

Storm King 441

Chapter 441: Leon's Campaign VIII

Leon's unit was cornered, they had been separated from the stone giants, and they had taken heavy casualties. As a result, when Leon gave the order to charge, only a few hundred of the thousand or so that remained joined him.

It was a dismal showing, one that would've had Leon face-palming in shame if he weren't so preoccupied. At the very least, none of the people that Leon interacted with regularly failed him— Marcus, Alcander, Alix, Valeria, Anzu, and Lapis all charged with him.

Fortunately, even with how few of his people were charging, it was still enough to take the advancing Octavian troops by surprise. They were forced to halt their own charge where it was, with sloppy lines and terrible formations as Leon's unit attacked.

That didn't stop the stronger Octavian mages from utilizing their magics, though. Even before Leon's unit hit their foe, numerous holes were punched in their line by elemental magic, and even Leon himself was hit a few times, though his armor staved off the worst of it. He was more concerned with the weaker members of his party, but thankfully, he drew most of the magical attacks that might've otherwise been fired at them.

He also didn't just take the attacks; responding in kind, Leon hurled a handful of lightning bolts at their enemies, killing three fifth-tier mages and injuring a few more as he ran.

Lapis, too, was hit by many attacks, but the stone giant took all of it and made it look easy. Without their casting formations from earlier in the day, it was much harder to take down a sixth-tier giant as strong as Lapis. Leon, however, did see a few small cracks being made in the giant's stony skin despite Lapis' seeming lack of concern.

The charge was short, it didn't have far to go. A few Octavian warriors were caught without support and were swiftly cut down by Leon's desperate, scared, and angry unit, but the balance was still firmly in their enemy's favor. However, once Leon's unit finally made contact with their enemy, many of those who didn't charge began to find their nerve and ran to support their comrades, though many more stood firm on the hill.

Leon himself hit the enemy lines with as much force as he could manage. Many Octavian troops were cut down by his blade, while quick blasts of fire killed many more. His party by far did the most damage to their foe as they followed him, but the Barons did all right, too. Many mages tried to stop them, but led by Leon, the unit was like lions among sheep, slaughtering as they went with little trouble.

Leon remained silent as he pushed forward, concentrating completely on the challenges ahead, putting every ounce of guilt and sorrow at the losses sustained by the giants and others in his unit into every swing of his blade and blast of fire that erupted from his fingers. It didn't matter who stood up to try and stop him, they fell before him like wheat before a scythe. Groups of fourth and fifth-tier mages attacked as he pushed deeper, only to fail as their attacks were either dodged outright or slid off his black Magmic Steel armor.

Behind him, he could hear the others being almost as effective. Marcus shouted incoherently with every swing of his blade, while Alcander's war cries were slightly more understandable.

"FUCKING TRAITORS!" he bellowed, driving his ax into a hapless second-tier's shoulder, pushing it almost down into the man's lung.

Alix and Valeria, meanwhile, made short work in stoic silence, with Valeria covering Alix when higher-tiered warriors stepped in, and Alix covering Valeria when she was dealing with their stronger foes.

They were doing spectacularly well, but their momentum was unsustainable. The Octavian flanking force simply had too many people, and they couldn't hew their way into their lines fast enough to stop the ranks further back from planting their feet and bracing for their charge. Consequently, up and down Leon's line, his people were being slowed, then stopped, and then pushed back, their charge halted and then reversed.

Following a feint, Leon quickly removed the head of a fifth-tier mage, his blade sliding between the man's helmet and breastplate, giving Leon enough room to take a second to pause, take a breath, and project his magic senses. As soon as he did so, his heart sank even further than it did when he first saw the forces that were marching on the camp.

Hundreds of his people were dead, his giants were down to a paltry dozen, and all those that were left were being inexorably pushed back. Still, it wasn't until his magic senses spread further out that his blood ran cold. From further north, he could see the approach of thousands more people in Legion colors, with the familiar face of Sertor Arellius riding out in front of them.

For a moment, Leon was confused. He knew that Arellius had been dismissed from his command by Prince Octavius, so he had no idea why the Legate was back in command of his Legion. Given that Arellius had fought against the Augustine forces before, Leon could only assume that he'd been pardoned for some reason and given his command back with orders to reinforce Duke Duronius.

No matter what actually happened, there was only one order that Leon could give now. Unfortunately for him, he gave it too late.

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Calerus felt nothing but sweet catharsis as he cut down Ursus' people left and right. They had foolishly charged his retinue, and while the barbarian himself had charged at a different part of the line, Calerus still took no small amount of pleasure in killing the traitors that followed him. The Count had lost one of his few remaining sixth-tier mages already, but with the way things were going, he knew that the battle was almost complete.

Even now, at least one of the treasonous fifth-tier nobles that had charged their position had been killed at his hand, and he could see the other three were in dire straits. Ursus himself and those around him—including that damned giant—were acquitting themselves admirably, but soon, they'd be all alone.

And then, Ursus shouted something that Calerus hadn't been expecting given the savage's reputation for violence.

“FALL BACK TO THE HILL!” the barbarian shouted, his voice easily carrying over the roar of battle. “BACK TO THE HILL!” he repeated, and his people slowly began trying to disengage and retreat back to where their remaining people were hunkered down on the hill.

Their numbers had been significantly reduced over the past few hours. Where once they had been roughly two thousand strong, they now numbered barely a few hundred, and when Calerus glanced off to the south, he could see that the giants had been greatly reduced in number, too.

He was about to order his army to pursue—not that they needed such encouragement—when the blue-tinted giant loudly rumbled, its deep resonating call easily passing through everyone present to be heard in the distance, where the handful of remaining giants began disengaging from the rest of the main army, too. They’d been greatly reduced in number, taking at least ninety percent casualties in Calerus’ estimation, but they had still killed thousands of people in the rest of the Octavian army.

However, a smile graced Calerus’ face as he realized that they’d only managed to savage the vanguard; the armies from Lentia and Vesontio had been untouched. They had been sent out by Duronius with more than fifty thousand warriors. At least ten thousand were likely gone by now—leading Calerus to feel some small amount of respect blossom in his heart for his adversary, despite Leon killing his lover—but they still had more than enough to bring an end to Ursus and his remaining few hundred.

The giants moved extremely quickly, easily breaking off from the vanguard and falling back, though one was consumed by some kind of suspiciously demonic fiery creature that Calerus saw summoned from a spell scroll used by a sixth-tier knight. The consumed giant fell to the ground with a titanic crunch, the ground shaking even where Calerus stood watching half a mile away and didn’t move again.

The rest of the giants, however, managed to fall back, moving quickly enough that Calerus decided to take the opportunity to form back up and prepare for the charge and wait for the vanguard to catch up to them rather than moving recklessly and being hit in the flank by the giants.

But it wasn’t until Calerus’ magic senses picked up on the advancing Legion that he began to call out in panic, “HOLD! HOLD!!!”

It took a minute or two for his knights to corral the weaker and less disciplined members of his retinue, but eventually, order was restored from the chaos of battle, Ursus’ unit finally broke off, and Calerus’ retinue hung back, waiting for the rest of their assault force to reform. Calerus himself walked down his line until he was finally in front of the barbarian, though hundreds of feet of blasted, burning, and broken forest now separated them. When it came time to charge for the last time, he wasn’t going to be watching from a distance again.

No, he was going to kill the barbarian once and for all, and in doing so, allow his fallen lover to rest in peace with his Ancestors. The only complication now was that Legion, but with the army still numbering more than forty thousand, Calerus wasn’t too worried. Besides, it was probably only Octavian reinforcements, anyway, but it was prudent to let the rest of the army catch up before doing anything that would leave his forces exposed.

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Leon stared out at the broken plain before him, surrounded by dead men, women, and giants, so far from safety. At his back were the paltry remains of his unit, barely two hundred left, and only a dozen

giants. They'd fought admirably, their foe had taken so many more casualties than they had, but that would hardly matter to Leon if he wound up dead in the end.

Before him were at least ten thousand knights and men-at-arms—probably more, but it was difficult to make a better estimate right now—and a mile behind was an advancing Legion. There was no escape, no way out. August's forces entrenched on their hill were too far away and beyond too many of their enemies. Even now, their enemies reformed their lines and assembled, taking their sweet time now that what few forces he had left had fallen back to the hill.

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, allowing himself to feel just a few strands of despair before he clamped down hard on that feeling and suppressed it with every ounce of emotional strength that he could muster. Things were bleak, far more so than any odds he'd faced at least since the battle at Fort 127, but they could be much worse.

At the very least, Lapis and a handful of giants still stood, their bodies cracked and their auras, once as strong and immovable as mountains, flagging and sputtering. Marcus and Alcander were battered, bleeding, and bruised, but alive.

Valeria and Alix, too, were fine, relatively speaking. They had scrapes and small injuries, their armor was dented and bloody, and their weapons weren't in great shape, either, but they remained on their feet, as strong and defiant in the face of their impending deaths as anyone else.

Anzu was a little worse for wear, but he was alive and his aura was strong. One of his wings was clearly injured—it was hanging limply at his side—but his eyes were bright, his claws, beak, and practically the entire front of his body was covered in the blood of his defeated enemies, but Leon could also see a few gashes that proved at least some of that blood was the griffin's own.

Apart from them, three of the Barons were dead or had fallen somewhere out in the forest and couldn't get back to the hill, leaving only Orientis and Gellius there with him. His unit was nearly shattered, and he couldn't even see the champions he'd fought against in his duels against the Barons—his unit was truly on its last legs. They didn't even have any of their horses left, nearly all having been killed in the opening moves the flanking unit had taken.

Leon took a few long, deep breaths, and examined his own state. His people were about as well as could be expected—though he was incensed to see any of them dead or injured, let alone nearly all of the giants or the griffin he'd raised almost from birth—so he turned his attention to himself.

He hadn't sustained any major injuries, but he was tired and had used much of his mana. To make up for that, he began to pull as much magic power out of his soul realm as he could, trying to replenish his reserves so that he could be ready for their last stand.

"We... could always surrender..." Gellius murmured just loud enough for Leon to overhear. He sounded like he was just thinking out loud, but Leon responded anyway.

"That's not an option, can you feel the killing intent radiating from all of them? If you throw down your weapon, the only thing you'll accomplish is dying with empty hands."

Gellius' shoulders sagged, all signs of arrogance and pride that he'd possessed in the previous weeks gone in the face of certain death. Whatever thoughts he might've had in response to Leon's statement were left unsaid.

In fact, no one else spoke. There were no epic speeches, no panicked shouting, everyone was just too tired. With a Legion behind them and noble armies in front, all they could do was to prepare to die with as much dignity as they could, though that didn't stop many of Leon's people from dropping their weapons and falling to their knees anyway.

Thereupon that hill Leon waited, his invisibility ring and flight suit occasionally entering his mind, but he couldn't abandon these people even if he knew those were surefire methods of escape. He'd rather stand his ground than run away while the people he regarded as his own were left to die.

After a while—Leon didn't quite know how long—the Legion to the north finally became visible as they marched through the woods towards them, while the noble armies finished their assembly in front to the south. No one came out to demand their surrender, proving to Leon that they didn't intend to take any of his people prisoner.

And then came the horns from front and back, seeming to reverberate through the forest like it was an echo chamber, and their enemies began their final advance towards the tattered remnants of Leon's unit.

Chapter 442: Leon's Campaign IX

Calerus leered at Ursus' unit on the hill like a predator that had just about run its prey to exhaustion. His retinue was formed up and ready to charge, as were those of his fellow nobles in this Octavian detachment. With the advancing Legion finally coming into visual range to the north of the hill, they were finally ready to bring an end to Ursus, who had caused them no small amount of grief during the siege of the Augustine camp.

But there was one large problem that had to be addressed before anything could happen.

"Why is that Legion here?" Calerus asked, glancing at his superior, the woman who was leading the detachment, the Duchess of Vesontio.

The Duchess had come to the front with her retinue of twenty thousand, which had, so far, not taken part in this operation at all. The same for the Duke of Lentia's retinue, which had been held back in reserve. On the one hand, Calerus could understand that with their immense numerical superiority, holding some forces in reserve was a wise decision, but emotionally he couldn't help but somewhat despise Vesontio and Lentia for their inaction so far.

Not that he'd say anything about that out loud—he was only a Count, after all.

"The 2nd Legion was dispatched from the capital to reinforce our position," the Duchess coldly replied, her lips only moving as much as they had to in order to form those words; the rest of her face remained as stoic as if it had been carved from marble.

"Why wasn't I informed of this?" Calerus angrily demanded, though his tone remained controlled. "This was an unpleasant surprise, and if I had known that they were friendly, I would've already dealt with that barbarian rat!"

"We only got word of their deployment after you had split off for your flanking maneuver," the Duchess explained, not once glancing in Calerus' direction.

Calerus quietly rolled his eyes at her aloof attitude, but he said nothing about it. Instead, his concerns were more practical.

"Then, my people are ready to charge on Your Grace's word," he said, effectively signaling the end to his questions.

"Once the 2nd closes to within fifteen hundred feet of Ursus' position, then you may charge," the Duchess said in her flat, almost uncaring, purely informative tone.

"Very well," Calerus replied. He proceeded to turn around and return to his unit not far away, sparing the Duchess only one more glance over his shoulder.

She was a gorgeous woman, with long blond hair, an hourglass figure, a perfect heart-shaped face, and a pair of the warmest brown eyes that Calerus had ever seen. Calerus wasn't usually attracted to women, but even he had to admit that she was breathtakingly beautiful, at least on a physical level.

However, her attitude left much to be desired, in his opinion. She was practically a walking, talking statue for all the emotion she showed. That attitude was all well and good among the commoners and peasantry, but when she was among her peers Calerus found it quite off-putting.

He couldn't help but wonder if she was truly loyal to Prince Octavius, or what it might've been that Octavius had promised her to keep her on his side. Her cousin was the Brimstone Paladin, after all, and from what few reports of the Northern Front that he'd heard, Brimstone and Dame Minerva were making the lives of the Octavian armies up there hellishly difficult.

Once they'd dealt with August, Roland, and Ursus, Duronius' armies would secure Ariminum, then move north. The Legions would take Ironford and secure the east while the nobles would continue into the Northern Territories.

That was something that Calerus wasn't looking forward to, given how intensely the fighting had been reported to be.

But that was a future concern. As Calerus returned to his perfect position to charge at Ursus, who stood waiting for them upon the hill, he refocused his attention to the problem at hand—namely, the destruction of Ursus' remaining troops, including the remnants of those damned giants. Calerus could see that the giant with the blue streaks running along its body was sticking close to Ursus, and he knew that if he wanted to make the barbarian a head shorter, then he'd have to get past the giant, and that wasn't going to be easy. Calerus wasn't too worried, though—he'd fought the giant off once before, and he was confident he could do so again.

It was an excruciating wait for the Legion to close the distance. Ursus' unit did nothing but wait at the top of the hill. Calerus could understand that decision, they hadn't the numbers to do anything but. However, he did see the giants carving a few ditches and low walls in their path, but Calerus knew it to be wasted effort. Ursus' group had nothing left, they were finished.

Finally, the moment came for Calerus to announce his charge, and announce it he did, shouting, "CHARRRGE!!!" for his entire retinue to hear. Without missing a beat, he began to run up the gentle

slope of the hill. So eager was he to finish this that he barely even noticed, let alone cared that Vesontio's retinue didn't move.

Calerus led his people from the front, easily clearing the pathetic obstacles the giants had put in their path. His eyes were locked on Ursus, and his killing intent soared higher than it had ever done before. His heart beat in his chest like a drum, and adrenaline flooded his body with energy all for the purpose of killing the savage.

Ursus' people remained at the top of the hill, just bracing for the charge. As they closed the distance, the few mages that Calerus had left that could use elemental magic opened up, killing a handful of Ursus' people in their charge. Calerus himself launched an ice spike at Ursus, but he never seriously thought that it would land. Indeed, the blue-tinted giant simply swatted the ice spike aside like it was nothing more than an annoying insect buzzing around its master's ear.

Ursus led the counter-attack, hurling a golden bolt of lightning at Calerus. The Count conjured an ice plate in front of him, blocking the bolt.

With that, neither side had much time left for another salvo; a moment later, Calerus' retinue crashed into Ursus'.

To Calerus' right and left, it was carnage. Blades bit into soft flesh or slid off hard armor, men and women screamed in pain and the exertion of inflicting that pain, and the sickly-sweet scent of blood filled the air.

But Calerus noticed none of this. He had eyes only for the barbarian.

Only for Ursus.

Ursus didn't move to intercept him. The barbarian clearly felt the Count's killing intent, but he seemed content to wait for his charge, staring Calerus down as he rapidly approached, Calerus' magic power flooding through his noble body like he was a conduit for the Endless Ocean itself.

Twenty-five feet from Ursus, Calerus drew back his blade, then swung it like a club, sending a wave of biting water washing over the grassy hill. Ursus staggered, the wave pushing him back just slightly. Taking the opportunity, Calerus rushed forward with all the speed he possessed, the tip of his sword lunging for Ursus' exposed throat...

... and clanged off the solid stone arm of the blue-tinted giant. Calerus barely had the time to reel back to avoid the giant's retaliatory swipe, its stony fingers brushing past the visor of his helmet.

Calerus backed off, his eyes turning to the giant as it advanced. The nobleman's wave of water hadn't affected it in the slightest. Calerus snarled as Ursus took the opportunity to slip away, seeming to trust that the giant had this handled, and charged into battle, his lightning making short work of three of Calerus' fourth-tier knights.

Roaring in anger, Calerus conjured a head-sized sphere of water above his head and threw it with a flick of his wrist at the giant. The giant didn't bother moving, allowing the water to splash across its torso as it pulsed with earth magic.

