body broken and battered.

Calerus maintained his noble demeanor as much as he was able, but he emanated a terrifying amount of killing intent, and his eyes frequently turned back toward those dark acres of forest where they had lost so many.

“Halt!” he shouted. His remaining knights repeated his order up and down the line, and over the next few minutes, the entire unit slowly came to a halt and reformed. It took a few moments for them to get back into a battle line and for Calerus’ senior knights to look back to him for further orders. His adjutants, meanwhile, waited at his side to relay his orders to those knights.

After a few moments of silence, one adjutant hesitantly asked Calerus, “... Your orders, my Lord?”

“Burn it,” Calerus growled, staring back at the forest. “All of it. Burn it all down, send those rats and savages to meet their Ancestors in whatever hell they languish in!”

Chapter 436: Leon’s Campaign III

With the issue of what to do with the Octavian prisoners dealt with, Leon focused on getting his people back on the move. He passed out a few healing spells to those who needed them, earning him a few grateful looks, but they didn’t move quickly enough.

“FIRE!” boomed one of the giants on watch, its warning quickly spreading across the entire line of alert giants.

Leon’s head swiveled around so fast he felt his neck pop. He hadn’t been keeping an eye on the direction the Octavian forces had retreated in since the giants had been keeping watch, so he was more than a little surprised to see an enormous forest fire moving in their direction. The conflagration was clearly magical, too, since it was moving through the damp forest far faster than Leon knew it should’ve.

“Fall back!” he shouted. It hadn’t been more than ten minutes since the ambush had come to an end, but it had been enough time to get some semblance of organization back into his unit, and once his order was relayed, they began running in the opposite direction of the fires. “Lapis! That means your people, too!” Leon shouted, noticing that the giants had remained still.

At his word, the blue-streaked giant rumbled its acquiescence, and the giants began falling back, though they remained in a loose line the entire time, their attention fixed behind them.

“What the hells are they doing?!” Marcus shouted aloud not too far away from Leon. “They can’t seriously believe that this will kill us!”

Indeed, no matter how quickly the magical fire was spreading, it wasn’t moving fast enough to catch Leon’s unit in its grasp. Plus, he had a few water mages on his side, and they left a few walls of ice behind to slow the fires down.

“I doubt it’s to kill us, it’s probably just for catharsis and to deny us the use of this forest again!” Leon responded.

Marcus looked like he had more to say, but both he and Leon were immediately drowned out by a horrible sound: that of hundreds of men and women screaming in pain and panic. In their haste to leave, they hadn’t grabbed the Octavian prisoners and had left them where they had been gathered. The prisoners had been too injured to retreat with their comrades, and so too were they too injured to run from the oncoming fire.

“They’re killing their own people!” Leon said, almost amazed at the ruthlessness on display. He’d seen some dark things in his time, but this was something special.

“They’re *our* people, too...” Marcus quietly replied as they settled into a slow jog behind the rest of the unit, both staring back into the dull orange glow that shone from the once-dark forest.

Leon gave the young nobleman a strange look, but he said nothing. He felt little kinship with those people, but even he thought this was going a bit too far.

‘Should’ve just let Gellius kill them all, at least it would’ve been quicker that way...’ he thought to himself. He’d heard some terrible things in his twenty years of life, and none surpassed the scream of a banshee for sheer terror, but Leon had to admit that the way the people screamed as they burned alive in that forest affected him. He didn’t think he’d ever forget it, no matter how long he lived.

“Let’s keep moving,” Leon said to Marcus. They’d fallen behind the rest of the unit a bit, and the giants were catching up. The two of them were the two most highly ranked leaders of the unit, and so it wouldn’t do to lag behind so far.

Marcus was all too happy to oblige. He’d never heard a banshee’s scream, and so he was more profoundly affected by what they had just heard than Leon.

—

Ten miles and about four hours later, Leon’s unit finally regrouped in their hidden camp. The giants had carved a giant pit into which barracks and other facilities had been constructed. With a hundred giants working together, it had only taken a matter of hours to build.

The entrance to the camp was in an innocuous river valley at the foot of a hill, hidden by thick trees and dense foliage. Still, Leon was incredibly careful with how they returned, for thousands of people and a hundred giants weren't easy to hide when on the move, and their tracks had to be covered by those who were familiar with such things. Fortunately, among the levied peasants were more than a few hunters who were willing to assist Leon in this.

They did their best, but the tracks made by the giants weren't so easily concealed. As a result, on the final approach, Leon had Lapis and the giants submerge themselves into the ground and move that way. It was slower, but their tracks were less obvious and would require an earth mage experienced in tracking to follow them.

It wasn't that great of a stretch for Leon to think that Duronius had such people, so he kept several giants underground on watch, along with a number of higher-tiered knights in a chamber just inside the mouth of their camp.

But following that chamber were a series of large spiral staircases that led down into their relatively small and cramped, but comfortable camp.

Leon's first order was for the Barons and the rest of the leadership to get a final accounting of their losses. He figured they'd be heavy, since the fighting hadn't been entirely one-sided despite their victory, and then he and the rest of the highest leadership went to have a post-battle meeting while the senior knights got their headcount.

"We did very well out there, I'd say at least ten thousand of their troops were killed, either by our blades or their fire," Leon said, opening the meeting with some well-deserved praise. Just as he expected, some of the omnipresent underlying antipathy in the eyes of the Barons died just a little with it, which was his goal even if he meant every word. "Now, we have to figure out how to follow this up."

"There's nothing really to figure out," Marcus said, jumping right in despite the obvious fatigue in his expression and body language. "We need to get in contact with the Prince, Sir Roland, and my father. What we've done already has weakened us tremendously, and we need to coordinate better with the main army if we're to inflict any lasting damage."

"That's what I was thinking, too," Leon mused as he leaned back in his stone chair. Everyone was sitting in a small conference room around a circular table, all made of stone, while the only sources of illumination provided were a couple of weak light runes on the ceiling that cast dim light into the room. But everyone there was at least of the third-tier, and as such wasn't bothered too much by the lighting.

"We haven't received word back from that messenger, yet," Orientis added. As the Baron with the largest number of troops in the unit, it was invariably her knights that made up the majority of the camp watch, so Leon trusted that she knew of the comings and goings in their camp better than anyone—not that there was much of either coming or going, anyway.

"We still shouldn't try anything new until we do," Marcus said.

"There's something to be said for waiting," Valeria stated, her tone calm but deliberately measured as if the statement were a reluctant confession, "but there is far more to be said for maintaining our momentum. We won today, we shouldn't now rest on our laurels."

“Just because we won today doesn’t mean we’ll win every time, we got lucky,” Marcus countered.

Baron Gellius finally spoke up, but in contrast to how he usually acted, he spoke quietly and patiently. To Leon, it came off like he was speaking down to Marcus, like the younger nobleman was child.

“Sir Aeneas, aggressive policies are always better than defensive ones, we shouldn’t let the traitors relax out of fear of retaliation...”

“I’m not scared of their retaliation, I’m concerned for our long-term sustainability!” Marcus retorted, clearly offended by Gellius’ tone. “A battle is not a war! And we don’t even have a good estimate for how many people we lost today! Still, I would guess that we’re down at least a third of what we started with. Today was a victory, to be sure, but many more victories like that and we’ll lose. We can’t exchange one of ours for every two or three of theirs—hells, we can’t even lose one for every ten they lose! If we’re to win this war, and not just future battles, we need to keep this in mind. By waiting to make any more attacks until we make contact with Prince August, we’ll be able to better use our strengths and maximize our chances of coming out of this with as many people still alive as possible!”