Calerus, recognizing the pulse for what it was, threw himself back once more just in time for a stone spike to erupt from the ground and skewer the air where he stood but a moment before. He wasn't deterred; he glared at the giant and snapped his fingers, causing all of the water that had coated the giant to freeze.

The ice cracked and snapped, and the giant slowed. Calerus lunged forward, his blade disappearing in a flash of light to be replaced with a borrowed war hammer. Calerus closed with the giant, dodged a slow grab, and slammed his hammer into the monster's leg. He was rewarded with a spiderweb of cracks spreading over its leg, but a moment later it lifted the injured leg and slammed it back down, shaking the earth and throwing Calerus to the ground.

Calerus, acting purely on instinct, shouted incoherently and rolled through the grass, narrowly avoiding a stony impalement. Pushing himself back up to a crouch, Calerus abandoned good footing and leaped into the air, easily clearing the giant's head height, and summoned the largest ice plate that he could just below him.

Once gravity reasserted its dominance over him, he and the large ice plate fell. The plate was bigger than a rowboat, but still small enough that the giant easily caught it. However, a moment later, the ice shattered in its grasp, and Calerus landed upon the giant's head.

He brought his hammer crashing down upon the giant. It rumbled as its head cracked, trying to shake him off, but Calerus braced and conjured even more water, flooding the cracks. A second later, the water flash froze, forcing the cracks to open even wider.

Calerus hit the giant again, and this time, it was thrown to the ground. He threw himself back to the ground just in time to avoid its massive ice-encrusted fist, but then he was upon the giant again, turning the giant's head into pebbles and shards of ice with one more titanic swing of his hammer.

Spikes of stone burst from the ground around his feet, pushing him around and sliding off his armor, but he was unharmed. The ground around the giant rippled and began to crawl over it, trying to hide its injured form, but Calerus wasn't having any of it.

In the hole where its head once was, Calerus saw flashes and sparks.

'There!' he thought, and he lunged forward one last time.

Dropping the hammer, Calerus conjured a jet of water and lunged. Backed by his sixth-tier power, the water battered the giant, sinking into every hole and crack it could, even as a stone spike finally managed to break through Calerus' armor and rip a chunk of flesh out of his chest as it slid past his ribs beneath his outstretched arm.

An instant later, the water flash froze. Ice exploded out of the giant's body, shattering it. The elemental wisp within flashed and sputtered, and a moment later, vanished as if it had never been there.

The giant's aura seeped from the giant's broken shell, no longer propelled by any will. Its magic dissolved into the chaotic surroundings, lost in the battle's bloody aura.

The giant was dead.

Calerus had no time to celebrate his kill, though, for once the giant had fallen he felt the specter of death turn its eyes toward him; a wave of killing intent more intense than anything he'd ever felt before hit him like a tsunami.

He smiled. He'd hurt Ursus by killing his pet giant. And he was about to hurt the barbarian even more.

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The moment Lapis fell, Leon knew. He didn't see the fight, but he *felt* the giants passing washing over him like a wave of electricity. It was almost lost in the battlefield aura of thousands of battling mages, but Leon was familiar enough with Lapis' aura to know what it was he felt.

With a quick flash of his blade, Leon finished off his opponent and turned in Lapis' direction. As his eyes landed upon the heap of stones that had once been the giant's stony shell, time seemed to slow down as Leon stopped and stared.

Lapis was gone. The loyal, friendly, abundantly accommodating giant had died, killed at the hands of the sixth-tier ice mage—obviously a nobleman of some rank given his enchanted full plate armor—standing over its fallen form, as if he were gloating, reveling in the death of one of Leon's most ardent supporters.

Or, perhaps, one of Leon's most supportive friends?

Leon wasn't sure how to define his and Lapis' relationship, but he thought quite highly of the giant, and as the reality of the situation crashed down upon his mind, his mind descended to a dark place where no coherent thought could be found. All he saw was red.

Not too far away, an Octavian mage, hoping to take advantage of Leon's distraction, lunged forward, his spear aimed for the back of Leon's neck in the gap between his cuirass and helmet. However, Valeria's glaive came sweeping in from the side, deflecting the blow and sending the mage reeling. With a quick follow-up, Valeria took the man's head, then turned and shouted, "Leon!"

In that instant, killing intent exploded out of Leon's body. Everyone around him, Valeria included, felt it wrap around them and weigh them down, sapping their will to resist his wrath and making it hard to breathe. A few of the weakest mages were even forced to their knees under its tremendous weight.

And then Leon was gone, vanishing in a flash of light and leaving nothing but a deafening clap of thunder in his wake.

He reappeared a moment later behind the ice mage that had killed Lapis, his blade already in mid-swing. The mage barely had time to move his arm to block Leon's strike, but stuck in the mire of Leon's killing intent, he moved sluggishly. To Leon, he practically moved in slow motion.

But Leon's sword still hit his forearm, scraping along the metal, rending and tearing the gauntlet as he went. The mage screamed, but Leon didn't care. All he wanted was blood.

He rained a flurry of blows down upon the mage, who cycled his magic power and managed to fight off the worst of Leon's killing intent. Leon's blade scratched and ripped his armor, the Adamant metal powered by his wrathful power cleaving through his defenses like a hot knife through butter.

Needing distance, the mage threw himself back, but Leon was faster. It was all the mage could do to defend himself as Leon's furious blows rained down upon him. Only when the mage managed to form icy armor over his body was he able to gain a hint of breathing room; Leon's sword had a much tougher time slicing through ice than it did steel.

But Leon was undaunted. With a flick of his wrist, Leon deflected the ice mage's sword, thrust out his off-hand, and fire burst from his fingers, searing his wrath into the mage's body. The heat was intense, and most of the mage's icy armor melted and vaporized in it, scalding the nobleman further.

Again and again the mage attempted to defend himself, but Leon was just too fast. He switched from lightning to fire effortlessly, taking full advantage of the speed boost from lightning magic while incinerating all hopes of victory or escape with fire.

Making a last-ditch attempt to escape, the mage allowed Leon to hit him with another gout of flame. Instead of focusing all of his energy on defense, the mage leaped for all he was worth, landing upon the chest of Lapis' empty shell.

Leon wasn't going to let him get away that easily, though. Only a moment later he was on the mage again, his fury rising as he was forced to fight upon Lapis' corpse.

And then his moment came. The mage was on the ropes and Leon swung for his sword, intending to disarm. However, the mage shouted in anger and pushed back and their blades locked together. Leon simply hit him with fire once more, sending him reeling.

To Leon's lightning-augmented eyes, this moment seemed to last an eternity. He watched as the mage's arm was jerked away, leaving his vulnerable armpit open. There was no ice there, no steel plate, only mail and cloth padding—easily pierced with his sword.

Without hesitation, Leon seized the moment, driving his sword deep into the mage's armpit, piercing clean through the mage's mail, slicing through the many layers of cloth in his gambeson, breaking skin, and biting deep. Past the mage's ribs slid Leon's sword, impaling first the mage's lung, and then his heart. But Leon didn't stop there, he kept pushing deeper, his magic power flowing through the blade, the Adamant metal responded to his violent rage and resonating with his power, heating up.

For the first time in its existence, the blade began to burn as it pierced the mage's other lung. Bright orange fire erupted from the metal, reducing the ice mage's internal organs to ash in an instant. He never even had a chance to scream, to so much as exchange a single word with Leon. Leon doubted he even had time to process his death as Leon's fire consumed everything within him. Fire filled his body, hardening his skin and erupting from the cracks, frying his muscles, racing up his esophagus and out his mouth, coursing into his head and destroying his brain, boiling his eyes into vapor, and bursting out of his ears.

A second later, Leon pulled his sword from the ice mage's body, letting the burning corpse collapse in a charred heap upon Lapis' chest, the mage's scorched armor the only thing holding his corpse together. Leon stared into that conflagration, feeling nothing but sorrow. His enemy was dead, but so too was Lapis. So too were so many others that Leon had been counting on.

His giants were all gone. Leon was vaguely aware of that, though he was unsure of how he knew. All that remained of his unit were a few dozen. None of the Barons were still alive, and what few people he had left had formed a defensive circle around Lapis' body.

In the distance, Leon could sense that the approaching Legion had closed to about six hundred feet and were getting ready to fire their arrows. He took a deep breath, preparing himself for what seemed like his end.

So consumed was he that he barely registered that his blade still burned, and deep within the crackling, sparking, raging orange fire, down near the guard and only an inch or two away from his fingers, was the barest hint of black flame.

Chapter 443: Leon's Campaign X

All of the giants were gone, including, most painfully for Leon, Lapis. His unit was down to a few dozen who had formed a defensive line around Lapis' body, atop which Leon stood. The Barons were dead, most of the higher-ranking knights were dead, they were surrounded, and the approaching Legion were preparing their archers.

Leon stared out at all of this in disbelief, numb and wondering how everything had gone so wrong. But then, he caught a flash of white in his peripheral vision, and his eyes naturally followed it, landing upon the form of Anzu. His griffin was covered in blood, and from the gashes in his coat, Leon knew that not all of it was those he'd killed. Worse, Anzu seemed to be limping, and both of his wings were sagging with a lack of energy.

Fury exploded within Leon; fury, and fire, both filling his heart and feeding off the other. He'd lost Lapis, he wasn't going to lose Anzu, too. In his last moment of lucidity, he noted that Marcus, Alcander, Valeria, and Alix were still alive, still fighting, though all but Valeria were sporting a collection of injuries.

And then Leon's body moved almost on its own as instinct took over. His conscious mind seemed to recede, consumed by rage, and he leaped from Lapis' body straight into the hordes of Octavian warriors that had surrounded them. Before he'd even landed, he'd already swung his blade, sending an arc of radiant orange flame to prepare the ground for his landing. When his boots hit the dirt, he found himself standing amidst the corpses of a dozen Octavian warriors, all of whom were dead from his fire.

But that barely registered in his mind. His fire magic coursed through his body, filling him with power that he'd never felt before, his rage feeding and strengthening it.

He swung his blade twice more in less than half a second, incinerating ten Octavian men-at-arms who had sought to exploit his momentary pause as he recovered from the landing. Then, acting purely on instinct, he held out his off-hand and let his fire magic pour out of him. His hand seemed to explode as the flames raced out, consuming all before him in a terrible inferno, but giving his comrades behind him just enough room to catch their breath, one of whom happened to be Valeria.

She watched in horror as dozens of people vanished within Leon's fire. Their screams filled the air, rising above even the sound of clashing blades, the stench of burning meat filling her nose and blocking out all the other horrible malodors that filled the battlefield.

Valeria was no stranger to battlefield horror, not after so much fighting in the civil war, but seeing Leon like this paralyzed her. She stopped and stared as he reduced all who challenged him to ash, his blade an orange blur.

And, when Leon stopped for just a moment as the Octavian troops around him hesitated to charge, she saw it, the hint of black within the orange. Her eyes widened and her heart sank, for if she could see it, then anyone else could, including someone who might be connected with her father.

Instinctively, Valeria screamed, “LEON!!!” and thrust out her hand, a weak jet of water spraying from her fingers but vaporizing before reaching Leon’s flaming sword.

He turned, coolly regarding her with his golden eyes, which had once sparkled with life even when his expression seemed dead, but had now dulled and seemed unfocused, as if he were looking past her, as if her sudden use of magic had been completely lost on him.

Which wasn’t entirely untrue. Valeria’s cry had broken through Leon’s furious haze, and as he regained control over himself and the fire on his sword died down, he sensed something else, something familiar off in the distance over Valeria’s shoulder.

It was a magical aura he’d felt before; and yet, it was different, feeling like he’d gotten the attention of some terrifying monster in the forest, some otherworldly creature whose powers dwarfed those of all the rest around him. He’d noticed the attention of something in the woods watching him before but had suspected it to be nothing more than vampires—a threat, to be sure, but one that he hadn’t had time to investigate. Since that feeling had soon passed and other things had demanded his attention, he hadn’t put too much thought into it.

But now... now he felt that power rising as if its source was getting ready to make a move, to exert some horrific will upon all of them.

And then it vanished, almost as suddenly as it had come, and Leon felt a tremendous sense of loss. For some reason, that power had been quite comforting in its familiarity, as if it were something he had once known, but lost.

His time for deliberation quickly ended, though, as the distinct whistling of thousands of arrows in flight filled the air; the Legion had finally opened up on their position.

Or so Leon thought.

As soon as he heard it, he roared for his people, “TAKE COVER!!!”

Valeria, who’d been staring at him silently imploring him to return to his senses, hit the dirt. Most of the rest of Leon’s remaining unit followed suit, trusting Leon’s word and getting as low as they could.

A second later, the arrows began to fall.

Leon stayed crouched, placing his faith in his armor to block any arrows that might fall upon him, but as more and more of the deadly missiles came down, he realized something strange: none of them were hitting his people. In fact, the arrows fell so deep within the Octavian lines that there was no possible way the Legion soldiers had been aiming at Leon or his people.

Then horns began to sound and a magical flare was launched into the sky. Simultaneously, the Legion soldiers charged, crashing into the northern flank of the Octavian forces that had surrounded Leon's position, while the great Octavian armies that had been held in reserve smashed into their own comrades from the south.

The troops that had surrounded Leon's tattered unit were taken completely by surprise. With barely any time to react, dozens were cut down by those they had considered allies only moments before. Those further back—closer to Leon's group in the center—were so taken aback that few of them moved to re-engage Leon's unit.

Still, Leon quickly rose back up and shouted, "RECOVER!!!"

The tattered remnants of his unit immediately complied, pulling back into a tighter circle around Lapis' broken shell.

A few Octavian warriors seemed like they were about to continue their battle, but the Legion and their former comrades were cleaving deeper into their lines, leading them to simply stand and stare at Leon's unit, not willing to turn their backs upon their foe but also not wanting to provoke the wall they were thrust up against into making things even more difficult.

Leon, meanwhile, closely monitored what was happening with his magic senses. His unit was surrounded by what he estimated to be about fifteen hundred remaining Octavian warriors, but that number was constantly decreasing.

A few minutes later, Leon noticed something else: a blast of lightning amidst the violence that tore a huge hole in the enemy lines, into which rode Sertor Arellius and his retinue of light cavalry. With sword and spear they hewed their way through the Octavian lines, Arellius himself leading the way with a greatsword in hand that sparked with the power of lightning.

"What is this..." Leon heard Marcus whisper as the young nobleman stared in awe at what was happening before them. "Do they think that that unit is us? Is this a case of friendly fire?"

"Maybe they're on our side..." Alix replied, though if she truly thought that might be the case, her exhausted tone didn't sell it.

"Stay vigilant!" Leon ordered. "They're still hostile until they prove otherwise! This could just be an internal dispute that they're solving while their rivals are weak!"

"HAHA!" shouted a voice familiar to Leon, and as he refocused, he saw Sertor Arellius finally cut his way through the Octavian lines, arriving just before Leon, no more than thirty feet separating them. "A paranoid mindset, Sir Ursus, but I can hardly blame you for that!" the man eagerly shouted. "But fear not! We are here to reinforce Prince August, not to act against him!"

"Forgive me if I'm not convinced..." Leon replied, remembering just how fervently Arellius had accused him of being a traitor when last they had fought each other, when Arellius was trying to prevent their escape from the Central Territories.

"Am I not being convincing enough?" Arellius asked, gesturing around at how the 2nd Legion was massacring those that had surrounded and nearly killed Leon's remaining people.

"No," Leon simply replied.

"... OK..." Arellius seemed thrown off by Leon's attitude, but he quickly regained his cheery demeanor and continued, "Let's talk when these brigands and thieves have been dealt with!"

And like that, he and his horse charged back into the fray, his lightning magic making him easy to track as he cleaved his way through Octavian troops.

Alcander asked the question on everyone's mind.

"What the *fuck*?!"

"Reserve judgment and be ready for anything!" Leon shouted, and the couple dozen of his people who remained straightened up, preparing to continue fighting for their lives.

But as their enemies were cut down by those who had once stood at their sides, things started becoming clearer. He could see many knights and men-at-arms wearing the identifying marks of the Duchy of Lentia, and he already knew that they had been trying to defect to August's side, even if August's acceptance hadn't yet reached them.

After about twenty minutes, the last of the Octavian troops were mopped up. No quarter had been given, even when some of the enemy knights started throwing down their weapons. Once that was done, the Legion soldiers and noble retainers backed off from Leon's unit, leaving them to stand alone, surrounded by nothing more than corpses. If Leon had to guess, then including those who had been killed before they fell back to the hill, at least fifteen thousand Octavian troops had been killed, probably more.

"What do we do? What's the play?" Alix asked as they finally began to relax now that they had a few minutes to rest and think.

"We should at least hear them out," Marcus replied as he applied a healing salve to a long gash on his waist that some lucky man-at-arms had put there. "If they did all this and yet refrain from finishing us off, then there has to be so—AH!"

"Careful with that, it's not a good thing to make your wound worse when you're trying to heal it," Alcander said, applying a healing spell of his own to a burn on his shoulder.

Leon, meanwhile, was applying a stack of dozens of healing spells to Anzu. The griffin's injuries were much worse than they had appeared; moderate blood loss from multiple lacerations, a broken leg, both wings were broken in several places, and his tail had been almost chopped off. Needless to say, Leon's anger remained quite strong as he tended to his griffin, but Anzu himself seemed content to simply nuzzle Leon as he made the pain go away with his enchanted paper.

As he finished up with Anzu, he rubbed the griffin's head and said, "I can't sense any killing intent coming from them, for however much that's... worth..." As he turned to speak, he noticed that Valeria had been staring at him, her expression one of abject concern, and, more importantly, her aura radiating the power of a fifth-tier mage. "You ascended?" he asked in shock.