“I agree,” Alcander whispered, surprising Leon a bit. Alcander was usually down for whatever fight was going on, at least in Leon’s experience, so to hear him advocating for a more cautious approach wasn’t what Leon was expecting.

“As do I,” Orientis replied, and the other three Barons agreed, making the decision clear if Leon were to put it to a vote.

“Very well,” Leon said, deciding not to fight the issue. They’d pulled off the ambush he wanted, now he’d let everyone rest and recover, even if it meant giving up the initiative. “But they know we’re in play, now. We can rest here until Prince August lets us know what the plans are going forward, but we’re going to need some serious defenses. So while we rest, we can get started on that.”

“Thank you, Sir Leon,” Marcus said, an expression of honest and genuine gratitude on his face, but Gellius’ was completely opposite. The Baron’s obvious displeasure concerned Leon a bit, but Leon was relatively certain that he wouldn’t do anything stupid.

It would be pretty difficult to do so in the first place, but Leon knew from his own actions that it was better not to trust stupid people to make good decisions. At the very least, though, he felt certain that Gellius wouldn’t do anything suicidal.

Leon nodded to Marcus in acknowledgment, then moved on. “All right. Now that that’s handled, let’s start hammering out what our own defenses will look like...”

—

Calerus’ face burned in anger and humiliation. He was sitting at the war table with the rest of the Lords and Legates under Duke Duronius’ command, and everyone was staring at him with a mixture of pity and delight at his current circumstances.

Duronius himself sat at the head of the table, clad entirely in brilliant white, his face covered by a long silver beard, his eyes hard and dark. There was no levity in his eyes, only cold anger.

"She's furious," Duronius growled, his voice deep and his aura oppressive as he stared holes into Calerus. "She's demanding that we do something about you."

"Her fury is misplaced! All I did was act to kill that damn savage!" Calerus protested, the memory of the water mage dead in his arms still fresh in his mind. It had been almost an entire day since the ambush, and he'd been recalled to give a report on the situation.

And it wasn't going well.

"Had you charged into the forest, there would have been no issue," Duronius replied, his body barely moving in his chair as if he were a marble sculpture of a distant god. "However, you burned down a significant portion of the forest in the Countess' land. Under normal circumstances, you would be brought before His Majesty to answer such a crime."

"These aren't normal circumstances..." Calerus snarled through gritted teeth.

"No, they are not," Duronius responded, his frozen tone not changing in the slightest. "But consequences are still to be expected. A noble's land should not be burned down so flippantly. You were not out of options when you made that decision. You still outnumbered the barbarian by more than two to one, even with the giants. Can you sit there and tell me that you had no other choice than to burn down the forest? Giving up all hope of reclaiming our injured and dead?"

Calerus finally broke eye contact with Duronius, the Duke's words finally getting through to him. He knew that even though they weren't materially affected, the rest of the nobles around the table would demand that he be punished. Their lands weren't burned—at least not at his hand—but it was the principle of the act that so offended. It didn't matter who did it, the burning of a noble's land couldn't go unanswered, otherwise they'd all open themselves up to every arsonist in the Kingdom.

He knew that if he were in their place, he'd want the arsonist brought to justice, too.

But Calerus wasn't in their place, and his lover now lay dead in his tent, waiting to be recovered by the man's wife and heir. Calerus wanted nothing more than to wring bloody vengeance out of Ursus, no matter how many lives it took.

"What would you have me do, then?" Calerus quietly asked, half challengingly to Duronius. The Countess who owned the forest he burned down was relatively poor and unimportant. She hadn't even contributed a thousand warriors to their army. He knew he was more valuable to the war effort, and he wondered how far Duronius would be willing to push him over the principle when weighed against the practical benefit.

Duronius answered instantly, not even seeming to stop to think, leading Calerus to believe that his punishment had been decided long before this meeting.

"You will hunt down the savage, take his head, kill his giants, and slaughter those who follow him," Duronius said, and Calerus' heart skipped a beat in surprise and excitement. "However," the Duke continued, tempering Calerus' glee with dread, "you will not be in command of the force to bring the barbarian to justice."

Duronius paused for effect as he glanced to his right, the place of highest honor at the table. There sat a stoic woman—golden blond hair that glimmered in the light of the command tent, beautiful oval face, high cheekbones, well-endowed hourglass figure that would make any lady-lover salivate.

The Duchess of Vesontio, a woman so quiet and stoic that Calerus had never once heard her speak or so much as narrow her eyes; a woman so powerful that she sat at Duronius' right hand; a woman so noble that not once had Calerus ever dared to speak with her directly. She was beyond wealthy—easily one of the top ten richest nobles in the Kingdom—and had brought no less than ten thousand levies to the army, along with five thousand men-at-arms as heavy infantry and five thousand knights as heavy cavalry.

She was also the cousin of the Brimstone Paladin.

"Your Grace," Duronius said, his voice finally softening with something that resembled respect, though not an ounce of deference, "I charge you with taking control of this situation. Kill Ursus and all those that follow him, then return with all haste."

Vesontio didn't say a word, but she quietly nodded her head in assent.

Duronius took a deep breath as a subtle signal that the topic was now being changed, and the rest of the table sat up a little straighter.

"The fleets of the Consul of Discord are assembling in the south," Duronius said. "With them, taking Ariminium should be no issue at all; a few shots from our Flame Lances will annihilate their defenses. The 2nd Legion is also making its way south with its new Legate. The bastard traitor August will soon be brought to justice..."

Chapter 437: Leon's Campaign IV

Three days.

Leon scowled as he stared out into the dark forests of the Southern Territories. It had been three days since their ambush, and they'd not heard a word from August.

Even worse, after that ambush, the human contingent of the unit was down to two thousand, and that was including those who'd been injured and since healed. Leon knew that Octavian scouts were out in force scouring the woods looking for them and with only two thousand his chances of leading another successful ambush were slim, even with the giants. A few scouts he might be able to pick off but given that they had proven themselves willing to burn down the forest to get at him, it was risky to try.

All of this meant that for the past three days, Leon and his unit had mostly been sitting around in their underground camp waiting around—their scouts being the only exceptions—and that wasn't something that Leon was entirely comfortable doing in these circumstances.

So, now he stood just outside the entrance to the camp, his invisibility ring activated, staring out into the dark unsure of what to do now.

Rather, he knew what he wanted to do and he knew what he *needed* to do, but he couldn't decide which to choose.

He wanted to use his invisibility and the few spells he'd made in his downtime to go and wreak some havoc within the Octavian lines. It was incredibly reckless and risky, but it wasn't anything he hadn't done before, and he had confidence in his skills and experience.

But he needed to wait for communication from August. Acting on his initiative was one thing, but he had to admit that Marcus was right when he brought up the fact that without support from the main army, still under siege in their fortified camp, then he wasn't going to be able to do very much to the Octavian forces alone.

It was maddening, and he felt his heart race and his hands shake every time he thought about it. His enemy was right in front of him! He had to do *something*, and training so far hadn't cut it. In fact, there was something about the very idea of training that seemed to repulse him, and he couldn't honestly put his finger on it. He just... didn't want to. It wasn't that simple, but Leon couldn't justify it any other way.

Leon stood out there, leaning against a tree, thinking for what seemed like an eternity. It was the middle of the night, so he didn't have anything else to do other than think, but he couldn't come up with anything that could reasonably solve his problems.

And eventually, he simply lost patience. '*Fuck it,*' he thought in frustration as he scowled and turned around and strode back into the camp, letting his invisibility drop for the benefit of the guards watching the entrance.

Without breaking stride, Leon made his way over to the hallway where Marcus, Alcander, and the Barons all had rooms in the center of their camp. Walking directly to Marcus' stone door, Leon hammered on it thrice.

He heard a surprised groan from within. It was roughly midnight, so he knew he was waking Marcus up, but he felt like he needed to do so right now. Likewise, he loudly knocked on Alcander's door, waking the young nobleman from slumber.

"... eh... the fuck?" said Alcander's muffled voice from his room, and not a moment later, Marcus' door cracked open.

"Sir... Leon...?" Marcus asked, blearily blinking in the dim light of the hallway.

"Sir Aeneas," Leon formally responded, "I have some work for you and Sir Alcander. We should get moving."

Marcus opened the door a little further, revealing his bare chest and extremely confused expression. "What's... going on...?" he inquired, still obviously waking himself up.

"I'm not explaining multiple times, just get dressed and meet me outside," Leon said, glancing at Alcander's door as it opened to ensure that he got the message, too.

"Hang on..." Alcander drowsily sputtered as Leon turned back down the hallway, "why...?"

"Just do it quickly, I'd rather not burn any more moonlight than we already have," Leon said over his shoulder as he walked back toward the camp entrance.

Marcus and Alcander could only stare at each other in complete bewilderment. It was obvious from the lack of hustle and bustle and Leon's demeanor that they weren't under attack, but neither had any idea what was going on.

But after a moment, Marcus shrugged and said, "Let's at least see what's going on."

Alcander was a little grumpier, but he agreed. "Right... I think I'll bring my full kit, just in case..."

"Good idea."

Ten minutes later, Marcus and Alcander, both fully dressed, armed, and armored, found Leon and Anzu just outside the entrance waiting for them. Unlike them, however, Leon was dressed a little differently, clad in what seemed to be leather armor covered in runes rather than his black Magmic Steel armor. Also notable was that Anzu was fully saddled and stretching his wings.

"So, Leon, what's up?" Marcus asked as he and Alcander stepped out from the camp, the curious eyes of the guards boring holes into the back of their heads.

"We're going for a little flight over to Prince August's camp," Leon answered, his tone completely nonchalant as if Marcus had just asked after the weather.

"What?" Marcus flatly replied. "Wait, *what*?! No, no, no, if we do that and we're seen, we're likely to be shot down!"

"Yeah..." Alcander murmured as he stared warily at Anzu's saddle. "I, uh... don't do so well with heights, especially when my feet aren't on the ground..."

Ignoring Alcander's comment, Leon said, "Won't be a problem." He gestured upward to the mostly overcast sky. "We've got plenty of cloud cover, and they won't be looking up. And their defensive wards won't be too much of an issue, either, we'll be flying *very* high."

"If we're still seen..." Marcus began protesting only for Leon to cut him off.

"We'll be well out of range for arrows. Magic might be a problem, but like I said, we're not going to get close. We're not attacking them, we're flying right over. Now get on, let's go."

"Have you told anyone about this?" Marcus asked.

"Valeria and Alix know, but we'll be back hopefully before anyone wakes up. Or, at least, *I'll* be back. We'll have to see if the Prince and Marquis Aeneas let the two of you come with me."

Still, Marcus and Alcander hesitated.

Leon rolled his eyes but kept his tone civil as he said, "I get that you're nervous about it, but we'll be fine. Now *get on*."

As he finished, Anzu turned his head and glared at Marcus and Alcander as if he wanted nothing more than to claw out their eyes and rip out their throats. Naturally, this didn't inspire much confidence in either noble, but with one more glance in Leon's direction, they both took a few steps toward the albino griffin.

Reaching out his hand to grasp Anzu's saddle, Marcus said, "I'm putting my life in your hands... please don't get me killed..."

Leon wasn't sure who Marcus was talking to, him or Anzu, but he responded anyway.

"Anzu will steer you true. He likes new people about as much as I do, but he'll behave."

"I hope you're right..." Alcander muttered as Marcus hauled himself up into Anzu's saddle. The larger nobleman then followed, pulling himself up right behind Marcus.

Anzu looked less than thrilled, but he bore both with ease.

It took a few moments for Alcander and Marcus to get properly strapped in—which did nothing to quell Alcander's anxiety—and once they were done, Leon said, "You're good to go, neither will fall off. So let's get moving!"

He then channeled his magic power into his leather armor, causing the runes to momentarily glow with a dull grey light. Alcander and Marcus had been too distracted to ask, so when a huge gust of air suddenly enveloped Leon and lifted him into the air—buffeting the two in the process so much that if they hadn't been strapped into Anzu's saddle, they would've been thrown off—they were shocked speechless.

Leon took a second to steady himself in the air and bask in their surprise, then he took off straight upward. Anzu followed but a moment later, raising himself up onto his hind legs until Marcus and Alcander were parallel with the ground, then flapping his wings and sending himself and his passengers rocketing into the air.

"SSHIIIIIIIT!" Alcander couldn't help but scream, and while Marcus remained quiet, he was echoing Alcander's outburst in his mind as the ground fell away from them. Leon cringed a bit at how loud Alcander was, but he couldn't blame the nobleman given just how terrified he appeared to be. Since he didn't make any more outbursts, Leon didn't make a big deal out of it.

Together, the group of four climbed into the air, barely visible in the dark by mortal standards. A mage stronger than second-tier would've been able to see them if they were paying attention, but they climbed quickly and soon vanished into the clouds.

That in itself proved more than a bit problematic, for the clouds left them drenched and cold. Leon didn't feel the cool too much, but it clearly made Marcus uncomfortable, for Leon could see him shivering. Alcander, meanwhile, was too focused on not losing his dinner to care about being a bit wet and chilly.

For his part, Anzu didn't care. The water slid right off his fur and feathers, which were both too thick for him to feel cold even that high up.

Hidden above the clouds, Leon's small group proceeded south. Leon had to dive below a couple of times to confirm their position, and they made a beeline for August's camp.

It was a rough flight for Marcus and Alcander, having never been so high before. They could certainly jump quite high with their third-tier power, but this was on a whole other level.

Leon, however, enjoyed flying so high and so fast in ways that he could not properly articulate. It felt so freeing, so *right* to be in the sky without relying upon anything else's power. Flying with Anzu was satisfying, to be sure, but knowing that he could fly without his griffin made the experience so much more intense.

The wind in his hair, the ground so far below; flipping, spinning, and cartwheeling through the air; Leon couldn't get enough. His heart raced, his face was split in half with an unabashed smile, and all he could think about was that he never wanted to let his feet touch the ground again.

But that was unfeasible. The flight was over far too quickly, and before Leon knew it, they had reached August's camp—or, more accurately, about a thousand feet above the camp.

They had flown straight over all the Octavian defenses, for flight was such a rare power that no Bull Kingdom soldier or warrior would ever think to defend against it, and to do so was so magically expensive that most wouldn't bother even if it did occur to them. Most enchantments preventing going over walls only extended a few hundred feet into the air so that the most powerful mages couldn't leap over the walls, and that was it.

"Down we go!" Leon called out to Anzu, and both he and the griffin dove through the air, passing through the clouds like falling stars. It was all Marcus and Alcander could do to hold on and not scream themselves hoarse.

The group landed in a large open space near the center of the camp, likely a place for most of the leadership and their retainers to gather. It was surrounded by hastily constructed and architecturally boring stone structures that served as quarters for the army's high leadership and their staff, so when Leon pulled out of his dive and prepared for landing, his propulsion boots kicking up a huge dust cloud as he did so, a loud alarm went off and guards began pouring out of these structures.

Leon landed without much ceremony, though, and Anzu gracefully touched down right beside him. A moment later, all four of them were surrounded by spears and shouting guards.