"*Really*?! You made it to the fifth-tier *already*?" Marcus demanded, his tone mostly of amusement but with a few hints of jealousy leaking in.

"Nice! Good job!" Alcander congratulated her with a wide smile on his face while Alix gave Valeria a smile of encouragement.

All of it was lost on the woman herself, though, for she continued to silently stare at Leon.

"Something wrong?" he asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Are you... all right?" she hesitantly asked, glancing meaningfully at his blade. "You were using some powerful magic... and you looked almost feral..."

"What do you mean?" Leon asked, barely even remembering the fugue he had been in following Lapis' death and his duel with the sixth-tier mage.

"Nev... Nothing," she sputtered, turning around to face the Legion soldiers. "Someone's coming."

Leon glanced over and saw that Sertor Arellius was riding toward them, though he maintained a slow pace and kept his hands free of weapons, which Leon appreciated.

"Sir Leon!" Arellius called out as he approached. "Have we proven ourselves? Will you now speak with us?"

"Who's 'us'?" Leon shot back.

"I believe he means us," someone shouted from the other side of Lapis' empty shell.

Leon cocked an eyebrow in annoyance, but it settled back down as a familiar knight rode around to join Arellius, another knightess at his side. The man was only of the third-tier, but the woman was sixth-tier easily. Both were heavily armored, preventing Leon from seeing their features, but from his voice and body language alone, he knew who the man was.

Gaius Caecilius Tullius.

Chapter 444: Without Sentiment

Leon stood before Gaius, Arellius, and the unknown woman for what seemed like an eternity as he stared at each in turn. Their combined forces had just rescued what few individuals remained of his unit from the Octavian forces that had nearly annihilated them, but Leon was still reeling from the loss of Lapis, the power he'd sensed from the forest only minutes before, and Valeria's ascension to the fifth-tier, and he was finding it difficult to switch back into a more diplomatic gear.

"Well, Sir Leon?" Sertor Arellius asked. "Are you ready to talk? We can wait as long as is necessary, we understand that these circumstances are hardly ideal..."

Leon glared at the Legate, or former Legate, or whatever he was now. With the corpse of Lapis behind him and the bodies of the vast majority of his unit scattered around the field, talking was the last thing Leon wanted to do.

But he knew that there wasn't much else to do right now.

"I can talk," Leon said, at the same time giving Marcus and Alcander meaningful looks. The two were the only two noblemen from landed families left among the handful of survivors that he had now had in his unit.

“Wonderful!” Arellius leaped down from his horse with a joyful smile on his face, his armor gleaming in the late morning sun.

Gaius and the woman, too, dismounted, but they remained silent.

“So, let’s just jump right in!” Arellius enthusiastically said, his boisterousness seeming quite dissonant with the spattering of blood on his armor and the corpses that they were all surrounded by. “I’ve led my Legion here to fight for Prince August!”

Leon cocked an eyebrow at the Legate. “*You’re* Legion? I’d heard that you were replaced after our last fight.”

“Indeed I was!” Sertor punctuated his sentence with a booming laugh. “But replacing a Legate in a Legion they’ve led for decades isn’t so easy, especially when the Legate in question is unwilling!”

“And you were unwilling to follow the orders of Prince Octavius?” Leon looked at him skeptically. “Seems at odds with how you conducted yourself last time. As I recall, you called me and the rest of us traitors and swore that you’d destroy us.”

Arellius had the good grace to look embarrassed, but his exuberance quickly returned. “For that, I apologize! I was acting upon bad information and made bad assumptions! However, after a long talk with the High Arbiter following my dismissal, I have since recognized that the trial condemning Prince August was a sham set up by Prince Octavius!”

“A long talk, huh?” Leon responded, looking unconvinced.

“Let’s not get bogged down in details here,” the woman suddenly interjected. “The point, Sir Leon, is that we’re here to fight against Prince Octavius, and we’d like your support in doing so.”

Leon blatantly broke eye contact with her to glance around at the hilltop and its surroundings, covered by thousands of bodies of Leon’s unit and Octavius’ supporters alike.

“What took you so long?” he quietly asked, his words laced with killing intent. His eyes flickered to Gaius at the same time, though not Arellius.

“What do you mean?” the woman asked, her brown eyes narrowing in displeasure.

“You marched your people all the way here and watched as my unit was torn apart. All of my giants were killed fighting the people you threw at us! So. What took you *so long* that you couldn’t act sooner?”

Leon glared at the woman and she glared right back. Both began emitting killing intent and subtly reaching for weapons at their waists.

Fortunately, Marcus spoke up before either could draw.

“Sir Leon, I’m sure Her Grace was simply waiting for the best time...”

“She still could’ve made her move quicker. Maybe then we wouldn’t have lost so many.”

“The plan was to move when the 2nd Legion got into position,” she said, her tone if not quite conciliatory, at least devoid of anger or arrogance. “We were to make our moves at the same time. The timing was off for everyone, of that I’m aware, but at least you’re still alive.”

Leon scowled, but he could reluctantly understand waiting until the appointed time. It didn’t erase his anger at how long everyone waited, but he at least retracted his killing intent and took his hand off his weapon, with the woman doing likewise in response.

“I hope all that unpleasantness is over,” Gaius said, his voice mostly calm but with a slight shake to it that betrayed his nervousness about what had just almost happened, “because I’d like to get down to business.”

And so they did, though Leon was surly and barely communicative during the entire discussion. Of course, given his usual behavior, not many people noticed a difference.

The woman, as it turned out, was the Duchess of Vesontio, who had only pledged herself to Octavius once all of her neighbors had done the same. If she hadn’t, she said that her lands would’ve been invaded once the war began. She could only turn against Octavius now that the armies of her enemies were busy fighting for Octavius in the Northern or Southern Territories rather than assembling on her borders.

Or so she claimed; Leon wasn’t in the mood to take her at her word. Still, she’d made her move against Octavian forces and in so doing pledged herself to August’s side.

Gaius, on the other hand, Leon was a bit more impressed with. Even without receiving word of August’s acceptance of his older brother’s defection—he only learned of the Prince’s acceptance when Leon told him during the meeting—he still fought alongside Vesontio and Arellius to kill more diehard Octavian troops. If August hadn’t accepted, he and the entire Tullius family would’ve been branded as traitors by both sides.

As for Arellius, as Leon had heard from the former Spymaster, he’d eventually been relieved of command following his inability to keep August from escaping to the Eastern Territories, though the political concerns had delayed it a bit. However, once Octavius had finally committed to removing him, Arellius had already met with the High Arbiter and been told of the sham trial. Consequently, his Legion abandoned the capital before they could receive their new Legate.

What surprised Leon the most, however, was that none of them had received any kind of assurances from anyone affiliated with August that their defections would be accepted. Their actions during the battle were done completely of their own accord—and as that occurred to Leon, it suddenly made a lot more sense why they took no prisoners and waited until the 2nd Legion arrived so that they could ensure that no one loyal to Octavius or Duronius managed to escape.

By the end of their talk, they had mostly agreed to all work together, and that until Roland arrived, they’d share the responsibilities of command. It was about as fine a deal as Leon and his people could hope for. It was also decided that Gaius and Vesontio wouldn’t return to the Octavian camp, even though their cover was most likely still intact. It was too great of a risk to assume that no one within their retinues would talk, so the only way they could maintain the ruse that they were still loyal would be to stay away from the main Octavian camp.

So, Leon and his retinue decided to fall in with this ad-hoc army, at least until Roland managed to break out of the camp in a few days.

But now, Leon had several more immediate problems. The survivors of his unit, being noble retainers, unanimously decided to leave the war and go home. They had followed their Lords, and their Lords were now dead. They stayed only just long enough to recover the bodies of the Barons and several of the highest-ranking knights that had fallen and then they set off back to the Eastern Territories.

It was quite disheartening for Leon to see them go, but he had no personal connections with any of them, and so recognized that convincing them to stay was so likely to end in failure that it wasn't even worth it to try. This left him with a 'unit' of five others, and that was including Anzu. At the very least, Marcus and Alcander agreed to continue their unofficial stay under his command.

The next issue he had to deal with was what to do with the giant corpses. After a few seconds of thought, he absorbed them all into his soul realm. He intended to return them to the Crater Tribe at some point, but leaving them behind didn't feel right, especially in the case of Lapis.

Leon also spent about an hour searching the forest for the source of the incredibly powerful aura he'd sensed right as things seemed most dire. However, he wasn't able to find anything. The power had seemed quite familiar to him, almost like Naiad's, but for however much that excited him, it had also been different enough that he couldn't be sure. After finding nothing, he chalked it up to being either some desperate hallucination or him simply missing Naiad so much that he mistook some other aura for hers.

That left the last of his immediate problems. Valeria. Leon wasn't entirely sure how to deal with her, yet, and at the very least he wasn't willing to do so until he'd recovered his magic reserves that had been expended during the battle. Her ascension to the fifth-tier made one thing crystal-clear, though: however he was going to handle the situation with her, he had to do it as soon as possible.

—

Leon stared out into the Mists of Chaos surrounding his soul realm. He was at the top of the mountain, sitting just in front of the door to the lantern chamber where his throne resided. Beneath him was first his vault, then Xaphan's pavilion, and then followed by a new structure—essentially a simple stone box divided into cells for each giant—that housed the remains of the giants. Beneath the tomb was Leon's Mind Palace in its entirety.

He'd finished the whole thing not long ago, but his soul realm was still only growing at a relatively slow rate. It wasn't even halfway to being big enough to be considered seventh-tier, and from what Leon had been taught by the Thunderbird, he knew that if his Mind Palace was truly complete then his soul realm would start to accelerate its growth, propelling him to the seventh-tier in a matter of days, if not hours.

But his soul realm remained frustratingly static, even with his Mind Palace 'complete'.

As a result, for the past few days, when Leon trained, he'd focused on adding small details to the Mind Palace—a mural here, a garden there. Small touches that helped to fill the place out, to help it feel not quite so empty.

But empty it did feel. It was a palace of more than a thousand rooms, but only Leon resided within. He'd added libraries, bathrooms, kitchens, bedrooms, ballrooms, everything that a functioning palace would need in the physical world, yet his soul realm didn't respond.

If he never completed his Mind Palace, his soul realm would never grow big enough. Eventually its growth would stall out, leaving him stuck at the sixth-tier just as so many other mages were. He needed to figure this out.

But right now, in the wake of Lapis' death, Valeria's ascension, the loss of his unit, and that mysterious aura poking at the wound left in the wake of Naiad's departure, Leon was in no mood to wander his halls adding tiny, meaningless touches to his Mind Palace. So, he just sat at the top of his mountain, staring at nothing in particular as he ruminated on how everything had gone wrong, on how everything just *seemed* wrong.

The past four to five months had been some of the worst in Leon's life. Only the loss of his father could compare. Things had been about as close to perfect as Leon had ever had in his life before all of this had begun, but then he lost Trajan and Naiad on the same day, he couldn't take immediate revenge, he was run out of his home and forced to leave Elise, the giants he'd called into service had all been killed, he'd lost Lapis, and now, finally, Valeria was gaining on him in power.

Leon's thoughts were dark. All of the frustrations of the previous few months were weighing down on his mind, and with his soul realm refusing to acknowledge that his Mind Palace had been completed, it was all Leon could do to just sit at the top of his mountain and stare into the distance rather than...

Well, he didn't know what. His instincts demanded violence, but Valeria was the only person around that he could direct that at, and in that respect, his pragmatism and personal feelings won out. He didn't want to kill Valeria—at the very least, not until she'd told him everything he wanted to know about her family and their relationship to him and his.

It occurred to him that he was, perhaps, just trying and failing to focus on his Mind Palace issue to get away from his problem with Valeria, but he didn't much care.

At least, he didn't until he realized that the Thunderbird had been staring at him for who knew how long.

"Gaah!" Leon shouted in alarm as he bolted to his feet.

The Thunderbird laughed at his shock, then asked him with an almost derisive look, "What's wrong, boy? You're moping like a dog that isn't being given food from the table."

Leon scowled, then explained to the Thunderbird his Mind Palace issue. The rest he wasn't quite up to talking about, and so he focused on what seemed most frustrating and least embarrassing.

"... and it just doesn't *feel* right, you know? And the more I add, the more I realize that the more would *have* to be added to make it right, and it just doesn't feel like it's come together the way I wanted it to."

The Thunderbird nodded her enormous avian head in understanding, then fixed him in her bright yellow eyes.

“Why do you think it doesn’t feel right?” she asked.

“Not a clue,” he replied. “I suppose because it isn’t detailed enough?”

“That may be true, I suppose,” the Thunderbird replied. “But, boy, have you ever considered that it’s *too* detailed?”

“I—” Leon began before cutting himself off. He stared down at his palace, soaking in all that he had built. Towers and halls and a mountain and a secret underground palace. Training rooms, gardens, enough space for hundreds of people with thousands of servants. Glittering marble, intricate architecture, detailed statues, and equally detailed murals.

In short, he’d built much in just over a year.

“Is it too much?” he quietly asked as he drank in the enormity of his creation.

“I can’t say, that’s for you to decide,” his Ancestor replied. “However, from what I’ve seen of your temperament, aesthetic choices, and from what you’re feeling right now, I’d say it does seem... a little overdone, no?”

“Maybe...” Leon muttered. He stared out at his palace for another minute or two, then began to walk down the stairs. He didn’t fly, he wanted to see it all for himself from ground level.

He paused at Xaphan’s pavilion.

“What do you think, demon?” Leon loudly asked, knowing that Xaphan had likely been listening in—he and the Thunderbird had hardly been whispering, after all.

Xaphan’s fiery yellow eyes opened and landed upon him. The demon barely even moved, simply sitting in the firepit of his pavilion for enough time to make Leon feel quite awkward. So, instead of pushing the matter of his soul realm—for Leon had already realized what he needed to do as soon as the Thunderbird asked her question, he just needed to work up the nerve to do so—he asked a different question.

“Did you sense it, too?” Leon quietly asked.

Xaphan remained silent.

“Felt a lot like Naiad,” Leon said.

Xaphan stared at him, no words falling from his lips... if he even *had* lips for words to fall from, Leon wasn’t too sure on that front.

“I can’t be sure, but I’d be willing to bet that she was here, watching.”

Finally, Xaphan spoke up.

“I’ve felt various powers in the forest following you for a while, as I told you a few days ago. At first, they were only more of Amon’s vampires—or at least, beings associated with fire demons—but given they never made a move against you, they were undoubtedly weak and no threat to you. A day or two ago, those auras vanished—probably hunted down by what I sensed next. And that was a strange, yet

familiar aura; one that caused the magic power that your fish girl left within you to resonate, the power that she left within you when you first met.”

Leon carefully nodded. He directed his attention to the area around his throne—specifically, his Mana Glyph. When he’d sworn to Naiad to mate with her and father her children, she’d left some of her magic power within him so that she could find him whenever she needed to. At first, he’d been able to do likewise with her since he’d left some of his power with her, but she seemed to quickly figure out how to prevent it, leaving him with little idea as to her whereabouts. Eventually, that power had faded into the background of his soul realm, and he’d quite forgotten about it.

But now that he stared at it, the little clump of transparent magic power floating in the air by his Mana Glyph, he could see it trembling.

“So she is here...” he whispered.

“It would seem that is the case, though I’ve little idea why,” Xaphan replied in an almost dismissive tone. “After all, your pathetic attempts to be assertive practically chased her out of your home. If she wanted to reveal herself to you, I think she would’ve before now.”

Leon grimaced, looking suitably chastened. He knew that forcing that decision on Naiad wasn’t the best course of action, but hindsight was always perfect and he’d just lost Trajan, so he wasn’t in the proper state of mind. Regardless of the circumstances, though, he knew he screwed up and deeply regretted being so sudden and not talking to her more openly.

“Have you learned from your fuck-up?” the demon asked, sounding for all the world like he was trying to be Leon’s father, which irked him a bit.

“Yes, asshole, I have,” Leon testily replied.

“That’s unfortunate, I was hoping to watch you fuck up again. Though I suppose you’ll probably do that, anyway. You’ve a habit of doing so, after all, and I’d bet on it happening again with your silver knight girl.”

“Yeah, we’ll soon see,” Leon combatively replied.

“I put your odds of getting her on your side completely at less than five percent. Personally, I kind of hope she walks—she’s too good for you, anyway. I mean, a woman who advances *that* quickly and *that* devoted to mastering the martial arts? So far out of your league it isn’t even funny... not that I won’t laugh at it anyway.”

Leon bitterly smiled and nodded as he turned away from the demon and back to his Mind Palace.

“Back to my original question, demon, what do you think about this place? Too much?”

“Does it *feel* like it’s too much?” Xaphan replied.

Leon went quiet as he stared out at the majestic palace that he’d built. “I have to say that it does...” he murmured. He then walked away from Xaphan’s pavilion, ignoring the demon’s grumblings about the unceremonious departure, and proceeded down the stairs cut into the side of the mountain.

The only thing on his mind was that his Mind Palace would never be complete. As it was, he could easily see himself making constant small changes to what he had until the day he died, never truly considering it to be 'complete'. He'd already been doing that on some level for several weeks before he'd initially thought it to be done, and there was no sign that that situation was going to change.

In fact, as he reached the upper halls of the palace, those that he'd set aside for his 'personal' use—not that there was much difference between that and non-personal given that his soul realm was hardly public—he began doing what he'd been doing during that time: aimlessly wandering the halls, lost in thought as he stared at his creation.

It was all beautiful, all of it exactly what he thought a richly decorated palace ought to look like, and none of it felt *right* even if he found it aesthetically pleasing. His Mind Palace was supposed to represent *him*, not how he saw himself, not who he *wanted* to be. The further down he walked in those halls, the more obvious it became that his initial strategy in building the place had been misguided.