Leon was panting a bit from the exertion of powering his flight suit while Anzu glared at the guards. Marcus looked a bit sheepish and raised his hands in a nonthreatening gesture. Alcander, however, was so out of it that he barely realized where he was, and he struggled to undo his straps. It took him a moment, but as soon as the straps had been undone—in direct violation of what several guards had been screaming at him to do—Alcander fell out of the saddle, landing on his hands and knees, and started vomiting into the grass.

This didn't calm the guards down any, and they continued to shout and scream often contradictory orders at the quartet, while a few started lightly poking Anzu and Leon with their spears to get them to comply.

"I am—" Leon began trying to explain, but he was immediately cut off as five different fifth-tier mages only screamed louder, trying to assert their authority over him and the entire situation.

"CALM YOURSELVES!" Marcus suddenly shouted, and Leon almost thought it would work, but it only angered the guards even more, and they continued shouting for him to shut his mouth and remain where he was.

It wasn't until the relatively deep and authoritative voice of Roland was heard that any of them stopped with their incessant shouting.

"What is going on here?!"

"Sir Roland!" Leon called out as the guards went silent.

"Sir Leon?" Roland asked in surprise as he pushed through the circle of guards. "It is you!" he exclaimed in joy, rushing forward to offer his hand to Leon. Leon hesitated a moment, but he clasped Roland's wrist in greeting. "It's good to see you! Oh, and all of you..." he turned his gaze on the guards, his aura and unhappy expression causing them all to wilt slightly, "... return to your posts! This is Leon Ursus, the Thunder Knight! The White Griffin!"

Chapter 438: Leon's Campaign V

"This is Leon Ursus, the Thunder Knight! The White Griffin!" Roland shouted to the guards, and immediately, nearly all of their expressions turned to surprise and almost panicked regret.

Leon, however, was so stunned at what Roland had just said that he reeled back a bit as if he had just been struck across the face.

"W-What... the... did you just...?" he sputtered, looking at Roland as if he were a two-headed dog that learned to talk.

[Oh... by all the Gods and Devils... that is just the greatest thing I've heard all week!] Xaphan gleefully whispered from Leon's soul realm, though Leon was a bit too distracted to hear him.

Ignoring Leon for the moment, Roland repeated to the guards, "Get back to your posts! These are allies!"

As Leon pulled his shocked mind back together, he could sense Marcus' judging eyes upon his back. Glancing backward, he saw that Marcus was actually watching the guards head back to their posts, but Leon *knew* that Marcus was barely holding in the laughter at the ridiculous things that Roland had just said. Alcander, however, was still retching into the grass and barely seemed to know where he was.

Making things worse, Leon could hear some of the men and women of the guard detail chatting amongst themselves as they followed Roland's order.

"... was Sir Leon? I thought all barbarians were bearded..."

"I know, he was *socute*..."

"... honestly expecting someone a bit more... I don't know, wilder?"

"... heard he has a thousand giants with him, and that they've already killed fifty thousand of Octavius' nutlickers!"

"... knew I'd seen that griffin before..."

'*Maybe they're not all that bad...*' Leon thought to himself, but once they had gone a respectful distance, he turned his attention back to Roland coincidentally as Roland did likewise.

“So,” Roland said, “Sir Leon—eh!”

Leon interrupted the Paladin by uncharacteristically throwing his arm over Roland’s shoulders and pulling him close as if he were an old friend.

But he wasn’t an old friend.

“If you *ever* call me those things again,” Leon whispered into Roland’s ear, emitting a few strands of killing intent that had Roland’s hair standing on end, “I will *end* you. I will fuckin’ *end* you. Got it?”

With a quick flash of light, Roland slipped out of Leon’s grip and stood a few feet away, a bemused smile on his face.

“I suppose I can refrain from such titles in the future, but I can’t say the same for the rest of the army,” he said in a smugly matter-of-fact tone.

“What does that mean?” Leon demanded, his heart dropping into his stomach in panic.

“You... haven’t spent much time with the rank-and-file in your time, have you?” Roland asked, cocking his head, and narrowing his eyes in inquisitiveness.

“... No...?” Leon replied, thinking back to all of his time in the Legions. Barring the few weeks he’d spent at Fort 127, nearly all of his time in the Bull Kingdom had been spent in the company of knights and nobles.

“I wouldn’t sweat it,” Roland said with a laugh and a shrug. “The troops have a tendency to assign nicknames. The Brimstone and Bronze Paladins were both named by their troops, you know.”

“No matter who it comes from, I don’t appreciate the nicknames,” Leon replied without a shred of amusement.

“Unfortunately, you don’t have much choice in the matter,” Roland said. “They’ll call you what they will, and you can either live with it or fight against it. If you fight against it, then you’ll likely only earn yourself something... a bit less *flattering*.”

Leon scowled, his golden eyes glaring in the direction of the largest group of guards as they disappeared into their quarters.

“Well,” Roland said a bit awkwardly as Marcus helped Alcander to his feet, “as much as I would love to stick around here and chat, we should probably have you report in with His Highness. Come with me.”

Roland then led them to the largest of the stone barracks, being about four stories tall and dense with offices on the first three. Anzu had to wait outside, though, much to his consternation, but accepted it when Leon rubbed his head and made sure the griffin knew he was coming back soon.

As they went inside, Leon asked Roland, “There aren’t that many guards, I’ve noticed. What’s with that? Isn’t this the nerve center for the entire camp?”

“It is,” Roland replied, waving them past the guards and handful of secretaries still working this late.

“Most of the guards stay inside at night since there isn’t much point in having them wait outside this far

inside the camp. If someone was capable of penetrating this far into the camp without raising any alarms, having the guards standing watch outside wouldn't make much of a difference anyway."

"Understandable, I guess," Leon replied, taking note of all the empty desks and offices they passed as Roland led them to the central stairway.

"By the way, who are your companions?" Roland asked.

"Sirs Marcus Aeneas and Alcander..." Leon quickly replied before pausing for an embarrassingly long moment as he realized that he didn't actually know Alcander's family name.

"I got it," Roland replied, covering for Leon a bit. Fortunately for Leon, Alcander was still feeling too queasy to notice. "A pleasure to meet you, Sir Aeneas, Sir Laronius. Your parents will be beyond pleased to see you two alive and well."

"You too, Sir Magnus," Marcus replied with almost excessive formality while Alcander focused on remaining upright.

A few seconds later, Roland was showing them into August's office where he quickly introduced them. August himself was clearly tired, though Leon could understand that given the time of day and the weeks of siege; the Prince sported large bags under his eyes and a lethargy to his movements that Leon hadn't seen before the Prince awakened his blood.

August repeated Roland's pleasantries, while Marcus and Alcander did their best to present themselves to the Prince with as much ceremony as they could, bowing and professing how much of an honor it was to meet August.

Noticing that Alcander had started to sway despite having a knee on the floor and Marcus stifling a yawn of fatigue, August quickly said, "Please, rise and take a seat. It's late, we could all stand to be a little less formal, no?"

"Thank you, Your Highness," Marcus replied while Leon and Alcander took the offered seats without a word—though, in Alcander's case, he more or less fell into the chair rather than sat down.

"Roland, please inform Marquis Aeneas that his son has arrived," August said, to which Roland nodded and left. "Now," August continued, turning his attention to Leon, "tell me what all has happened to you over the past few weeks. No need to get too detailed since I'm sure you'll have to repeat yourself once everyone else is here, but I would like to hear the basic rundown, please."

Leon nodded, acquiescing to August's request-like order.

"Hmm, we were wondering what prompted so many of their warriors to suddenly leave like that," August said once Leon had finished his brief explanation. "Our scouts estimate that you killed eight thousand of their people at least, so I have to offer you my congratulations."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Leon replied, though the thought of how many losses his side took relative to their total weighed down the pride he would've otherwise taken in such a victory.

Just then, Roland led Marquis Aeneas into the office. The Marquis appeared grumpy and barely dressed, but as soon as his eyes landed upon Marcus, all irritability and vexation in his demeanor vanished.

"Son!" he loudly exclaimed, rushing forward to pull Marcus out of his seat and into his arms.

"Ah! Uh, good to see you, too, Father," Marcus sputteringly replied, taken aback as he was with his father's decidedly un-noble outburst.

Quickly regaining his poise, the Marquis released his son, but Leon could see a few unshed tears in the elder noble's eyes.

"It's good to see you, my boy," Aeneas growled as he straightened his clothes. He then turned to August whom he had practically ignored, bowed his head, and said, "I apologize, Your Highness. I forgot myself for a moment."

"Don't worry about it, My Lord," August replied, mustering up all the cheer he could to smile at the family reunion. "Sir Leon was just telling me about his exploits..."

Like that, Roland and Aeneas pulled up a pair of chairs as Leon made a more thorough report of his mission and the actions he had taken upon his return.

"That was reckless, you're lucky you didn't lead your entire unit to their deaths," Aeneas chided, though Leon couldn't help but notice that his tone lacked the harder edge that he had come to expect when speaking with the Marquis, and once he noticed that, he also happened to see that the Marquis' gaze seemed a bit softer than it was, too.

"I trusted my people to accomplish their task," Leon replied, his tone a mix of matter-of-fact confidence and confusion.

"I hope you trust them to continue to do so," Aeneas continued.

"You don't think I ought to try and get them here?"

"No, it's far too useful having a force outside their siege lines, even if it's small."

"I agree," Marcus added. "I would like to join you, if possible."

Aeneas' head whipped around to stare at his son in astonishment. "That's..."

"I would join... you too," Alcander interjected, though he still seemed about ready to melt before their eyes.

Ignoring Aeneas' rapidly escalating panic, Leon said, "I don't have a lot to work with, so I'd be happy to have you both come back with me."

"Marcus!" Aeneas loudly protested.

"Father, I am close to the fourth-tier," Marcus calmly replied, to the amusement of the watching August and Roland. "Some combat experience will be good for me. I can't pass this opportunity up."

"It would be safer for you to remain here!"

"Safer, sure. But better? I would disagree."

Sensing a familial fight was brewing from the way Aeneas' expression was slowly turning angrier, August interrupted, saying, "Sir Marcus is a grown man and a knight without a commander. I, personally, couldn't imagine a better person for him to follow than Sir Leon, at least until this war is over."

Aeneas glared at August for the briefest of moments before getting his face back under control. "... Very well," he growled. "If that is where Your Highness stands, then I will not stand in the way."

August gratefully nodded while giving the Marquis a sympathetic look. "So, moving on," he said, "let's get down to business here. Sir Leon is outside their lines with two thousand warriors and a hundred giants. The Duke of Lentia has offered to join our cause. We're stuck here unless we can manage to break out, and given the way our last attempts went, I would hesitate to order another try at that."

"Are there any other ways to escape?" Leon asked. "Your messenger managed to reach us, though I don't know if he managed to return..."

"None of the messengers we sent out have come back," Roland said with a mix of sorrow and fury. "That one managed to reach you is a miracle unto itself. But none have returned."

"Our paths through the mountains are too rough for large numbers of people to escape through," August explained. "And, at this point, most of them have been blocked off by small but powerful groups of Duke Duronius' soldiers. We're effectively stuck unless we were to make a costly assault, and we're not at that point yet."

"Aren't you, though?" Leon asked. "Seems to me like none of us have many options. We're still outnumbered almost two to one, and unless we take drastic action, we'll run out of food before anything happens. How's the supply situation?"

"We have enough for about three weeks," Roland answered.

"Three weeks of food and 'we're not at that point yet'?" Leon asked August, his tone disbelieving.

"You weren't here when we tried to break out, we took serious casualties," August shot back a little testily. "That we managed to hold this hill long enough to fortify it is the only reason we're still around. If we abandon these walls, then we're done for."

"We're done for if we stay, too. I'd rather take the chance of breaking out than the certainty of starvation."

"I'm... with Sir Leon on this one, Your Highness," Marcus said somewhat nervously as August's eyes flitted over to him. He'd never spoken one-on-one with Royalty before. "A defensive attitude is only viable when we have something to defend. This hill isn't worth it, and if we stay here... we'll lose."

"We have plenty worth defending," August quietly replied. "There are a hundred and fifteen thousand people in this army. That means we have a hundred and fifteen thousand reasons not to attack..."

Leon quietly sighed and glanced over at Roland, who looked back at him apologetically. It seemed to Leon that seeing how many people had died in their previous battle had affected August more than either had thought at the time.

“People are going to die no matter what,” Aeneas said, his head still occasionally turning from August to his son. “If Octavius wins, then all of this is meaningless, Prince Trajan’s murder will go unavenged, and Your Highness will be executed. All of *us* would likely be executed for treason as well.”

August nodded in a way that Leon knew meant that he, Aeneas, and Roland had all had this argument many times in the past couple weeks. That they were still hunkered down on the hill simply meant August hadn’t yet decided what to do and was hesitating now that he had been confronted with what the cost might be following the previous battle.

“People die,” Leon whispered, drawing August’s attention. “No matter what, people are going to die. We’re past the point of no return. Starvation, battle, or the headsman. That’s the choice we all have. I would choose to risk my life in battle rather than the other two, as I’m sure most people in the army would agree. Prince August, if you stay this passive and defensive, we’ll lose.”

It took almost an entire minute of sitting in uncomfortable silence, with Leon, Marcus, Alcander, Aeneas, and Roland all staring at August, exerting pressure by making their expectations known before August relented.

“Fine,” he murmured, his eyes closing and a strained look pulling the skin of his face taught. He said no more, but he didn’t need to, his agreement was all that Aeneas needed.

“Good! Sir Leon, Marcus, Sir Roland, we have plans to make! Come, we have an army to destroy!”

Chapter 439: Leon’s Campaign VI

Leon’s meeting with Roland and Marquis Aeneas went quickly. There wasn’t much for them to say, for Aeneas had been planning their next moves for days, he’d only been waiting on the go-ahead from August.

First, Leon was to return to his unit outside the walls and harass the Octavian forces laying siege to the Augustine camp. No more large-scale battles or ambushes as he’d led several days ago, his only job was to harass Duronius’ supply lines. Meanwhile, Roland would lead a group of elites from the Legions and escort a group of magic engineers into the mountains to break through the Octavian forces holding the narrow passes, and then widen them to allow significant portions of August’s army to escape from the siege.

Once there were enough forces on the outside, they’d smash the Octavian troops between them, with Aeneas and August on the walls and Leon and Roland out in the field.

During this time, they’d try to get in contact with the Duke of Lentia’s forces and send him a message that his defection is accepted. If done quickly enough, then the Lentian army would be able to assist them in the campaign.

It was simple enough to be clearly understood, while broad enough to give Leon flexibility and room to act on his own initiative, making it one of the most perfect plans Leon had ever heard. In fact, given Marcus’ penchant for detailed, complicated plans that Leon had seen first-hand during their time at the Knight Academy, he almost wouldn’t believe that Marcus was Aeneas’ son if it weren’t for their strong physical resemblance.