The thought had been to have architecture reminiscent of the Bull Kingdom hiding an underground palace built with architectural styles that resembled the few Thunderbird Clan buildings he'd seen, much like how was a member of the Thunderbird Clan masquerading as a Bull Kingdom knight. He'd thought it made sense. But it wasn't him, not who he was at his core.

He didn't truly consider himself a member of the Thunderbird Clan. He never knew any of those people, he had no real personal connections with them aside from his father and the Thunderbird herself. In other words, he had no strong feelings about the Thunderbird Clan beyond how it related to him, and the same could be said for the Bull Kingdom. He cared about some people within it, but he was by no means loyal to the state or the ideas it represented.

Leon emerged from the palace about twenty minutes later from its lowest hall and stood at the base of the mountain, staring up at the palace. Without hesitation, he lifted his hand, swiped it across his vision of the palace, and causing nearly everything he'd built on the mountain to dissolve back into the mist that he'd used to create it, which rushed back into the clouds far beyond the island's edge. He swiped again, and the underground palace joined it, leaving nothing but a hollow mountain. But even that wasn't enough; Leon swiped a third time, and the mountain itself collapsed upon itself as Leon wiped the slate almost completely clean.

In a matter of seconds, his Mind Palace was brought down along with the mountain it sat upon. Leon kept a few things, such as the stone platform upon which his throne sat, his vault, Xaphan's pavilion, the giants' tomb, and the red and white checkered tiles that had always existed in his soul realm. All of it now rested upon a huge flat plain of lifeless dirt and bare stone.

Leon slowly walked back to Xaphan's pavilion where both the demon and his Ancestor awaited.

"Wonderful, simply spectacular!" the Thunderbird said as she morphed into her human form, clapping her hands as soon as they formed. Xaphan didn't speak, but Leon saw his shadow briefly nod its head in recognition of what he'd just done. "How do you feel, Leon?" the Thunderbird asked.

Leon paused near the pavilion and glanced around at the rocky plain, taking it all in and measuring his response. Once he was ready, though, a smile of abject joy and relief blossomed across his face.

"I feel light as air," he exclaimed.

“Good, that’s how it should be,” his Ancestor replied.

“I can’t force these things, I can’t plan them out,” Leon continued to the Thunderbird’s glee. “I tried that, and it clearly didn’t work. I have to let it come naturally. Let it come in the moment.”

The Thunderbird nodded furiously, her bronze face alight with happiness that Leon understood without her having to explain.

“Planning works for some people...” she started.

“... but not for me,” Leon finished. “I’m not a man of a palace... or however it should be phrased—I’m not a ‘palace guy’, maybe? Whatever, to the hells with palaces. That’s not me.”

“What is ‘you’?” the Thunderbird asked.

“I suppose we’ll find out,” Leon replied. “However, right now, I have some other business I need to attend to... This hasn’t... *weakened* me, has it?”

“Do you feel weakened at all?”

“... No, but I haven’t tried throwing lightning bolts, either.”

“Your Mind Palace wasn’t resonating with you, and as such wasn’t giving you any benefits. You’ve lost nothing in casting it off. Notice how your soul realm hasn’t even shrunk?”

Leon refocused his gaze to the Mists of Chaos miles away, and indeed, they hadn’t moved any closer.

“That in itself is the biggest indicator that you’ve done the right thing, here. Now, what is this business you have that had you worried about possible weakness?”

Leon’s smile turned grim and he didn’t answer, at least not out loud. He knew what he had to do now, he didn’t need to talk to Xaphan or the Thunderbird about it. In his mind, he whispered a name.

‘*Valeria.*’

Chapter 445: Confrontation

Leon felt like an invisible weight around his shoulders had been lifted as he returned his mind to the physical world. Scrapping his Mind Palace had been the best decision he’d made in a while, and was the sole reason he had a light smile on his face.

That the Thunderbird was impressed with his lack of sentimentality was another source of pride for him; she had said that the reason many people remain at the sixth-tier rather than ascending to the seventh was that they grew too invested in the time and effort that they’d already put into a Mind Palace that would never work. They’d get stuck trying to fix or perfect something inherently flawed, and in doing so, rarely, if ever, finish their Mind Palace and ascend. This held true even in the Nexus, at least from what the Thunderbird knew of the place as it was now, where the baseline power level didn’t even reach above the sixth-tier despite the abundant magical resources to assist progression.

But as Leon leaned back in his stone chair in the underground camp that, until a mere few hours before, had housed his unit, reality came crashing back in, obliterating his good mood and leaving him with nothing but depressing thoughts, chief among them was what he had to do about Valeria.

During the battle, she'd ascended to the fifth-tier, allowing her to use elemental magic, greatly increasing the threat she posed to him. Without Trajan, without Naiad, without Lapis and the giants, without the Barons and their retainers, Leon was more vulnerable now than he'd been in years.

He had to stop procrastinating. He had to act before she grew any more powerful. He had to act before he lost anything else.

So, still fired up a bit from his decisiveness in the throwing away of his Mind Palace, Leon rose from his chair and left his room. Most of the neighboring rooms hewn from stone were empty. They'd been the sleeping quarters of the Barons for what little time they'd spent here. A few Legion soldiers and noble servants were busy moving things in and out in other sections of the camp to prepare for the higher-ups in the Legion and noble armies above to move in if they were going to stay for longer than a day, but at least for a few hours, Leon and the few survivors of his unit that stuck around had their sleeping quarters to themselves.

Across the hall from Leon were Marcus and Alcander's rooms. From the sounds that Leon could hear, the two were in Marcus' room playing some tactical board game as they wound down from the long battle and processed the terrible losses they'd taken. A little further down the hall were Alix and Valeria's rooms. Alix had racked out, but Leon noticed with his magic senses that Valeria was still awake and experimenting with her new powers by creating small objects out of ice. Fortunately, it seemed that she hadn't yet begun experimenting with her magic senses, for she didn't appear to notice Leon's quick probe.

Before going to Valeria's room, Leon went and got Anzu. The young griffin had been laying down in his own chamber right next to Leon's recuperating from his wounds. Leon's healing spells had done most of the work, but Anzu still needed some rest. Despite this, when Leon poked his head through the door, Anzu's head shot up and he stared at his human.

"Come on!" Leon called to his war beast, and Anzu rose as quickly as he could and bounded over, almost pushing Leon over as he nuzzled the human.

Leon took a few minutes to give Anzu plenty of head pats and to run his fingers through the griffin's feathers before proceeding, enjoying what could very well be the last few moments of calm he'd ever experience. Once he confronted Valeria, there would be no going back. He'd either convince her to join him or make an enemy of her. If the latter came to be, then he'd have to kill her or she'd get away and tell her father about him, which given how most of Leon's family had ended up, would force Leon into hiding or be assassinated.

So, despite everything that Leon had ever gone through, all the battles and killing and violence, his heart still pounded in his ears. Blood rushed through his veins so quickly that he almost thought that they'd explode before he could get this over with. Dread settled into his stomach like a heavy meal, weighing it down and making him feel weak and sluggish. He noticed his hands start to shake as he slowly preened Anzu's wings and he felt a terrible lump in his throat.

And then it was time. Artorias. Trajan. Naiad. Lapis. The memory of all those that had supported him in some way flashed through his mind, giving him strength, reinforcing the conviction that he used to throw away his Mind Palace. It was time.

Leon looked up at Anzu, who'd grown so much that he now towered over Leon. Their eyes met, Leon's shining gold and Anzu's bright red, but both so strangely similar. An understanding passed through them, one that Leon needn't explain. He sensed the smallest, subtlest waver in Anzu's aura as a thread of killing wound its way in, and he knew that the griffin was with him one hundred percent.

Leon turned around and walked back into the hallway, his footsteps echoing in his ears. He was almost painfully aware of every step he took, shockwaves racing up his leg with every step as if he were a thousand feet tall. Each footfall took him one step closer to answers, one step closer to vengeance, or one step closer to death.

He thought of Elise. He regretted that he couldn't speak to her about this. He regretted that she would never allow this to happen if she knew—one of her best friends and the man she loved about to come into terrible conflict. No, he knew she'd never approve of this. Worse, if Leon failed and had to escape, then he could imagine that his enemies would go after her. Unfortunately, the die had already been cast on that front; she was too close to him for them to ever ignore her.

But he had to do it. If things went south, he'd return to her and beg for forgiveness, but he had to do this now before Valeria slit his throat in his sleep.

He passed Alix's door and briefly considered letting her in on this. She knew his real identity... but no, Leon didn't want to involve Alix in something so deeply personal. He moved on, leaving the young woman to rest. She'd earned it, and from the way her aura radiated from her, Leon could tell that she was close to the fourth-tier, perhaps close enough to reach it with a couple of weeks of hard training.

Just a few more steps and there he was, outside of Valeria's door, his face a grim visage of intent and hostility. This was his last chance to bail, to return to his room and pretend that Valeria was just another friend, just another knight that he could fight alongside of without thought. The last chance he would have to ignore the strange looks she'd been giving him, the last chance to ignore the fact that she probably knew who he was.

Pausing only to whisper a quiet apology to Elise and to conjure his armor, Leon pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

Valeria was still there, sitting on her bed practicing with her water magic. Her closed eyes snapped open as Leon entered her room and her right hand instinctively went for the glaive leaning against the head of the bed. Fortunately for Leon, her armor was piled up in a corner and not in her soul realm where it could be easily summoned.

"Sir Leon!" she exclaimed in surprise as she rocketed to her feet, glaive in hand. "What's going on? Are we being attacked?"

"No, no we're not," Leon replied, his tone grave and serious enough to send chills down Valeria's spine. "We need to talk."

"A talk... in armor?" she asked. Leon noticed that she subtly tightened her grip on her glaive, so he began to call upon his lightning magic, just in case.

Leon took a few more steps into her room, just enough to let Anzu inside. The griffin slipped past him as smoothly as a snake, and though he moved with grace and silence, the way he kept his eyes locked on

Valeria made her feel like a rabbit that had been cornered by a lion. When he came to a stop, he was between Valeria and her armor.

"Sir Leon, I—" she began, but Leon cut her off when he quietly closed the door, leaving the three about as alone as could be in the underground camp. None of them had much room to move in the cramped room, but Leon knew that they'd have to get *very* loud for anyone outside to hear them, making the small space worth it for that extra privacy alone.

As the door clicked shut, Anzu's body tensed, and he lowered himself down and furled his wings as if he were getting to pounce on Valeria. She backed up a step and assumed a more overtly defensive posture, raising her glaive and keeping it between her and Anzu.

Her sapphire blue eyes, usually so cold and stoic, now frantically landed on Leon, and he could see deep fear and panic within. '*Good*', he thought. At the very least, it was about as good a confirmation as he would get that she didn't have some hidden guardian waiting in the wings to strike down all those who threatened her. It seemed that they truly were alone.

Answering the obvious question in her gaze, Leon simply stated as matter-of-factly as he could, "You know who I am."

Valeria was quiet for a long time, but her eyes darted from Leon to Anzu and back again several times as if she were weighing her options. Leon sensed a thread of killing intent rise up from within her, but it was quickly suppressed. The rest of her aura, however, remained strong, and he could tell that she had already started to call upon her new powers. He didn't, however, assume that it was a sign she was about to attack, and instead silently praised her wisdom for preparing to defend herself. He stood as calmly as he could between her and the door, his face stoic beneath his helmet, his off-hand resting on the hilt of his sheathed sword, his right hand hanging at his side. He did his best to project an air of confidence and control while she processed his intrusion.

After a long moment, though, Leon continued. He couldn't let the responsibility for action fall upon her shoulders, not when he'd already lost so many.

"Say my name," he whispered with a calm that surprised even him, though his voice carried with it an undercurrent of his power that had Valeria's hair standing on end and her heart beating so fast that Leon could see her neck pulsing in time. "I know you know who I am. So tell me who I am. Say my name."

As he spoke, his left hand tightened around the hilt of his blade and an arc of lightning flashed around his fingers. The Adamant metal was warm to the touch, and a feeling of comfort and power flowed into him through it.

Valeria stared at him, fear written all over her face. But when Leon finished speaking, that fear turned into something more desperate, something that gave Leon the impression that she was going to attack him.

He prepared himself for a fight, and Anzu started to twitch as he glared at Valeria.

But then her expression softened, turning back to the careful, controlled, perfectly neutral expression that Valeria nearly always sported. It took Leon a little off-guard, but when Valeria lunged forward, her

glaive raised and on course to slash Leon across the chest, he drew his blade and deflected in one clean movement. It was a move he was familiar with given their habit of sparring with each other, and with lightning magic coursing through his body, she had no chance of taking him by surprise.

Anzu wasn't far behind Leon. He shrieked and sprang, his talons raking across Valeria's exposed midsection and his beak sinking into her right shoulder. Valeria cried out in pain and dropped her weapon as Anzu tore into the meat of her shoulder.

Leon then took a step forward and slammed his armored fist into her stomach. Her abdomen was already tight and as hard as iron from the pain of Anzu's attack, but Leon's strike with his gauntleted hand was powerful and she gasped and collapsed as the air was forced out of her lungs.

With a wave, Leon had Anzu release her and back up, her blood splattered over his white coat, his red eyes fixing solely upon her. If she so much as moved, Leon knew that Anzu would lunge again.

To prevent that, Leon kicked away the glaive—though, given the size of the room, it didn't travel far—and stepped on her shoulder, simultaneously pinning her to the ground and putting enough pressure on her shoulder wound to keep her from bleeding out too quickly. Anzu had done serious damage, Leon could tell, and even with his boot keeping her shoulder from bleeding, the mauling she took to her stomach and lower ribs was already bleeding profusely, soaking her tight blue shirt in crimson blood and bright red mana.

Leon stared down at Valeria as she stared back up at him, something akin to sadness and resignation in her eyes. He didn't think she'd move again, so he recalled his helmet back into his soul realm, allowing them to properly lock eyes.

With a shallow sigh, Leon asked, "Why did you do that? You can't have imagined that you would kill me."

"No... no, I didn't," Valeria gasped, her voice strained by pain. "I was... kind of hoping you'd kill me."

"I need answers that you can provide, you're not dying yet," Leon replied.

Valeria smiled weakly. "And what... questions do you have... Leon Raime?"

Chapter 446: Valeria Isynos

"And what... questions do you have... Leon Raime?"

Valeria's voice wavered, a pained smile on her face with Leon's boot pressing her back into the floor and her wounds continuing to bleed. She didn't feel at all bad about this situation, though. This confrontation had been a long time coming, and there was no getting out of it now. Better to roll with it, and as she admitted to Leon that she knew who he was, she felt a huge weight come off her shoulders.

Leon, however, only felt worse. He'd thought that hearing confirmation would make him feel better, maybe find some relief to the stress that had been slowly building the longer Valeria stayed with him, but all it meant to him was that the chances of him killing one of Elise's best friends—one of *his* best friends, too, if he were to be honest with himself—had just gone substantially up, despite his personal feelings.

He didn't want to kill Valeria. She'd done nothing to harm him, their short exchange a moment ago notwithstanding. More than that, she'd helped him out on numerous occasions and he quite liked her quiet and stoic attitude as well as her devotion to training. Staring down at her now had his heart madly beating in his chest. Excitement, reluctance, terror, and a whole host of other emotions were warring in his mind, and it was all he could do to maintain his demeanor.

But, regardless of his personal feelings, it was time for questions to be answered, and if they weren't... well, he didn't know. He doubted he'd be able to do anything more to her than what Anzu had done now that he could see her bleeding on the floor.

"Who are you, really?" he asked, deciding to start simple.

"Valeria Isynos," she answered without hesitation, her smile twitching on her face as Leon unconsciously dug the ball of his foot deeper into her shoulder.

"Your real name," Leon demanded.

"That *is* my real name," Valeria unhesitatingly replied.

Leon was tempted to call her a liar, but he managed to hold his tongue.

'Calm down you stupid shit, calm the fuck down!' he thought to himself, recognizing that his emotions were clouding his judgment. There was nothing to gain and so much to lose by taking the pain of his recent losses out on Valeria. Besides, he'd already gone far enough to have Elise furious with him at the very least if she were to ever hear about this.

"Valeria Isynos is my name," she insisted, not breaking eye contact with him. "It's been my name since the day I was born! I would never lie about that! Not to y—I just wouldn't!"

"You once told me that your name meant that you were 'from Isynia'," Leon pressed.

"And it's true!" she insisted, her eyes momentarily flickering in pain as she pressed her hand to the bleeding wounds Anzu had left on her abdomen. "The place I was born was in the Nexus! A city called Isynia! It just so happened that there were a few cities on this plane that had the same name, so my father said we were from one of those and kept our names the same!"

"Why would he do that?" Leon inquired, his tone beginning to soften as he started to get himself back under control. "Why are you even here?!"

"I-I... I don't even know where to start," she admitted.

Leon could tell that she was starting to weaken as pain and blood loss took its toll. As much as he was tempted to continue in this fashion, though, he couldn't just watch her bleed out. He didn't hate her, and he'd never wanted her dead. He took his boot off her shoulder, but just as she started to look up at him in surprise and worry, he reached into his soul realm and retrieved a few healing spells—even wounds as serious as hers looked could be easily fixed with enough healing magic, and Leon's stash of healing spells was relatively deep. He retrieved enough to fix just about all of the damage done to her.

"I'm... sorry about my handling of this... These should be enough to heal you."

“... Thank you,” she responded, quickly pressing the paper to her wounds. Anzu hadn’t held back when he retaliated against her for attacking Leon, and she hadn’t been armored. As a result, even for her, a newly-ascended fifth-tier mage, her wounds were terrible enough that her robust natural ability to heal wasn’t helping too much.