Once the meeting was over, Leon, Alcander, and Roland left the room, leaving Marcus and his father to catch up for a few minutes.

"I'll see you outside the walls in five days," Roland said to Leon.

"I'll hold you to that," Leon replied.

"You can count on my being there, and I'll bring as many friends as I can," Roland responded. "In the meantime, we'll try and establish better contact with you so that you don't have to risk flying over—"

"I don't mind flying!" Leon interrupted with an amount of enthusiasm that Roland found both strange and completely understandable.

"... I suppose I wouldn't either if I had managed to build one of those flight suits..." Roland quietly stated, looking at Leon's attire with more than a little bit of envy. "It seems your sentiment isn't shared, though..."

Both men glanced at Alcander, who was staring at Anzu, his face pale and his hands shaking.

"You good, Alcander?" Leon asked, walking over to the nobleman.

"Yeah... yeah..." he mumbled.

"You don't have to come with us, I'm sure Sir Roland can find you a place with him to break through the mountain passes," Leon said, glancing back at Roland.

"I would be happy to have you, Sir Alcander," Roland replied, smiling at the younger man.

"I'm good to go," Alcander shot back, his tone sharp and determined.

"Mm. Well, I suppose we're about to find out," Leon said. He nodded to Alcander in solidarity, then left him and Marcus to get back into Anzu's saddle and strap themselves in.

"All right," Roland said, clearly angling to leave them to their preparations, "I'll see you in a few days."

As the Paladin turned around to return to August's building, Leon stopped him, saying, "By the way, Sir Roland, about what I told you before, I wasn't joking."

"Hmm? What do you mean? What did you tell me before?" Roland asked as he stopped and turned back to face Leon.

"Don't call me any of those names again. *Ever.*"

Leon's demeanor was deadly serious, even emitting strands of killing intent. Despite this, Roland still treated it like a joke, chuckling and saying, "Of course, Sir Leon. If you don't wish to be known by those titles, then I shan't use them."

He looked like he wanted to say more, but after a moment's pause, he nodded to Leon one more time, then walked back inside.

Before Leon could get started on his preparations, though, he heard the familiar deep, resonant voice of Xaphan from deep within his soul realm.

[Awww, did the big bad *White Griffin* get his feelings hurt? Hmmmm? How about it, *Thunder Knight*? Surely you're too tough to let a few names get the better of you...] The demon's tone was mocking, but as he continued, he suddenly seemed to become much more serious. [Of course, I know you aren't tough enough to take that, your skin is so thin that it's practically transparent.]

[Uh huh,] Leon replied, knowing that he wasn't going to hear the end of this very soon. [What I'm more worried about is that you've had at least an hour to come up with ways to mock me over those names, and *that's* all you're giving me. What's the matter, is the weak little demon getting restless in his box? Do I need to get you a chew toy to pass the time?]

[No need to go out of your way, oh mighty Thunder Knight, oh attractive and most illustrious White Griffin!] Xaphan sarcastically retorted. [Your lowly de... actually never mind that, I can't even bring myself to finish that sentence. I'm better than you in every conceivable way, and to suggest otherwise, even as a joke, is simply too much for me to bear.]

[Wonderful to know where you draw the line, it's good to see you finally admit defeat.]

[This isn't defeat, young human, far from it...]

And like that, Leon felt Xaphan's presence descend back into his soul realm, which he took to mean that their exchange was over. Oddly enough, it actually put quite a spring into his step, knowing that Xaphan had been beaten back in their little verbal spar, but he could feel something was up with the demon—his mocking was simply too awful for him to be completely all right.

But this wasn't the time to be pondering the demon's issues; the sky was calling to Leon, and he had to answer. Quickly donning his flight suit, Leon made sure that Marcus and Alcander were properly secured and then took off, kicking up a huge cloud of dust in his wake. Anzu was right behind him, soaring into the firmament, his coat gleaming every time the moon shone through the clouds.

Leon spared Marcus and Alcander a single glance before the thrill of flight overtook him. Marcus seemed fine, but Alcander, as with their previous flight, barely seemed able to keep himself upright. Leon could sympathize a little bit, so decided to try and make their flight as quick as possible.

To that end, he began cutting through the clouds on a northerly route, dropping back down below the clouds a couple of times to check on their position. Things were quiet over the Augustine camp, likewise for the Octavian camp. However, Leon noticed a problem as they passed the cleared areas and back over the forests.

He could see the trees moving as thousands of people pushed past them. He could hear the thunderous footsteps and the labored breathing of people marching through the rough, swampy terrain.

These weren't his people; these were undoubtedly sent by Duronius. And from what he could tell from so high above and on the other side of the thick leafy canopy, there were tens of thousands of Octavian troops heading straight for the camp.

As the realization sank in, all elation that Leon felt in liberating his feet from their earthy prison vanished, replaced with a slow, cold dread. The forest was large and full of hiding places, but this Octavian marching column was heading straight for his camp.

'They know we're there...' Leon thought to himself in panic.

He accelerated to his maximum controllable speed while Anzu fell in beside him, easily keeping up. Leon had to get back to the camp as soon as he was able to, for this unit was close enough that he might not have enough time to get his two thousand people awake and moving in time to escape.

Calerus slowly picked his way through the forest on foot. His horse had been killed the last time he'd been foolish enough to ride one into the trees, and he wasn't about to risk another of his expensive steeds on this mission. Most nobles, he knew, wouldn't be so quick to abandon such things, but he had no qualms about mingling with his knights and men-at-arms on foot.

Especially so when it would bring him closer to Ursus.

He knew that he was going to get the barbarian this time. He had the five thousand men and women of his retinue that survived Ursus' ambush, plus another forty-five thousand from various other nobles with him. There was nowhere for the barbarian to hide with such a large force about to crash down upon him.

He couldn't help but smile. Calerus could practically feel his lover watching him, supporting him in bringing the justice of civilized people to the savage that had prematurely sent him to his Ancestors.

Ahead of him, one of his weaker men-at-arms stumbled over a root and face-planted into the mud. A few of his knights snickered—if pressed, Calerus would've admitted that it was quite comical—but that quickly stopped as Calerus stepped forward to help his man-at-arms to his feet.

"Be careful out here," he said. "Always watch where you're going. We don't know what heathen tricks the savage has left for us in these woods..."

"Yes, My Lord," the man-at-arms replied, his face wearing the expression of abject shame and embarrassment. "I apologize for making such a fool of myself."

"Don't worry about it, just focus on which of the hells we will unleash upon our enemies!" Calerus chuckled good-naturedly, clapped his man-at-arms on the shoulder, and urged him onward. His lover was dead, but he had many other good people at his side, including the forces from Vesontio, Argentum, Lentia, Segovia, and Belum with him, along with another dozen units from smaller noble territories.

He still grieved for the water mage, but with so many good people at his sides and back, Ursus' fall was guaranteed. When his revenge was so secure, he couldn't help but smile.

Leon stood outside of the underground camp entrance, watching as his people filed out almost painfully slowly. He was fully armed and armored, with Valeria, Alix, and Anzu at his side. The Barons had gotten their people moving in short order, though had taken some prodding on both Leon and Marcus' part to get them started.

There hadn't been much time for Leon to brief the Barons and high-ranking knights of what had happened during the night. The Octavian forces were only about an hour or two away from their camp when he, Marcus, and Alcander returned, and he could practically feel every second that ticked away.

It had been long enough now that most of those leaving the camp could hear the Octavian forces in the distance, even with the muffling effect of so much forest between them, and that spurred their movements onward. As they exited the camp, they got into a loose marching formation and started moving.