She definitely regretted attacking Leon like that. She didn’t want to betray him or her father and panicked at the suddenly hopeless and profoundly shocking situation. Still, accidental injuries inflicted on each other weren’t entirely new, since they’d spent a great deal of time sparring, though these wounds were by far the worst—probably because they’d been deliberately inflicted by Anzu rather than Leon. At least things were calming down, though, giving the two a chance to talk things out rather than speaking through steel.

The runes on the spell paper glowed bright white, quickly burning themselves out. However, her wounds scabbed over, preventing her from further bleeding and fixing any internal damage that Anzu might’ve inflicted. From what Leon could tell, though, the wounds Anzu had inflicted bled a lot and probably terribly hurt, but none of her internal organs had been injured. Once the only mildly life-threatening injury she had sustained—that being her bleeding—had been treated, Valeria pushed herself up into a sitting position leaning against her bed. She spared a glance for Anzu, who was still glowering at her like he was waiting for just one antagonistic move from her to tear out her throat.

Despite herself, Valeria couldn’t help but quickly avert her gaze in the face of such mistrust and hostility.

“Let’s start over, then,” Leon said, as he leaned against the door and recalled his sword into his soul realm. With Valeria disarmed, he didn’t think there was much need for it and having it out now that he didn’t think his life was in danger would send the wrong message. So, too, did he wave at Anzu, silently telling the griffin to calm down a bit, easing some of his hostility toward Valeria. “You came from the Nexus?”

“Yes,” Valeria confirmed.

“Why did you come here? As far as I know, this place is seen as something of a backwater to the people in the Nexus, so what was your purpose?”

“I can’t speak to how this place is perceived, I didn’t grow up in the Nexus,” Valeria admitted. “But the story I told you before about my mother being taken from us after my birth was true.”

Leon nodded, remembering her story. “You also told me that you were entrusted with a ‘truly vile’ task. What did that mean?” The last time he’d asked this question, he’d allowed her to get by without providing any explanations, but this time was different.

“We were sent here to kill the son of a prominent member of a Clan that is opposed to our Lord,” Valeria explained. “We were sent here to kill you.”

Leon nodded. It had always seemed obvious to him that his mother was the reason why these assassins were after him, but it was good to have some confirmation.

“Upon our arrival—years before we made that arrival public by requesting asylum from the Bull King—we searched high and low for you and discovered your identity and the family you belong to. My father and his retainers visited your grandfather looking for you. Archduke Kyros refused to cooperate, and a

fight ensued, which my father won. During that fight, we discovered that your family was descended from the Thunderbird from the power they wielded, which made your family our enemy as well, forcing us to target your father as well."

"Who is your Lord?" Leon asked, interrupting her.

"A man named Kamran," she answered patiently, fully understanding that Leon wanted to know *everything* and that it might take a while for her to explain what she knew. "He's a prominent Anax in the Nexus..." She noticed Leon's confused expression. "... An Anax is a powerful Lord, someone who rules over a great amount of territory. Their rank is second only to the Elemental Kings. Do you know who those people are?"

Leon calmly nodded, but his heart smashed against his ribs, his instincts demanding that he take whatever revenge he was capable of, but his rationality knowing that there was nothing he could do right now other than attacking Valeria, and that wasn't something that he was keen on doing. "What makes this 'Kamran' so powerful? What—"

"Sir Leon, I'm going to have to stop you right there," Valeria said, eliciting a reproachful glare from Leon, who nonetheless paused. "I don't want to repeat myself too much, but I do want to stress that I don't know that much about the Nexus. I never lived there, and my father only ever gave me a cursory education in how it operates, politically speaking. He also took pains to separate me from his duties as Kamran's vassal. As a result, I don't know much about Kamran, not even what he looks like. I can't help you very much in this regard."

Leon kept his gaze locked on her, looking for any sign of deceit. When he saw none, he reluctantly set that topic aside for the time being. Besides, if Kamran was as powerful as she claimed, then Leon was confident that he'd be able to find other sources of information on the man in time.

"Then tell me more details about what you were assigned to do and *why*," he demanded.

"As I said, killing not just you but your father, too, became our mission following the battle at Argent Palace," Valeria continued, taking a more circuitous route in her story than Leon appreciated, though he let her tell her story. "However, we were completely unable to find either one of you, and with all of your family members dead, we had no leads. My father deemed it best that we present ourselves to the Bull King and seek employment in an attempt to gather more resources within the Kingdom to continue the search."

"How old were you at the time?"

"I was about..." Valeria paused to think. "... Maybe five?"

"And your family was just accepted?"

"Yes," Valeria replied. "My father is quite strong, stronger than just about anyone else in this Kingdom, I'd wager... Most Kings would jump at the chance to so easily recruit someone of my father's relative power."

Leon stifled a grin. He didn't share that confidence in her father's strength; he'd seen Justin's fight with Naiad and how he'd run from it, but he wasn't going to tell Valeria that.

"The Bull King, having lost his best friend and the strongest mage in the Kingdom when Archduke Kyros di—was killed by my father... was quite accepting of my father, though if the King knew that my father killed Kyros, I doubt that would've been the case. But thanks to my father's power, he was assigned to govern Calabria, and there he remained for more than a decade expanding his influence and network of spies. It wasn't until a few months before we joined the Knight Academy that we heard anything about you..."

"Adrianos Isynos," Leon spat. Adrianos had been the man that had led the team of assassins to Leon's home, leading them to kill his father.

"Yes," Valeria quietly said. "He contacted us when Sir Roland returned to Teira and told us that he thought he found you two. My father sent him reinforcements, and that was the last we heard of them."

"They're dead," Leon replied, taking some small satisfaction in seeing her momentary look of shock, then understanding.

"We thought so," she said. "They wouldn't have been gone for so long if they were still alive."

Leon went quiet for a short time as he stared at Valeria. Some energy had returned to her after Leon's healing spells fixed much of the damage that he and Anzu had caused, her natural healing abilities now rapidly going to work on what was left. He felt more than a little guilty about that, but as much as he wanted to apologize further, he couldn't get too friendly with her right now, not when he still had questions he wanted to be answered.

"You're telling me quite a bit, but you've been frustratingly vague about the 'why'," Leon quietly said.

"Your mother," she matter-of-factly replied. "We heard reports that the daughter of one of Kamran's enemies had been found here. She managed to escape from Lord Kamran's strike team, but you were left behind. It was our duty to find you and kill you. That you're descended from the Thunderbird made things even worse, since the Thunderbird Clan was another of Lord Kamran's enemies. With that knowledge, we couldn't leave you or your father be, no matter how much we wanted to. Lord Kamran would've used shadow magic upon us and discovered the truth if we ever returned, and then we would've been tortured to death along with my mother."

Leon scowled. After his encounter with the vampire Bran during the war with Talfar, he hated darkness magic. That much he could understand, though. The rest of what she said didn't make much sense to him, but he had so little context for all this that he managed to reserve judgment. Of course, he had so many questions that he barely knew how to continue. After a few moments of silence, though, he went with what was most personal to him rather than what was most practical.

"Who was she? Or 'is', maybe? I don't even know if she's still alive... Why was her Clan this 'Kamran's' enemy? What was the Thunderbird Clan his enemy?"

"I... can't answer that," Valeria hesitantly replied. "My father hasn't told me much about the conflicts back in the Nexus or the reasons behind those conflicts. All I know for sure is that your mother is an important part of a powerful clan descended from a Divine Beast and that her father is the Patriarch of one of the clan's strongest families, making him essentially an Anax in all but name."

'I fucking knew it!' Leon thought as his scowl grew deeper despite his herculean attempts to keep his face as neutral as possible. Much of what Valeria had just said was wrong according to what he'd been told by people he thought he could trust, but it felt so right and aligned so well with old suspicions that he couldn't disregard this information. It actually infuriated him, since he'd specifically asked the Thunderbird if he'd inherited anything from his mother, and she'd told him that he didn't.

He tried to keep it in perspective, keeping in mind that just because his mother was descended from a Divine Beast—or so Valeria claimed—that didn't mean he inherited anything from her. But the Thunderbird hadn't even mentioned this, and that had his excitement and anger mixing in uncomfortable ways, with a profound sense of betrayal eventually settling into his gut.

"And... because..." Leon sputtered, desperately trying to maintain a calm attitude, "because of that, this... 'Kamran' wants me dead? Just because I'm connected to his enemies?"

"Yes," Valeria answered, her gaze unwaveringly fixed on Leon.

"Was there... any discussions of my coming in alive?" Leon asked. He had no intention of surrendering, but it did seem strange to him that the practical considerations for taking a hostage hadn't seemed to have been considered.

"Not that I was aware of," Valeria replied. "I'm not all-knowing, Leon. I'll answer what I can, but all I've known is this place, this plane. My father has tried to keep me in the loop regarding some of the larger picture things, but he keeps me from many of the more dangerous and unsavory details."

"What could possibly be considered unsavory when he was sent to murder a newborn?" Leon sarcastically wondered.

"I can't say, all I know is that my father feels tremendous guilt, and he adamantly refused to allow me to take an active role in this mission. Now that I know the truth about you, I'm more than grateful for that."

"So you're saying that it would've been different if I were someone else? If you didn't know or like your target?"

"Absolutely," Valeria said, shamelessly smiling as she did. "I've never met my mother before, but I would do anything to keep her alive and well. I want to see her with every fiber of my being, and the only thing that will prevent me from doing so is if my actions cause harm to someone who means as much to me as she does."

Leon's expression quickly reverted to his scowl as she reminded him of her crush. That was a line of questioning he didn't want to go down, for he already didn't want to kill her and regretted causing her pain, and if they got into a discussion about her feelings for him, he didn't think he'd be capable of it even if he had to.

Instead, he averted his gaze for a moment and asked, "What about your father? Tell me about him, how strong is he for real and what kind of subordinates does he have? If he's set on being my enemy, what should I expect if or when he puts everything together and comes for me?"

"My father is an eighth-tier mage," Valeria replied. She'd been quite unhesitatingly candid this entire time, but Leon was still surprised at how easily she provided that information, especially given how he'd

so aggressively started this conversation. “As far as Nexus mages go, it’s a respectable power level, but one that only led to him having a scant few subordinates. To make an analog to the Bull Kingdom, he’d be at about the level of a hereditary knight with a small retinue.

“To put it even more plainly, my father wasn’t anyone of importance, so even if he never came back Lord Kamran wouldn’t care.”

“Give me more specific numbers.”

“I don’t know the extent of his infiltration of this Kingdom, but I do know that he had four seventh-tier mages with him when he arrived, but two have died so far.”

Leon nodded, not needing any more explanation on that front—he already knew of those two deaths—even as he contemplated how hopeless it would be to fight Justin at this stage. He’d need much more power than he currently had to confront Justin, and it was both terrifying and reassuring to know how much further he’d have to go before feeling safe enough to do so. Even if he still had Naiad on his side it wouldn’t guarantee him victory right now.

“Do you know—” Leon began, but as he began his question, he heard a commotion out in the hallway. He quickly projected his magic senses and saw Gaius standing outside of his door down the hall and several other young knights hammering on the other doors of the occupied rooms, including one just outside Valeria’s door.

“Sir Leon!” Gaius called out, his voice muffled through Valeria’s door, “Sir Roland has arrived! Your presence is required up top!”

Leon didn’t respond. Instead, he glared at Valeria as if daring her to make a move. But she just sat there on the floor, her back leaning against her bed, an amused smile on her pale face as Leon wrestled with this interruption.

Then, she sat forward, looked him dead in the eye, and said without a shred of duplicity, “I will not harm you, Leon. I know that trusting me right now would be one of the hardest things to do, but I assure you, if you take a chance with me, you won’t regret it.”

She kept it simple despite having so much more she could say. She didn’t want to talk and talk until Leon gave in, she wanted him to either choose to trust her or just get it over with and kill her. However, she greatly hoped Leon would choose the former. Her heart beat in her chest faster than Leon’s did in his, and for all the calm serenity that her facial expression exuded, her subtle shivering and chaotic aura were enough to tell volumes about how terrified she was.

Leon stared at her for a long time, even as the knocking on her door intensified and the knight outside started calling her name; even as Alix, Marcus, and Alcander all exited their rooms and got ready to head topside.

Unfortunately, Leon’s ability to kill Valeria without being asked awkward questions—already quite dubious even before Gaius’ summons—had been essentially taken away, and he forced himself to accept that. But even if it hadn’t, Leon didn’t think he’d

Chapter 447: The Lion’s Guilt

Leon could barely believe what was happening. When he'd finally confronted Valeria and started getting some real answers about his mother and his family's enemies, Roland had to show up days early and interrupt.

Or, more specifically, have *Gaius* interrupt. There were few things Leon wanted to do more at that moment than walk outside and wring Gaius' neck.

As things were, though, he and Valeria had come to an accord, of sorts. They were going to trust each other at least until they could find another opportunity to finish their conversation.

Valeria herself was standing at the foot of her bed staring at him as she waited for him to give her a directive on how to proceed now that their conversation had been interrupted. Leon silently cursed as he took in the state of her—her tied-back hair had come loose, her blue shirt had been shredded and covered in blood, and she had a look of acceptance, relief, and joy on her face that made for an uncanny sight. If it was somehow possible, Leon's guilt at hurting her and happiness in making at least a temporary peace both deepened. With the benefit of more time to process and the knowledge of how she felt about him, he couldn't even imagine what she might be going through—he knew that if he had to choose between Artorias and Elise as Valeria had to choose between him and her father, he wouldn't be able to make a decision.

"I'll head out first. Give you some time to get changed," he softly said, nodding to her as politely as he could.

"Got it," she said. She didn't wait for so much as a second before she began pulling off her shirt. "You really got me good, Anzu," she said, her voice straining a bit to sound light-hearted even as the griffin stared daggers at her. It wasn't until Leon clicked his tongue and got Anzu's attention that the griffin relaxed.

Leon, for his part, wasn't too interested in whatever she was trying to do by taking her shirt off in his presence and simply turned his back to her—though she had given him a good enough look at her body to see that her wounds were now just a few faint white lines on her otherwise flawless skin. He felt like he should stay for a few more seconds since he couldn't just open the door and leave with her half-naked behind him, but she seemed to disagree.

"I appreciate it, but you can open the door and leave if you want," she said. "Sounds like they're getting a bit impatient out there. I think Anzu will block their view, anyway."

Leon could hear Gaius speaking with Marcus, Alix, Alcander, and the rest of the knights out in the hall. None of them knew that Leon was with Valeria, and none could say as to why neither of them was coming out, or if they were even still in their rooms.

Leon cast one last look over his shoulder at her and found her smiling back at him, her body turned away and an arm covering her substantial chest. It seemed to him that her smile was meant to be cheeky or otherwise playful, but her obvious nervousness and the way her eyes flickered toward Anzu ruined the effect Leon thought she was going for.

He lightly shrugged and pulled the door open just enough to allow himself to get out, surprising the knight who was still standing outside of it.

“Out of the way,” Leon curtly growled, feeling no desire to be in any way polite. Given how damn *loudly* the knight had been knocking.

The knight practically jumped out of his armor as Leon’s baleful gaze hit him like a boulder to the face, and he reeled a few feet further down the hall, leaving no one with a clear view into Valeria’s room for the split second before Anzu blocked the doorway with his large frame.

“Sir Leon?!” Gaius exclaimed in surprise as he registered not only Leon’s presence but also where he was coming from. “What... what were you doing...?”

Leon just glared at the young nobleman and blocked anyone from approaching Valeria’s doorway until Anzu slunk past him into the hallway. Only then did Leon fully close it behind him.

“Where’s Dame Valeria?” Marcus asked, his eyebrow raised, and a smile on his face that was both intrigued and congratulatory.

Leon glanced back at the door, thought for a moment, lightly frowned, and said, “She’ll be out in a minute.”

“Oh? Oh ho ho?” Marcus playfully said as he walked closer. “What, pray tell, were you doing in Dame Valeria’s chambers, Sir Leon? Could you h—”

“We were talking, I had some issues I needed to bring up with her,” Leon replied, cutting Marcus off, though not before Alix started walking over with stars in her eyes and Gaius stumbled back as a look of horror crossed his face. What they were doing was the last thing he wanted to talk about with them.

“Sir Leon!” Alix cried with a faux-scandalized tone before her curiosity got the better of her. “Did you finally make a move?! Or was it Val?! Are you two finally together now?! I mean, you’ve been *obviously* crazy about each other this entire time, so it’s good to see that you’re finally resolving this thick sexual tension!”

At that moment, Valeria’s door opened again and she strode out into the hall, not a hair out of place. If Leon hadn’t been responsible for it, he never would’ve guessed that she’d just been mauled by Anzu a scant few minutes beforehand.

“Sorry everyone, I had to get dressed,” she said, winking at Leon, clearly taking some amount of pleasure in his relatively obvious discomfort.

Leon rolled his eyes and ignored the looks everyone was giving him. He especially ignored Alix as she scooted past him to excitedly whisper into Valeria’s ear as she blatantly stared at him. Hearing them joke about him and Valeria only exacerbated his guilt over his actions.

Instead of responding, Leon turned back to Gaius, who appeared to be fighting off the urge to burst into tears.

“I *knew* it... I *knew* it...” he kept repeating to himself.

“Sir Tullius,” Leon loudly said, pulling the young nobleman out of his depression-induced mantra. “You said that Sir Roland has arrived.”

“... Right,” Gaius replied with a complete lack of enthusiasm, his eyes not once turning in Leon’s direction. “Let’s head back up...”

He waved his hand at his knights and they began to file out of the hallway, making room for everyone else to follow. A few uncomfortable minutes of making their way through the underground camp later, Leon and co. emerged in the late evening sun to find that everyone else had largely finished cleaning up the hill, gathering the bodies of the fallen, and setting up their own camp. It had even been fortified with a wooden palisade set in a stone foundation and featuring a stone gatehouse. Leon could also tell that the 2nd Legion had been quite diligent in setting up the standard suite of enchantments to ensure the wall was as protective as it ought to be.