It was only Leon, his retinue, and the giants that stood still, keeping an eye on their southern flank. If Duronius wanted his people to hit Leon in the rear, they'd have to fight their way through a hundred giants and Leon himself to do so.

He was ready. His hands were calm, his heart rate steady, his demeanor calm. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for most of his people, and even Alix standing next to him subtly shook in fear as the sounds in the distance slowly became louder and louder.

Only Valeria next to him was as calm as he was, and he wished he could be surprised or reassured by that. He was neither.

After a few more minutes of waiting, Marcus and Alcander came running out of the camp, having almost pushed their way through some of the levies that were still making their way out. That got them a few angry glares, but as they ran to take their places next to Leon, most antipathies towards them vanished.

"What are you two doing?" Leon asked, not even turning his head to acknowledge their arrival.

"We're not going to run while you stay behind," Marcus replied, smiling at Leon through his helmet—or so Leon assumed given his tone.

"Yeah... there's too many... people here who need an introduction to my ax..." Alcander sputtered, still looking a little green around the gills from their two earlier flights.

Leon glanced at them from the corner of his eye. They were both strong for third-tier mages—incredibly close to the fourth-tier, in fact, but he knew that his duty was probably to send them on their way rather than having them stay and fight.

"Fair enough," he said to them, choosing to ignore that part of his duty. If they wanted to stay with him, he wasn't going to stop them. But it did bring something up that he needed to check, so he turned his head as if to check on the progress of the unit in evacuating their camp, but instead, he gave Valeria's aura a quick inspection.

What he saw there only depressed him. She'd been close to the fifth-tier for months, and she was only drawing closer. He guessed that she was probably only a few training sessions shy of successfully creating and controlling elemental magic.

And the stronger she got, the harder it would only be for him to confront her.

'*After this...*' he thought to himself. He knew he'd said things like this before, but if he lived through this next battle, he'd make good on this promise. This had to be nipped in the bud.

Suddenly, as Leon was getting a read on Valeria's power, a massive aura made itself known deep in the forest, causing his head to whip around in alarm. A moment later, a fireball the size of Leon's entire body came peeling out of the woods and hit a fifth-tier equivalent giant straight on.

The explosion was tremendous, but Leon at first thought the giant had shrugged it off. Through the bright orange flame, Leon could still see a few glimpses of its body standing upright. However, as the fire quickly died down, he saw that the boulders that made up its body had almost completely fused together, the formerly grey and black stone now glowing a dull red.

A moment later, the giant fell, its body's brittle stone crumbling to pieces on the ground as the underbrush around it caught fire. For the first time since he'd brought them, Leon had lost a giant.

And the aura in the trees only grew stronger.

"GET DOWN!!!" Leon shouted as more fireballs came roaring out from the trees.

Chapter 440: Leon's Campaign VII

"GET DOWN!!!" Leon shouted as more fireballs came roaring out from the trees.

He and those closest to him hit the dirt. Even Anzu dropped down to the ground. The giants, on the other hand, stood their ground. Led by Lapis, the giants created huge earthen walls between themselves and the fireballs, reinforcing them in certain places with stone.

The fireballs hit this wall and detonated with extreme force. Fire spilled over the top of the wall, but none of it hit the giants. The explosions, however, tore the wall to pieces, and a moment later, another volley of fireballs followed the previous. Most of these ended up like the first volley, smashing and exploding relatively harmlessly against the wall, but two fireballs made it through and splashed across the bodies of a pair of giants, throwing them to the ground hard enough to shake the ground.

Leon was dismayed to see the giants remain laying there, unmoving. He focused his magic senses on those giants and could vaguely feel the lightning magic that animated their bodies dissipate into the air.

Fury ignited within him. He was tied to these giants in a way that he wasn't to most of the humans in his unit, and while he was angered and saddened when he lost any of them, seeing the giants fall was a personal loss that simply outweighed that of the others. He turned his gaze back ahead of him, and his magic senses slipped past the wall, rippling out into the woods.

There, he could see the hordes of Octavian troops waiting among the trees. In front of their ranks were a dozen groups of powerful mages, twenty per group, and each mage possessed of fifth-tier strength. The formation they stood in somewhat resembled that of a fire rune, with each holding a silver baton covered in runes that funneled their magic power to the mage in front of the formation. Each of these mages were sixth-tier, and fire danced at their fingertips as they prepared another volley of fireballs.

Leaping up from where he lay almost face-down, lightning coursing through his body, Leon alighted on the top of the wall, a golden spear of lightning appearing in his hand. The formations powering the fire mages were far away and many trees stood between him and them, but there were a few angles he had available. Sensing the mages about to fire again and the holes in the wall not quite patched up yet, Leon chose one of these angles and hurled the lightning bolt with all the strength he could muster.

The bolt passed through the trees with great speed, faster than any bolt he'd ever hurled before. In less time than it took Leon to blink, the bolt exploded on the chest of his target, one of the sixth-tier fire mages in front of the formation.

The fire mage was thrown back like a ragdoll by an explosion of golden sparks and hundreds of tiny arcs of lightning. The lightning explosion was powerful enough to impact the formation behind him, throwing to the ground those closer to the front while forcing those further back to their knees. The fire mage himself was killed almost instantly, his flesh melted away and the rest charred black.

Leon wasn't quite expecting his attack to have such an effect, but after a moment of thought, he figured it made some sense. It likely required everything that mage had to control the magic power of the twenty mages behind him into his attacks even with the aid of those silver batons, leaving him with nothing left over to defend himself.

For the briefest of moments, Leon felt a welling of pride in his chest, which was immediately dashed as another volley of fireballs rocketed forth toward the giants' wall. He raised his defenses in anticipation of the barrage.

Again, fire exploded upon the wall, and again, a few fireballs managed to make it through, striking several of the giants and killing the lightning wisps within their stony forms. The rest of the giants began rumbling, but not in any way that Leon could interpret. It wasn't language, more like a roar of fury, something which Leon had rarely seen in the normally ever-calm beings.

For his part, thanks to his considerable command over the element of fire, none of the fire came close to him.

Once the flames died down, Lapis and the rest of the giants extended their arms toward the wall, and with what seemed like a synchronized snap of their massive rocky fingers, caused the wall to detonate outward, firing debris in the direction of the Octavian forces. Contrary to Leon's muted expectations, the debris flew fast and far, hitting their enemy like meteors. In an instant, hundreds of the weakest members of their enemy's force were killed or incapacitated.

The mages powering the flame artillery, however, were largely unharmed and continued to prepare another attack. Leon noticed that the attacks were slowing down, however, and Lapis seemed to realize the same thing.

"AGAIN!" the blue-streaked giant roared, and the giants once more began using their mastery of earth magic to rip immense boulders from the ground and heave them at their enemies. Leon pitched in, too, with a couple of well-aimed lightning bolts.

Scores of Octavian troops fell, and three of their artillery formations were taken out of action. The remaining eight, however, opened up with another volley, and the giants weren't able to raise their wall in time to block the strike. Two fireballs missed their targets, careening out into the woods behind them and smashing into the shallow hill that the camp had been built under, but the remaining six hit their marks, killing six more giants.

The giants roared again, shaking the earth with their fury. Without waiting for a command from Leon, the giants charged, leaving only Lapis behind with Leon, Valeria, Alix, Anzu, Marcus, and Alcander.

"Fucking hell!" Alix shouted, finally getting a moment to breathe after that exchange of magic.

Marcus and Valeria were a bit more composed, both rising as Marcus asked the question on both of their minds.

“Should we charge, too?”

Leon turned his gold eyes to the two young nobles, and neither balked. They were ready for a fight, they *wanted* to fight.