The center of the camp at the top of the shallow hill was their destination. There, the main command tent along with the sleeping tents for Arellius, Gaius, and the Duchess of Vesontio had been set up. Most of the local leadership was in the command tent, so that was where Leon and the others made their way.

The first thing Leon saw upon striding in just behind Gaius was Roland and several of his knights looking more than a little uncomfortable as they kept a close eye on everyone around them. Roland seemed to relax just a hair upon seeing Leon’s entrance but otherwise remained on guard.

Sertor Arellius and Vesontio, however, appeared to be more than relaxed, with the two draped over chaise lounges next to the low table in the center of the tent, upon which was a relatively accurate map of the surrounding areas. The rest of their subordinates who were present were waiting patiently either standing or in seats closer to the edge of the tent.

“Sir Leon!” Roland called out in greeting as Leon came closer.

“Sir Roland,” Leon replied, his demeanor still less than cordial given where he was only a few minutes ago. “You’re quite early, I wasn’t expecting you for several days at least.”

“We had quite a bit of luck breaking out of the camp,” Roland explained. “We probably should’ve done so sooner, but... actually, how about we pretend that I didn’t just say that?”

Leon shrugged. Roland wanted to not come off like he was publicly second-guessing August’s decisions, but Leon wholly agreed that they should’ve tried to break out of their camp much sooner, especially since it seemed it was so easy to do that Roland arrived in hours instead of days.

“How many people did you bring?” Leon asked.

Roland glanced meaningfully at Arellius and the Duchess, both of whom had paused their own conversation to listen in. The Duchess seemed a bit aggrieved about something—Leon guessed his lack of formal greeting—but Arellius seemed more amused than anything.

“They’re on our side... probably,” Leon said as he gave Roland a quick run-down of the day’s events.

When he was finished, Roland’s attitude had shifted to something akin to regret and mourning. “All the giants are gone?” he asked.

Leon slowly nodded as he carefully controlled his expression to not show just how devastated he was about that.

“And your unit is gone?”

Again, Leon nodded.

Roland opened and closed his mouth several times as he processed this information and found himself unable to say anything.

“What’s done is done,” Leon said, his voice sounding much more confident and sure of himself than he did in his heart. “Time to move on. How many people did you manage to bring with you?”

Roland looked like he wanted to continue the other conversation, but with everyone staring at him in expectation, he sighed and said, “In addition to my retinue of five hundred, I brought two thousand of the Legion’s finest, and another two thousand from the Marquis of Aventino’s retinue.”

“My father sent that many?” Marcus asked, his tone more wonder than doubt.

“Lord Aeneas was concerned whether or not two thousand would cut it,” Roland answered. “That’s why he doubled those I brought. We were only supposed to run a few distraction missions, but now that I’m here and see what was waiting for us, I think we can do a lot more than that...”

“You can say that again,” Arellius enthusiastically boomed.

The others began to discuss the tactical and strategic situation, but Leon barely contributed. For the most part, he was completely checked out of the meeting. Without giants or a unit of his own, he didn’t feel the need to make his opinion known.

Instead, what he focused on was his conversation with Valeria. For the most part, she’d given him few surprises. With what he already knew, it made perfect sense that his connection to his mother had been the reason why her father had been hunting him, and being given the name of the man who’d sent Justin the plane hadn’t been too significant since it’d come without any other actionable information. At the very least, though, he now had some idea of how far he was going to have to go to achieve revenge—he had an Anax as his enemy, whatever that meant.

More significantly, though, was the information she’d given him about his mother. There was nothing he wanted to do more than to sink into his soul realm and grill the Thunderbird about his mother, but unfortunately, he couldn’t just do that in the middle of a meeting, no matter how little he was paying attention.

Perhaps more pressing, however, was how he was going to handle Valeria and her father. As things were, he figured the chances of making peace with her family were laughably small, no matter his personal feelings toward Valeria herself. He didn’t want to kill her, but his feelings about her father was another matter entirely. Valeria seemed to maintain that he was a good man whenever she spoke about him, but Leon didn’t know the man, his only connection to Justin being the fact that he’d had Leon’s father murdered.

He glanced at Valeria sitting next to him. She was back to her usual stoic self, her expression ice cold, her posture perfect, her gaze lingering on no one in particular. If he hadn’t known otherwise, he never would’ve guessed that she’d been so horribly injured less than an hour ago.

He couldn't help but appreciate that about her. She was so like him in many ways, from her diligence in her training to her general demeanor. If he were completely honest with himself, Leon would have to admit that he found her incredibly attractive, and if her father hadn't been connected to Artorias' death, then he would've followed Elise's suggestion and tried to bring Valeria into his harem, or whatever it was that he had.

Leon had no intention to kill Valeria. Seeing how injured she'd been filled with him with such guilt that he knew there was no way he'd be able to live with himself if he did something like that again.

'But killing her father? Is that something I can do?' Leon thought to himself, feeling doubt for the first time since he left the Northern Vales. If he'd thought about it only a few hours before, it would've been no question, he'd have killed Justin in a heartbeat. But now...

He supposed it would depend on the circumstances of their confrontation. If Justin were the person that Valeria claimed him to be, then... maybe Leon could make peace with him. If he proved himself otherwise or tried to kill Leon, then Leon would fight with all he had. He didn't want to fight an eighth-tier mage head-on, of course, but as it was right now, Leon felt like he had a good chance of winning if he invoked Xaphan's power. Plus, it seemed like Naiad was close by, and as that thought returned to his head, Leon felt a powerful urge to venture back out into the woods to continue his—

"Sir Leon?" Roland asked.

Leon blinked and pulled himself out of his thoughts, his mood souring a bit as his attention was pulled back to more immediate responsibilities. Roland and the rest of the command staff were staring at him, obviously waiting for something. Leon cocked an eyebrow, stared at Roland, and silently asked him what the Paladin wanted.

"Did you get all that?" Roland asked.

Leon glanced at the map of their surroundings that had been laid out on the table in front of them. From what he could tell from what had been marked on the map, the plan they'd come up with was about what he expected: attack Duronius' northern flank at the same time as August did, assuming Duronius didn't simply retreat when he realized he was outflanked. They'd break through in the north and swing south to crush the remaining Octavian forces. With more than a hundred thousand in August's camp and almost sixty thousand outside of it, their chances were good that their plan would work if they moved before Duke Duronius.

Leon nodded and said, "I got it." He'd obviously missed out on the details, like how they'd communicate with August, but he could ask the others later, right now he just didn't care about the specifics of the plan they'd come up with.

Roland didn't look entirely happy with Leon's response, but no one felt like arguing with Leon with the way he was glaring around the room. Even Arellius's loud attitude was rather damped when his and Leon's gazes crossed.

"... All right, then," the Legate quietly said in the awkward silence following Leon's response. "I suppose we ought to get some rest, then, if we're to pull this off before the morning."

Leon nodded as everyone spoke their agreement. His gaze wandered over in Valeria's direction again, his eyes admiring her noble figure. He figured he should wait to continue their discussion until he was in a better state of mind, and the same went for confronting the Thunderbird. At the very least, they could wait until there weren't about two hundred thousand Octavian troops nearby they had to deal with.

Chapter 448: Roland's Concern

"Sir Leon!" Roland called out as the meeting wrapped up and everyone departed the command tent to see to their parts in getting everything organized.

Leon paused for a moment, nodding to the others in his party to continue without him. Valeria stuck around for a moment giving him a questioning look, but Marcus, Alcander, and Alix all left, though not without giving Leon and Valeria some amused looks. Leon had to nod again to Valeria before she left—he was a little apprehensive letting her leave on her own, but he figured if he was going to trust her, now was as good a time to start as any. Only Anzu remained at his side.

"Sir Roland," Leon said in greeting as Roland caught up to him. "Was there something else?"

As he asked this, Leon's eyes strayed out toward the forest in the direction that he had sensed Naiad's power. He doubted he'd be able to find her before the upcoming battle kicked off, but he had been hoping to at least take an hour or two to poke around again and see if he missed anything.

"Mind if we talk for a moment? In private?" Roland asked with a wide smile and a meaningful nod toward another tent close by.

Leon thought for a moment as he clamped down on the instinct to immediately refuse. "... Sure," he said, reasoning that it was best to see what the Paladin wanted before a major battle. Besides, with confirmation that it was Valeria's family that had been responsible for his father's murder, he could finally put away the last of his lingering suspicion and antipathy towards Roland.

The two entered the tent, which Leon noted was bereft of most creature comforts that nobles and higher-ranking knights loved to fill their tents with. Whether that was because Roland's tent—at least, Leon was assuming it was Roland's—was borrowed, hastily put together, or because of more moderate tastes, Leon wasn't sure. The furniture within consisted of a bed, a handful of chairs, a small round table, and nothing more.

The two took seats at the table while Anzu waited outside, only poking his head into the tent so he could keep an eye on Roland.

For his part, Roland was a little bit put off by the griffin's constant stare, which Leon picked up on. It took a little prodding on his part, but Leon managed to get the griffin to leave them alone.

"So, Sir Leon," the Paladin cautiously began, his tone restrained and his cadence slow, as if the topic he wished to broach was one he would rather not talk about. "I... couldn't help but notice that you didn't seem to be with us during that meeting. Is everything all right?"

Leon clenched his jaw in displeasure. This was not a conversation that he wanted to have with Roland right now. Or ever, really, but he appreciated why the Paladin was asking. Even without his giants or his unit, Leon was still one of the strongest and most influential people in the army, even if his political

power paled in comparison to that of the others. It was imperative for Roland to make sure that everyone was all right before a battle, and that went double for the leadership.

Still, even though he could understand the rationality behind the question, Leon was more than a little annoyed with Naiad still out in the forest somewhere and the matter regarding Valeria lingering in his mind.

Despite these thoughts, Leon didn't snap at the Paladin. Even when annoyed, impatient, and still processing what Valeria told him, he managed to keep a firm grip on his actions.

"I'm fine, Sir Roland," Leon said as politely as he could manage.

"With all due respect, Leon, you're clearly *not* fine," Roland countered. "I've never seen you so inattentive, so passive when it comes to making battle plans. You didn't even offer your opinion in that meeting, for the Ancestors' sake!"

"And with *all due respect* to you, Sir Roland, you don't know me that well." Leon kept his voice calm and measured, but Roland still looked quite taken aback.

The Paladin bitterly smiled, held up his hands in a placating gesture, and stuttered, "I-I'm not looking to anger you, Sir Leon... I'm just... expressing my concerns."

"I just lost my entire unit, Sir Paladin, and of those few dozen under my command who survived, only Sirs Marcus and Alcander and Dames Alix and Valeria stuck around," Leon reminded him, the younger man's voice taking on a harder edge. "I also lost all of my giants, including one that I considered quite a close friend."

At that reminder, Roland visibly cringed, which caused Leon's wall to crack a little bit.

"You're right, I apologize," Roland whispered. "I suppose the point of me asking hasn't really changed, though."

Leon sighed, his face starting burn with shame, and said, "I apologize, too. I shouldn't have snapped like that. I... well, what was the point that you were getting at?"

"That I'm worried, and that I'm here if you need me."

Leon stared at the Paladin, stunned and a little bit suspicious. But Roland seemed as far as Leon could tell to be completely genuine, and Leon honestly had little idea how to respond. He just sat there completely flabbergasted at the direction Roland had taken their conversation. He'd assumed that Roland's reasons for reaching out were entirely practical...

"I-I..." he mumbled, feeling awkward in the silence that followed.

"Sir Leon, I'm no stranger to loss, I've lost my fair share of friends in my life. I've even lost friends during this civil war. Do you remember Sir Andrew and Sir Roger?"

Leon shook his head in the negative.

"They were two of the knights who accompanied me into the Northern Vales."

"Ah, I, uh, *do* remember them," Leon said upon further thought. He hadn't thought about either of those two knights in years and had honestly completely forgotten about their existence. Given how Roland's face had fallen just a tad, though, Leon thought he knew what the Paladin was going to say next.

"Both of them have been killed in the time since we sprung Prince August from the Royal Dungeon. Two of my best friends, two men who were so loyal to me that they followed me into the 'barbarous wasteland' of the Northern Vales. I won't pretend to understand whatever pain you're feeling, but I just want you to know that you're not alone. You're not alone."

A calm earnestness radiated out of the Paladin, and Leon couldn't even consider the possibility that Roland was being anything less than completely honest and forthright.

Leon wasn't the sort to cry, his grief was expressed in other ways. But Roland's statement had his eyes stinging as he tried to keep them dry, and his shame at snapping earlier magnified. All he was able to say was a quiet, "Thank you."

Roland sighed and was silent for a long moment, letting Leon compose himself, but he soon added to his statement.

"You're still young, Leon. Hold your friends and loved ones as close as you can, for if you survive this whole shitstorm, there is a frightening amount of time between you and the grave. A terrifying amount of time in which you will lose more people that you care about. More than enough time to make friends and watch them die before you. Enough time to treat everyone around you with the love and kindness that we all deserve, and to uphold the principles of justice and peace that Prince Trajan espoused.

"Sir Leon, please don't lose yourself in this identity of yours of the uncaring outsider, of the uncivilized barbarian that couldn't care less about what happens to the people around him and who solves all his problems with violence. It's no way to live."

During Roland's spiel, Leon managed to pull himself back together. The Paladin's words truly struck a chord within him with everything that had happened in the past few months, but Leon did an admirable job returning to his usual stoic expression, even if within he was a jumbled mess.

"... You're quite young yourself..." Leon said, not knowing what else to say after such a heartfelt speech. "You've got quite a bit of time ahead of you, too."

"I'm... not so sure about that..." Roland said as he stared unfocused at the walls of the tent. Leon didn't know what to make of that, so he settled for giving Roland a questioning look and keeping his peace. However, it seemed that Roland wasn't too interested in explanations, as he continued, "Sir Leon, I hope you're as happy as you claim, that you're comfortable being... who you are. I suppose I just wish that you put in more effort to be... *more* than that, to be the man that Prince Trajan thought you could be."

Leon cocked an eyebrow at Roland, wondering briefly if he should be offended by that statement or not. Before he could decide, though, Roland took his expression as one of dissatisfaction and hurried to clarify.

“I’m not saying that you should take up Prince August on his offer in exchange for your assistance with the Northern Territories... I’ve phrased this all wrong... Look, we all have room to grow as people, and it just seems to me that you’re too entrenched in your own way of thinking.”

[He’s not wrong, you know,] came the thunderous voice of the Thunderbird from Leon’s soul realm. [From what I can tell, you care little for these people, and you see the world in simple terms: enemies, allies, and everyone else.]

[Are you saying that I should change, too?] Leon asked bemusedly, though his tone was difficult to maintain with his Ancestor jumping in on this conversation—especially so when he remembered that the Thunderbird lied to him, at least from what Valeria had told him. He felt a little blindsided by all of this, and it just kept getting worse with every passing minute as Roland and now the Thunderbird tried digging deeper and deeper into who he was. He couldn’t say if he was appreciative to hear all of this, but he certainly felt a visceral sense of rejection toward much of this conversation, but he kept his tone with his Ancestor as normal as possible. It wasn’t quite time to be confrontational. [I seem to recall you encouraging me on more than one occasion to have this kind of mindset.]

[I don’t recall that,] the Thunderbird replied, her tone oddly soft and relaxed. [I’ve encouraged you to get your revenge and to think harder about what this Kingdom means to you if it allows you to be in danger.]

[You also encouraged me to destroy my Mind Palace and to be true to myself not even two hours ago,] Leon replied.

[The two are different matters. Your Mind Palace reflects your innermost thoughts and desires, how you see the world and your place in it, how you see *yourself*. Working to become kinder and more socially competent is always something to strive for, I think.]

[I honestly never thought you’d be telling me to be kinder, I thought you’d advocate for dominating everyone and everything through sheer power alone,] Leon shot back.

[While I would certainly enjoy seeing that, I did not achieve absolutely *everything* I did alone, I had many friends and allies and family members assisting me in the building of my Clan—I even turned many enemies into friends in my time, and I was stronger for it. It takes a certain political savvy to be what I was, you know. If every problem could be solved by hurling lightning at it, I never would’ve died. As it is, your outlook is too extreme, too black and white. You need to acknowledge that there are other solutions to your problems than reaching for your sword.]

Leon started getting a headache. ‘*Where the fuck is all this coming from?!*’ he couldn’t help but wonder. Still, as strange as the timing was, he couldn’t deny the accuracy of Roland and the Thunderbird’s words.

[We’ll see,] Leon slowly said. He had to admit, the thought of turning Valeria into an ally resonated with him. Or maybe something more...

‘*No... that’s impossible,*’ he silently said to himself with a self-deprecating smile.

But it was a nice thought.

“I’m fine, Sir Roland,” Leon eventually said out loud. “Thank you for your concern. I... appreciate it.”

"I'm... glad to hear that," Roland said, noticing a slight improvement in Leon's attitude. "If you ever need to talk, Sir Leon, I'll be here."

"Thank you," Leon repeated. "I might just take you up on that one of these days."

"Until then," Roland said, his tone turning lighter than it just had been, "how about a drink?"

With a flourish of his hand, Roland produced a tall bottle of wine from his soul realm.

"It's not very expensive, but it's my favorite. Comes from a small vineyard near the capital."

"Sure," Leon replied with a smile friendlier than just about any he'd ever worn before, "I suppose I can stay for one drink."

—

Leon wasn't the only person who was called aside for a private conversation following the meeting of the army's higher-ups—not long after Valeria left, Gaius came looking for her.

She had been consumed by thoughts of the past few hours, worrying about what her future might hold now that she and Leon had put their cards on the table. Worrying about where her father might be and what his reaction to learning about Leon would be. Worrying about which side she'd choose if she were forced to. Worrying about how willing Leon would be to kill her if she chose her father over him. Her shoulder that Anzu had torn into ached at the thought of fighting Leon for real, but her heart ached even more.

But it wasn't long that she was lost in these thoughts, for she hadn't even made it back to the underground camp before Gaius came running after her.

"Dame Valeria," he quietly said as he appeared at her side, choosing not to be as loud or brash as he so often was when they were kids. "Could we talk for a moment?"

"What about?" Valeria politely inquired, maintaining her pace and direction and not slowing down at all for Gaius.

"I... I suppose I was hoping that we could... you know, talk about *us*..." Gaius sheepishly said.

It was a bit surprising to see him so unsure of himself, but Valeria had much bigger problems to worry about right now than Gaius' crush on her. She wasn't interested in him in that way. Hells, she and him were barely even acquaintances, let alone friends or lovers.

"I have a lot on my mind right now, Sir Tullius, perhaps another time?" she said in a clear, if disguised in politeness, rejection.

"Is it about Sir Ursus?" Gaius asked, eliciting a reproachful glare from Valeria. She was a fifth-tier mage, now, while he was only third-tier, and if she wanted to, she could quite literally tear him in half if he angered her too much.

Fortunately for him, she had far too much self-control to go that far.

"Right, not my business," Gaius replied. "I guess I'll just let you go, then. Good luck in the battle, may your Ancestors guide your blade."

"Same to you," Valeria replied as she turned her attention back to her thoughts. So quick was she that she didn't even notice when Gaius stopped walking alongside her, nor did she notice when the nobleman vanished into the warrens of the camp, muttering something about needing to find Leon with a dark look in his eyes.

Chapter 449: Gaius and Leon

"Sir Leon!" called out a voice from behind as Leon left Roland's tent. "Just the man I was looking for!"

Leon couldn't help but roll his eyes and wonder, *'What now?!'*

Turning, he saw Gaius swiftly walking towards him, a look of purpose in his eyes that caught Leon off guard. He wasn't sure why the young nobleman would be calling out to him, but his talk with Roland had left him with a lot to consider. Hells, it just stacked onto everything else that had been dropped on him over the past day, so what Leon wanted right now more than anything was to just be by himself.

But he also couldn't just disregard everything that Roland and the Thunderbird had been trying to tell him, so he put on his best polite face and waited for the nobleman to approach.

"Sir Gaius," Leon lightly replied as Gaius drew closer, letting one of his hands rest on the back of Anzu to keep him from getting too territorial about Gaius walking up on them from behind—the griffin had diligently waited for him outside of Roland's tent, and was now happily trotting along beside Leon. Gaius disrupted his good mood when he called out, necessitating Leon's conciliatory contact.

"I was hoping to share a few words with you," Gaius imperiously said, already testing Leon's patience and seeming to ignore Anzu's presence entirely.

Leon considered the wisdom of simply denying Gaius. However, it didn't seem like Gaius was going to take no for an answer, as he jumped right in without waiting for Leon to respond.

"What is your relationship with Dame Valeria?!"

Leon blinked and cocked his head in confusion; this was not a question that he expected to fall from Gaius' mouth. Instead, he figured it would've been something more relevant to the state of the war... though as Leon thought more about it, he could understand why Gaius might be a bit concerned. He had just seen Leon emerge from Valeria's room not too long ago, and Leon knew that the young nobleman was romantically interested in Valeria.

"She's my subordinate, one of my knights," Leon replied.

"That's not all, though, is it?!" Gaius demanded.

"That's hardly your business to know, is it?" Leon countered, his tone turning a few shades sharper and more accusatory.

That question, even backed up by Leon's powerful aura, wasn't too oppressive, but it shut Gaius up long enough for the nobleman to think before he spoke. He straightened himself up and, for a moment, seemed to be about to lay into Leon, to say that Leon wasn't worthy of Valeria. Or, at least that's how it seemed to Leon. Instead, right before he spoke, Gaius seemed to relax back down into a more neutral stance.

“Sir Leon. Could we speak somewhere a little more private?”

Gaius’ tone had softened and taken on a significantly softer edge, which Leon noted. They were close to the center of the camp and quite a few high-ranking knights were giving them strange looks after Gaius’ loud outburst, so given Gaius’ change in attitude, Leon agreed.

A few minutes later, they entered Gaius’ tent, with Leon leaving Anzu outside again—the griffin wasn’t too happy about it, but he did as Leon wanted.

Much like Roland’s tent, Gaius’ tent was sparsely decorated, but given what Leon knew about Gaius, he figured this was mostly because the nobleman had to travel light or there simply hadn’t been enough time for his servants to set everything up rather than any preferences Gaius had for spartan furnishings. However, one thing that struck out to Leon was a small collection of four board games on the table, all of which were typically used by the nobility to practice their tactical or strategic skills, or simply to show off their cultural abilities. Not all of the games were so high-brow, however, for Leon also saw a pack of cards and some dice hidden amongst them.

“Nice collection,” Leon said appreciatively as they took their seats at the table, trying to maintain a measure of cordiality after the trying day, “though I’d guess you didn’t bring me here to challenge me to a game of keeps?”

Of all the games that could be played with what Gaius had, keeps was Leon’s favorite, though he’d played not very much. Both sides would use sixty game pieces each to try and take their opponents keep, moving and attacking in turns. The first to move either five of their pieces into the heart of their opponents keep or took all of their opponent’s pieces would win. The pieces were also divided into five separate types, each with their own strengths and weaknesses that could move or attack around the large game board in different ways. It was a game from the Central Empires that had been designed to hone the tactical mind and had made its way into the Bull Kingdom thousands of years ago.

“No,” Gaius simply replied. “Sir Leon, I suppose at this point you know how I feel about Dame Valeria?”

‘Bit of an arrogant assumption...’ Leon thought, though he kept that unsaid.

“I have some idea,” Leon replied out loud.

“To ensure that we’re on the same page here, I love her. Always have, ever since the first time I saw her in Calabria when my father brought me to visit when the two of us were about seven years old or so. She was the strongest, smartest, most beautiful girl I’d ever seen, and I swore then that I’d do everything I could to marry her one day. She... doesn’t seem to share my feelings, but I still love her with all my heart. I think my dream of being with her is dead, but I can’t help my feelings. So, even if she and I will never be, I want to impress upon you that if you ever do anything to harm her, I will do everything in my power to make you an enemy of my family.”

Gaius spoke passionately and with grim seriousness. There wasn’t an ounce of levity to be found in his tone or expression, so Leon knew that he would follow through with his threat. But there was a bit of a problem with that...

Leon grimaced and began glancing around the room as he searched for the right words. But none came, so he decided to lean into that. “I’m going to be blunt here, Sir Tullius. I’m not clever enough in the ways

of talking to really be anything but. But I think you can take, you're certainly strong enough for it, and I think it's something that you need to hear."

"Go ahead..." Gaius apprehensively responded as he leaned forward in his chair, waiting for Leon's proper response. He didn't have long to wait, and Leon didn't have that grand a statement to make.

"What makes you think I care about your family?"

Gaius looked taken aback, his eyebrow rising as he tried to parse what Leon had just said. As the relative of a Duke, it wasn't something he'd ever heard before. "What do you mean?" he demanded, his tone both confused and angry.

"I don't care about you. I don't care about your family. Well, that's not *entirely* true, we're currently allies, so I'll do what I can to keep you alive when in battle, but beyond that... after this war, we'll have no ties, no relationship. Given our history, I'm not even sure if having ties with you is something that I want. You can't harm me and you're not a friend of mine. So, quite frankly, I have no strong feelings about you one way or the other."

Gaius' expression changed from one of seriousness and that of projecting authority to one that looked almost hurt, though it was quickly covered up by noble stoicism.

"Don't bother threatening me," Leon continued. "I have no plans currently to bring harm to *my* own knight, anyway. She's the only knight I actually have on my payroll, and doing something to hurt her would be a bit counter-intuitive, you know?"

"And yet, you were in her room..." Gaius said.

"Don't mistake that, everyone else made a big deal out of it, but there was nothing sexual going on in there. I simply had some business to discuss with her. Besides, I had my griffin in there, you think I'd want to have sex with him watching?"

"People have weird tastes," Gaius said with an almost relieved shrug, though he still stared at Leon with suspicion. "But, to get back to my point, I suppose you can take what I'm going to say however you please, but I have to say it anyway. At this point, I'm aware that Valeria doesn't feel about me the same way that she feels about you, no matter how she feels about you. She and I will never be, and I can make my peace with that. What I *can't* make my peace with, however, is the idea that she'll be with someone who might abuse her, or might not respect her, or might bring her to harm. I *cannot* abide that! I will *not* let that be!"

"You say that like you have any choice in the matter," Leon replied.

"I don't, not really," Gaius admitted. "However, that doesn't mean I won't hear of it sooner or later. You could unite the entire plane under your banner, but if you were to make Valeria cry, I would still strive with all my being to bring an end to you. Do you understand that?"

Leon smiled and nodded. The conviction that Gaius spoke with was admirable in his eyes, even if the content of the declaration was kind of laughable—Valeria hardly needed such protection, at least under normal conditions. Besides, something told Leon that Valeria wouldn't take too kindly to Gaius inserting himself into their private affairs. Maybe that was just an assumption he was making, but he was certain in that belief, given how distantly she generally treated him.

“Sir Tullius,” Leon said calmly and carefully, enunciating every syllable in a clear attempt to stay even and light-hearted, “I have just lost every knight, every nobleman, every *single person*, including my giants, only a few hours ago. The *last* thing I need is you getting into my face and telling me how to lead my people and that I need to keep those few who are left alive. Do *you* understand that?”

Leon’s voice was steady and strong, each word hitting Gaius like a sack of bricks. There wasn’t a trace of killing intent in Leon’s aura, but still, Gaius could feel how sincerely Leon spoke. He meant every word.

“I-I understand that, Sir Leon,” Gaius said, suddenly becoming *very* aware that he was alone with a man that he considered an enemy not that long ago, a man who had his fifth-tier war beast waiting just outside the tent. And then he steadied himself, using every ounce of etiquette training he’d ever received to maintain a noble stoicism, even in the face of an irate sixth-tier mage. “I will not be taking back what I said, though. Keep that in mind.”

Leon only smiled, a thin-lipped thing that spoke far more of his anger and lack of patience than it did of any amusement he may have felt.

“I suppose that’s where we stand, then,” Leon stated. “Just know that I don’t hate you, Sir Tullius. Even with our disagreements in the past, I don’t hate you.”

Gaius visibly cringed in his seat as he remembered the arrogance with which he’d accosted Leon when they’d first met, and the one-sided rivalry he’d declared with the other man. It had only been a few years, but already the things that Gaius had said to Leon brought him nothing but shame, let alone the actions that he’d taken during their time at the Knight Academy.

“I... know that you said you don’t care about me, Sir Leon,” Gaius quietly murmured, his voice shaking with shame, and his eyes wandering around the tent, “but I would like to apologize to you. I wasn’t fair to you back in the Knight Academy, and for that I’m sorry. I would not do any of that over again if I were given the chance. I’m embarrassed by my actions, and I understand completely your responses to them.”

Leon awkwardly smiled, most of his obvious irritation and lack of patience vanishing with Gaius’ sincerity.

“I accept your apology, Sir Tullius, and I’d like to apologize to you, too,” Leon replied, surprising no one more than himself with how much he meant it, though Gaius came in a close second as his eyes turned back to Leon in abject shock. “Whatever you said to me didn’t matter then and it doesn’t matter now. My response should’ve been more measured and restrained. I regret humiliating you like I did. Just as you said you wouldn’t do the same thing if given another chance, I would say the same.”

“Thank you...” Gaius replied, unsure how to feel now. He’d come to find Leon with righteous fire in his heart, and now here they were apologizing to each other. It was a turn he hadn’t expected.

The two sat there at his table for a long, awkward moment, unsure how to respond. It took an almost embarrassing amount of time for Leon to find something else, *anything else*, to talk about to relieve the tension and move on.

“On a side note, Sir Tullius, mind telling me why your older brother isn’t here? I have to admit that finding you in charge of the Lentian retinue, someone so young and relatively magically weak compared to his immediate subordinates, was... *surprising*.”

“My brother already told you he was sending me to join his army,” Gaius reminded Leon, getting some life back into his voice again.

“That doesn’t explain why he didn’t want to come personally. I can’t imagine he was too cowardly to come and desert Duke Duronius’ camp himself, the impression I got of him back when we met was actually the exact opposite.”

“Sir Leon, if our magical power weren’t so different, I think I would’ve challenged you to a duel for those comments despite our previous conversation,” Gaius said, his mouth turning up into a thin smile. Both of them were staring at the other as if daring the other to make the first move, to attack the other and let them fight it out.

But Gaius knew he’d lose that fight. He’d never won when fighting Leon, and now that the difference in their power levels was so profound, he didn’t for a second believe that that would change.

“I wouldn’t blame you for that, though I’ll also say that I didn’t mean any offense and I apologize if you felt any,” Leon said, trying to put what the Thunderbird and Roland had been trying to tell him only a few minutes before into practice. He found it surprisingly nice, even as he realized that he’d probably need to get some coaching to say things more diplomatically. “I would, however, like an explanation.”

“My brother has other duties to perform at the moment,” Gaius said. “He was called to the capital to help Prince Octavius form part of the new government now that so many bureaucrats have been fired from the administration. My brother felt like it was best not to tip off Duke Duronius by showing up here instead. He’s not too far away, maybe a hundred miles or so—close enough to give strategic orders, though not close enough to take tactical command. He’ll show up to take personal command of the Lentian army soon, though. In fact, if we weren’t going to launch this attack tonight, he might’ve joined us before then.”

Leon nodded. It wasn’t a decision he would’ve made, but it was one he understood. “I’ve been told that delegation is the key to effective leadership,” he murmured. “I guess it’s a sure sign that you’re trusted back in Lentia if you’re able to take your brother’s place.”

“Hardly,” Gaius whispered. “I’m a Tullius, it was my duty to stand in for my brother, not a sign of trust or ability. As a matter of fact, I’m mostly a figurehead. It’s one of my brother’s top knights that’s actually making most of the decisions in the Lentian army.”

“A shame,” Leon replied with a wry smile. “Not going to lie, I was kind of hoping to see what you could do.”

“Really?” Gaius skeptically asked.

Leon nodded, he meant every word. He wasn’t particularly fond of Gaius by any means, but he knew the man and had figuratively crossed blades enough that he held a certain amount of respect for him.

“As I recall, you already got a taste of my abilities back in the east and thoroughly trounced me, despite being almost painfully outnumbered,” Gaius pointed out.

"But we never really fought," Leon pointed out. "I harassed you, you had other things on your mind than a set-piece battle."

Gaius' eyes strayed to the game of keeps nearby.

"Well, there *is* a way to have that, if you're willing."

Leon followed Gaius' pointed gaze. He found that he quite liked the idea. It sounded like a great way to get his mind off everything that had happened during the day, or at least to let him process a bit. Before agreeing, though, he spared only a second to send a pulse of magic senses to locate Valeria. He was trying to trust her, but he hadn't seen in her in a while and wanted to make sure that his trust was well-placed.

It seemed that it was, for he quickly located her training with Alix down in the underground camp.

He smiled and said, "I've never seriously played before, but I'm certainly willing."

"We have a few hours, why not?" Gaius said as he broke out the game and started setting things up. A predatory smile started spreading across his face as he started sorting the pieces. Leon had beaten him so many times in their time that Gaius was looking forward to beating him badly enough to salvage at least a little bit of his dignity.

Chapter 450: Breaking the Siege

Keeps was a fairly long game, especially when played as seriously as Leon and Gaius were playing. Hours passed as they slowly whittled each other's pieces down until, not long after the sun set and the sky grew dark, both had less than a dozen pieces remaining. Neither were anywhere close to taking the other's keep, so it seemed they were going to have to go for a complete kill—taking all of their opponent's pieces.

During the game, Leon occasionally contemplated checking in on Valeria. Every time, though, he refrained, choosing to continue trusting her. Each time he agonized over the choice more and more—it was so simple, he just had to project his magic senses and check in on her. But every time, he didn't.

If Gaius noticed Leon occasionally checking out of the game, he didn't say anything. In fact, neither of them said a word for the entirety of the game, simply making their moves in complete silence. This made it abundantly clear to Leon that when Gaius had said that he was nothing more than a figurehead for the Lentian forces, he wasn't being modest. Even with a large battle kicking off in only a few hours, not a single knight came in to interrupt their game until it was dark. In that respect, Leon could relate, for he no longer had a unit of his own and any practical authority he had was gone with it.

The knight that did interrupt them only did so to inform them that the armies were just about ready to get moving and that Roland needed both Gaius and Leon ready as well.

"So," Gaius said after the knight left, "how should we decide this?" It was the first thing he'd said to Leon since the game began, but Leon didn't mind.

On the board, Gaius had three more pieces than Leon, though Leon's pieces were stronger and more valuable overall. It was clear to both that they would probably need at least another hour or so to properly finish the game at the rate they'd been going.

“As much as it pains me to say this, how about we consider this one a draw?” Leon said, a look of bitter reluctance that slowly turned into something that seemed more congratulatory.

“I can live with that,” Gaius replied, a similar look passing over his classically handsome features. It wasn’t the win he wanted, but it was leagues better than the losses he’d sustained at Leon’s hands in the past. “I suppose I’ll see you on the battlefield, Sir Leon.”