Then, he glanced behind them. The rest of the unit had paused in their evacuation. The camp had been emptied, but the column wasn't moving.

Projecting his magic senses once more, Leon scanned the region to see what the problem was. And his heart sank.

“Not yet,” he whispered. “We have another problem. The marching column has been engaged by a flanking force.”

The others turned to face the same direction, Leon's look of dismay mirrored on each of their faces.

“... how many...?” Marcus solemnly asked.

“Can't tell. More than we have, at any rate,” Leon answered.

“Enemies behind, enemies ahead...” Valeria whispered. “We have to attack one of these. Which one?”

Leon grimaced, time seeming to slow down as he contemplated their terrible situation. If it were any other unit, he'd drop everything and aid the giants. They were, after all, the group that he could most claim to be 'his', and he felt that his responsibility to them was above that of his responsibility to the Barons. However, the giants were more than capable on their own, while he could see the front of the Barons' column being pushed back by the front lines of the Octavian flanking force.

But as Leon considered this, he saw the giants crashing into the front ranks of the Octavian lines. One more fire volley had been launched in the time he'd hesitated, killing seven more giants. The artillery formations had been disrupted, however, leaving the rest of the giants either tangled with powerful mages or rampaging through their enemy. Said enemy was not helpless before them, however, for Leon saw another giant fall as fourth and fifth-tier mages attacked it with hammers and axes.

The giants had no support, and while they were strong on their own, there were just too many Octavian troops for them to handle without help.

On the other side, the Barons were being pushed back. One of the Barons had already fallen, and the flanking unit was starting to exert pressure further down the marching column. They weren't going to last much longer, and neither were the giants.

Leon had to make a decision.

He grimaced, glanced guiltily at Lapis, and said, “We have to help the Barons! We'll get them to swing around and get into a defensive position back at the camp!”

The others nodded.

“All right, then we should get moving quickly!” Marcus said emphatically.

Leon agreed, but he spared the giants one more look. Two more had fallen in that time; their foes were far more prepared and organized than those Leon had fought before, and casualties were mounting.

“Let’s go!” he reluctantly shouted, and he started running for the front of the marching column, the others hot on his heels. A little surprisingly, Lapis followed as well, and the giant spoke not a single word of complaint. Leon wasn’t entirely sure why, but he wished he could say it was a surprise. That the giant was choosing to follow him over assisting its people only added onto the guilt that was starting to tear Leon apart inside.

Pushing those thoughts out of his mind for the moment, Leon focused only on putting one foot in front of the other. He and the others made good time, quickly reaching the marching column and shouting for everyone to fall back to the camp. This started a somewhat haphazard retreat, but Leon preferred a sloppy retreat to a last stand in these woods.

A few minutes later, they reached the point where the flanking force had engaged the front of the column, and Leon could already see that his side had come out of it in much worse condition than their previous engagements. The flanking force was stronger magically, they had more armor, they had better weapons. In truth, most of their engagements had been similar, but Leon’s side had used surprise and the support of the stone giants to even the playing field. They had neither now, with the sole exception of Lapis.

“Into the fire!” Leon shouted, not slowing down for a second as they charged at the flanking force. Their charge didn’t go unnoticed; many turned to face them, spears and swords at the ready, but Leon flicked his off-hand and launched a fireball at the Octavian ranks. Lapis did one better, coming to a full stop so it could use its magic power to reach into the ground beneath them and summon dozens of stone spikes.

Leon’s fireball raced through the air, detonating on the armor of the strongest Octavian knight he could see, killing the man instantly, along with a handful of those around him. Lapis’ spikes, meanwhile, skewered a dozen more while allowing Leon’s group to run up the back of the spikes like a ramp, mostly bypassing the spear wall.

And like that, they crashed into the flanking force’s flank. Leon did most of the heavy lifting, his lightning and fire creating openings for the others to exploit, while Lapis covered their rear once it caught up. After a few minutes of desperate combat, they hewed their way through their enemy’s lines to reach the Barons not far away, leaving almost a hundred dead in their wake.

The Barons had been marching at the front of the column, and as such, were the first to have been engaged by the flanking force. Unfortunately, Leon could only see four of them, the last was nowhere to be found. Making things worse, the Barons were being pushed back by three sixth-tier mages and at least fifteen fifth-tier mages.

With those clues, Leon was fairly sure where the fifth Baron was—probably one of the hundreds of corpses strewn about the place.

Leon and the others cut their way to the Baron’s vicinity, and Leon burst onto the scene with a blast of lightning that killed one of the sixth-tier mages outright; the knight had been too preoccupied with playing with Baron Gellius to notice Leon’s arrival.

The other two noticed Leon, though, and pulled back in surprise as Lapis and Anzu made their presence known. In an instant, the odds had almost evened out.

But Leon couldn't take advantage of that, as much as his instincts screamed at him to do so. Behind those mages were hundreds more knights and men-at-arms, and even Leon couldn't take them all on his own, or even with the forces he had with him.

"Fall back," he whispered to the Barons.

For once, he detected not a hint of hesitation or antipathy in their attitudes. They could see the writing on the wall as well as he could, and they fell back as soon as he gave the word.

Once they started running, the Octavian knights surged forward, intent on killing Leon and his people. However, with a great rumbling that had Leon's teeth chattering in his skull, Lapis raised its stony fist and slammed it into the ground. A wave of earth magic spread out, and thick stone walls appeared thirty feet high all around them. Leon could sense that the outside of the walls sprouted spikes, too, killing a handful of Octavian knights. That, however, wasn't the point; buying enough time to fall back was.

"Thanks!" Leon shouted to Lapis, giving the giant a look of true gratitude—he wasn't just thanking the giant for the wall.

"We must go," the giant whispered back to Leon, who nodded and started following the Barons back to the camp. The others fell in beside him, and they ran as fast as they could, occasionally fighting off squads of their enemies as they went. The entire time, Leon was intensely aware of the two sixth-tier mages on their backs, and he had to stop and toss a few fireballs to buy his weaker comrades a few more seconds. The Octavian knights responded in kind, and soon, the entire pathway that Leon's unit had chosen looked like an apocalyptic landscape; the ground was broken and burned by earth and fire magic, cut by light, water, and wind, deformed by ice, and scorched by one of Leon's occasional lightning bolts.

But they made good time, and the Barons had already gotten started on getting their people organized by the time Leon and the rest returned to the camp's entrance. Rather than going back down underground, however, they had formed up on the hill above it, which Leon wholeheartedly agreed with. If they had fallen back down into the camp, they'd have been at the mercy of the Octavian earth mages, and that wasn't a position he was in any hurry to be in.

The good news ended there, though. Leon could see in the distance that more giants had fallen, adding up to almost half of the total number. His heart sank in shame and sorrow, and not even the piles of dead enemy troops could raise it. Making matters even worse, as his magic senses swept over his human contingent, he could see that they'd lost roughly a third of their number in the woods. They had barely over a thousand fighting men and women left.

There was no getting past this. On the other side of the hill was a tributary of the Naga River that they'd have to ford to get away, and the crossing would leave them sitting ducks for their pursuers. They'd have to stand and fight.

Leon and his group sprinted right back to the front of their line, right next to the Barons, and then turned to face their foes barely even a hundred feet away. They'd slowed to reform their lines, but Leon knew they were either about to charge again or blast them with magic. Neither option appealed to him, but now that his people were back in something that resembled a cohesive formation, he had another option.

“Looks like this is it,” Leon said to everyone who could hear him. “All or nothing, we’re not getting away from this fight. We either counter them, or we die here. AND I DON’T FEEL LIKE DYING HERE! CHARGE!!!”