“I suppose so,” Leon said as he stood up. “Don’t die out there, Sir Gaius. I had fun with this game, and I hope we have another chance to play. And actually finish.”

“As do I,” Gaius quietly responded.

—

That night, the combined army almost sixty thousand strong ventured out back into the forests. Their destination was the northern flank of the Octavian forces besieging August’s fortified camp. Roland had managed to get in contact with August and Marquis Aeneas to coordinate with them, though they had to keep their plans simple due to time constraints and communication difficulties.

It was decided that Leon and his few followers would fight alongside Roland during the battle. Without a unit of their own, Leon and his tiny retinue had nowhere else to be.

And so, Leon, mounted on Anzu, found himself riding at Roland’s side, with Marcus beside him in turn, and Alcander, Alix, and Valeria following not far behind with Roland’s knights.

“... can’t believe that you never told me you play keeps!” Marcus complained to Leon after the latter finished explaining to him where he’d been following the meeting with the rest of the higher-ups. “I love keeps! We should play sometime!”

“I could probably find some time for that,” Leon said noncommittally.

“I’m going to need a firmer answer, Sir Leon,” Marcus replied. “I’m being serious, here. Keeps is my game! I’ve already played so many people—”

“Perhaps we ought to quiet things down, Sir Aeneas,” Roland gently interrupted. “We’re closing on our enemies, it’s best if we kept our focus on the task at hand.”

“Of course, Sir Magnus,” Marcus responded, though he shot Leon a challenging look as he did so.

Leon turned his attention to the forest in front of him. Much like the rest of the Southern Territories, it was damp and heavily wooded, though less so than the areas he’d been fighting in for the past few days. It was at a higher elevation, keeping things drier, though not as dry as Leon would’ve liked.

Further out, Leon could see with his magic senses the beginnings of the Octavian lines. It was preceded by hundreds of feet of cleared land, in which had been constructed numerous defenses on top of what had already been there when Leon had led his unit to bait out an attack. Now, instead of only pits and trenches, there were spikes, low walls, and archer platforms. None of it was too impressive given how it had only been a few days, but it was more than enough to make Leon grateful they were attacking so swiftly, for it was evidence that their enemy was trying to protect their position from attacks like the one Leon and Roland were about to make. If they had more time, they would’ve undoubtedly constructed more formidable defenses.

As it was, what they had wasn't going to be enough. Leon was confident that they'd cut through them like a freshly sharpened blade through cheap paper—and that was assuming they wouldn't be able to walk right past them, capitalizing on the belief that Duronius hadn't had enough time to realize the defections of the contingents from Lentia and Vesontio.

It took a while, but everyone got into their positions before midnight.

"This is it," Roland muttered in the last few moments before their charge. "Today, we end the campaign for the Southern Territories. We crush Duronius and those who follow him, and all of the south will fall to Prince August."

Leon lightly frowned. He wasn't so confident that all of the south would be so willing to roll over even if they won this fight. They still had the fleets in the Gulf of Discord to worry about, not to mention the nobles closer to the Western Territories who might find more cause to resist than others further east even if Duronius lost.

Regardless, he was going to fight to win. He had more than enough anger to spare, and all it took was thinking about Lapis to bring it all back. Augmenting that were thoughts of Artorias and Trajan. Much of Leon's anger was directed toward himself and his tendency to stay out of the way and not engage with people, which he was at least somewhat aware had created many of the problems he was now dealing with, but a greater deal of that anger was aimed squarely at those who were responsible for his losses.

His hand practically shook with how much he wanted to drive his blade into Duronius, and to a greater extent, Octavius, Earthshaker, and any others who might stand between him and them. His eyes also strayed a bit further south, closer to the center of the Octavian camp where he knew Duronius' command area was located thanks to Gaius and the Duchess of Vesontio.

It was one thing to trust Valeria, but these people he had little sympathy for. The faster he could cut them down the faster all of this would be over, and the faster all of the people they'd forced to fight could go home. The faster he did so, the more of them would still be alive to see their home again. But Leon pushed thoughts of the levies out of his mind. He could easily see himself paralyzed into indecision if he started empathizing with them too much in this situation. He pushed those feelings down far enough where they wouldn't bother him for the foreseeable future and he could focus on the task at hand.

Rather than sounding off on horns to signal a charge, the Augustine line began advancing after using signal flags and runners. There'd be no horns to signal to the enemy that they were under attack. Instead, the attack would begin quietly, with as little warning as possible.

Like that, almost sixty thousand troops began marching out of the trees, the sigils of Lentia and Vesontio prominently displayed before them. The 2nd Legion, too, had their Bull Kingdom standards flapping in the breeze, though the near-midnight darkness dampened the combined effect.

Leon, Roland, and the rest of their group marched close to the center. They steadily advanced, crossing the first lines of trenches without difficulty.

As they closed to within a hundred feet of the first arrow towers, however, Leon began hearing somewhat panicked and confused shouting up and down the line as the Octavian guards tried to get the advancing Augustine forces to explain themselves, to stop and await further instructions, or to control

and organize their advance—their wide line was the biggest indicator that something was wrong and it was making the guards nervous.

But the knights leading the noble troops and the Tribunes leading the 2nd Legion's battalions either completely ignored these warnings and pressed on, or loudly and arrogantly dismissed these lower-ranked knights leading the guards.

They passed the archer towers without incident despite these tensions. Leon was a bit concerned at leaving them behind, but the line was thick enough that those guards would be easily dealt with by those in the rear, and from their exasperated grumblings that he could hear, they were angry at how they had been dismissed but weren't going to resort to violence. Leon and the rest of the Augustine army were still in the clear.

Like this, they continued to advance, and the more they bypassed the Octavian defenses, the less they were bothered, as the guards further in were less likely to raise a fuss after they'd passed the outer guards.

All of that changed a few minutes later, as the front of the Augustine line finally passed the last few towers, trenches, and anti-cavalry spikes. They had a straight shot into the camp. No walls barred their way, no enchantments protected the camp's occupants. Even the Octavian troops in the camp had started filing out of their tents to see what was going on, and barely any had their armor or weapons equipped.

The ruse had worked; the Octavian troops were sitting ducks.

Without warning, Leon, Roland, Valeria, and all those capable of elemental magic up and down the line let loose with a blistering salvo of deadly magic. The air was torn apart as just about every element fell upon the outer tents of the camp, ripping apart the unprepared and undefended Octavian warriors. Knights, men-at-arms, squires, levies, all were killed in the terrifying fusillade of magical power.

Behind them, the Legion archers that had been waiting in the wings let loose with a salvo of their own, targeting the archer platforms. Arrows fell upon the camp guards like rain, killing nearly all of them, and those who survived were swiftly dispatched by the rear contingents of the army.

"CHARGE!!!" Roland bellowed before the dust kicked up by their opening attack cleared.

Leon needed no further encouragement and neither did Anzu. The two erupted from the line like a white and black lightning bolt, plunging into the dark and eviscerated camp. Behind him, Valeria, Alix, Marcus, and Alcander did their best to keep up, while Roland and the rest made their own charge. The nature of the ground meant that Leon and Roland were separated almost immediately, but neither was too worried about that fact. They trusted each other not to die in this battle.

The opening salvo had been horrendously effective. Nothing greeted Leon and those behind him save for mangled corpses, craters, and the remains of elemental magic, whether that be sporadic fires, spikes of ice or earth, or deep gouges carved by blades of light or wind. But beyond, they could hear the panicked shouting of Octavian warriors, and even further they could hear the distant sounds of August and Marquis Aeneas almost simultaneously sallying out from their fortress and launching their assault on the northern flank.

Leon pushed through the dust, his magic senses projected out in front of him in search of Octavian warriors in his path. He found what he was looking for, and he directed Anzu in the right direction.

The duo burst out of the dark cloud directly in front of a group of stunned Octavian knights as well as one person well-dressed enough that Leon assumed she was noble. All were armed, but without armor their weapons did them no good as Leon let loose with a lightning bolt that exploded in the middle of their group, killing half of them and wounding the rest. Anzu cleaned up with a flap of his wings, ending the rest with a few well-placed wind blades. In the short few seconds it took Leon's followers to come barreling out of the dust, the dozen or so knights and their commander were dead.

He avoided looking at their remains as much as he could. For all he knew, they were good people much like Valeria, and that he ended them wasn't something he wanted to think about right now.

'Ah, fuck...' he thought to himself. 'I'm going to need a good long look at myself when this is all over. Dad raised me to not falter in the face of death, I can't throw all that away after only a few years!'

He directed a mildly irritated look Valeria's way as she followed him out of the dust, but he meant nothing serious by it.

"By the Ancestors, Sir Leon, would it kill you to save some for the rest of us?!" Alcander frustratedly asked.

"Probably not," Leon admitted, nothing in his demeanor giving away what was on his mind, "but it might kill you. These knights were all fourth or fifth-tier, and you're still at the third."

"No need to remind me..." Alcander murmured, shooting Valeria a jealous look.

He, Marcus, and Alix were all approaching the fourth-tier from what Leon could sense from their auras; in fact, they were all close enough that Leon wouldn't be surprised if they ascended before the battle was over. It still paled in comparison to Valeria's recent ascension, though.

From their south came the sound of horns and they could see numerous flares lighting up the night sky.

"Looks like we've lost the element of surprise," Marcus observed.

"Not necessarily," Leon replied. "Keep pushing, prevent them from organizing a defense for as long as possible!"

With that, Leon spurred Anzu further into the camp where he could sense Octavian warriors were hurriedly putting on armor and arming themselves. Valeria, Alix, Marcus, and Alcander swiftly followed, while all around them, their allies were wreaking havoc in the Octavian camp, tearing through their unprepared enemies and taking full advantage of whatever surprise remained in the wake of their attack.

—

Cold fury settled into the pit of Duronius' stomach as he cast his gaze toward the north. He could see his armies up there being overrun by the strength and ferocity of the surprise assault, and he could see the banners of those who were leading it.

'Vesontio... Lentia...' he thought to himself in anger.

He was in the open area outside of his tent, fully armed and armored and astride his mount, a bull at least half again as large as an average specimen of its species. Normally, using a bovine as a mount was highly illegal in the Bull Kingdom, but Duronius had trained one year before in secret to satisfy his vanity. It was only after Octavius took control of the government that he was extended a formal exemption to use the beast outside of his territory.

All around him the Legions that he had were gathering and preparing their counterattack, while Duronius' personal retinue of heavy cavalry mustered. Duronius himself was going to lead the charge, but it was taking much longer than he wanted for everyone to get ready. For an excruciatingly long time, all he was able to do was sit in his saddle and watch.

But that time spent observing gave him plenty of opportunities to see who was where, and where his charge ought to be focused. He saw three targets in particular.

The first was the Paladin Roland. His aura and skill with light magic were unmistakable.

The second was the Duchess of Vesontio, dressed in shining silver plate, golden lance in hand whose tip had been bloodied by at least a dozen Octavian knights.

The third was a warrior unknown to Duronius, but he could make a guess: Leon Ursus, dressed in black and wielding terrifying lightning magic. Additionally, Duronius' eye kept being drawn to the blade in Ursus' hand, though he was completely unable to understand why. It seemed familiar to him, but it was a simple thing, free of identifying adornment. Still, for some reason, Duronius' subconscious was screaming at him that he was missing something about the savage, but for the life of him, he couldn't make the connection.

After what felt like an eternity spent waiting, Duronius' reinforcements finally finished assembling. His squire fell in beside him on a magnificent black charger, while Duronius' highest-ranking knight appeared on the other side. Further to his right and left were the finest knights in all the land, covered in plate and mail, brilliant tabards proudly displaying their allegiance to House Duronius and the rightful monarch of the Kingdom—Duronius' grandson. Past his mounted knights were Duronius' vassal Lords, all leading their own cavalry units, though none were as spectacularly outfitted as Duronius'.

The Legions began their march through the camp to reinforce the nobles in the north and Duronius ordered his cavalry to advance, though the camp itself was going to prove difficult to charge through. As he rode, he managed to decide on who his first target would be: Leon Ursus.

The Duke was more than a little vexed that a barbarian had managed to affect so much in his short time in the Kingdom, and here was his chance to lay the savage low. On a more practical note, Ursus was also closer than the other two, and he had less magically powerful followers with him. That made him weak and vulnerable, even if he was personally powerful and fighting harder and more ferociously than Duronius had ever seen anyone fight.

But all that power and ferocity wouldn't matter under several dozen tons of horse and blade.

—

Sliding his blade out of the neck of an Octavian knight, Leon felt some small sense of satisfaction. The knight had been a sixth-tier mage, and though he'd fought admirably—as the scratches and dents in Leon's left gauntlet and pauldron could attest—he'd still fallen to Leon's superior skill with the blade.

Leon glanced around, making sure that his people were still all right. Valeria was still close by, as was Anzu, who Leon had dismounted during the fight; both were fine. Alix was tending to a deep cut in the gap between her breastplate and her hips and Alcander was doing likewise for what seemed to be a couple of broken ribs—he'd taken a mace to the chest earlier. Neither was seriously injured, especially since they had some of Leon's healing spells with them, but it would take a few moments to get back into fighting shape.

Marcus, meanwhile, was in no position to be injured, as he'd stayed back to fire his bow from horseback.

Leon's core group were all relatively fine, though they'd picked up some other squads of Augustine knights and men-at-arms as their forces pushed deeper into the warrens of the camp. These troops fared a little worse than his group did, but since he, Valeria, and Anzu usually tied down the strongest fighters they encountered, casualties remained light.

A quick sigh of satisfaction later, Leon projected his magic senses to assess the situation and see where they had to go next. Roland, Vesontio, and Gaius had all pushed quite deep, with Roland even pushing deep enough to meet August's troops on the other side of the northern flank. In fact, just about the entire northern Octavian flank had collapsed, with noble retinues being separated from each other, and many either surrendering or preparing for a last stand. August and Aeneas had likewise done their part to achieve this, and many of their nobles and Legions were already swinging south to—

Leon's attention suddenly snapped away as he realized what they were turning around to face: the inevitable Octavian counterattack. Tens of thousands of Legion soldiers were bearing down upon them, along with a massive force of cavalry that Leon noticed was barreling through the camp straight toward him.

Leon's group had pushed the furthest south, meaning they had little support on their flanks.

"Hold!" Leon shouted as everyone around him began readying their next push. "We have an incoming cavalry charge! Form up and brace!"

His power was felt by all, his aura weighing down upon their shoulders and forcing them to accept his authority; none of the knights or their subordinates who had followed his group argued, they simply obeyed, trusting in his word. He saw panic in many of their faces as they began noticing the rumbling earth, the dust cloud in the south, and the faint noise of hooves breaking through the distant sounds of battle, but with Leon and his ghostly white griffin with them, they swallowed their fear and quickly formed up into a rough line, broken up only by tents.

A mere few minutes later, the cavalry charge came into sight. It was a terrifying mass of armor shining in the moonlight, horses trampling tents beneath their hooves, and the glow of elemental magic as it was being prepared.

Leon wasted not a moment more and conjured a lightning bolt in his left hand, raised it high, and hurled it. Up and down his line, those few knights who could do likewise did so, including Valeria, who summoned small finger-sized icicles shaped like arrowheads and fired them into the charging horde.

This display of magic was answered in kind, and dozens died on both sides. Leon's side, however, fared a little better, for they were still and had braced themselves. The Octavian cavalry wasn't in such a good position, and as many in the front were killed, their corpses became obstacles that others behind them had to navigate.

But the cavalry charge as a whole continued unabated, and Leon finally got a good look at the man leading it. He was riding a massive fifth-tier bull decked out in some kind of plate made of light blue metal and trimmed with silver. The man himself was fully encased in enchanted steel, obscuring all features save for his powerful frame. He radiated sixth-tier strength, and he was on a collision course with Leon.

Leon smiled in eagerness. He was sure of this man's identity, and he was ready. He had time for one last lightning bolt, and he didn't hesitate. A moment later, the bolt exploded upon the bull's armor, causing it to shriek in pain.

But it kept advancing.

There was no time for anything else. The Octavian cavalry began their charge in earnest, seeking to use their greater numbers to completely overwhelm Leon's group. For most of the mages with Leon, there was no time to do anything except brace themselves as much as they could and use their weapons and spears to try and blunt the charge, but it was a different case for Leon himself. With lightning magic coursing through his body, he had just enough time to jump before the charge connected with his line, just barely enough time to leap over the horns of the bull before they came into contact with his armor.

Luckily, there wasn't anyone behind Leon to take that hit instead, but it still left Leon in the air. He literally had no ground to stand upon, and Duronius—or the man Leon assumed to be the Duke—swept upward with his lance, catching Leon in the midsection. His armor held, but Leon was hurled several dozen feet and had all the air in his lungs forcibly expelled.

He hit the ground like a ragdoll, the pain intense but not debilitating—he probably had a fractured rib or two, and his desperate gasp of air felt like it sent waves of fire through his chest as his lungs tried to inflate. In just a single move, he'd been more gravely injured than he'd been in more than a year.

Leon clenched his jaw and forced himself back to his feet just in time to dodge out of the way as the bull charged again. Both were now behind the relatively thin battle lines but checking on his people was a luxury Leon couldn't afford with the bull all over him.

The bull's horns grazed Leon, scratching his cuirass but failing to injure him. Leon responded with a blast of lightning directed through his blade, the Adamant metal greatly facilitating his magic. The bull's armor blackened from the heat of Leon's magic, but the glowing runes didn't dim, indicating the damage was superficial. But the bull was enraged, and it swung its head around trying to catch Leon with its horns.

Leon threw himself back, landing with enough poise to deflect a lance thrust from the bull's rider. With the same motion, Leon let loose with a gout of fire from his off-hand, enveloping the bull's head in flames.

Again, the runes on its armor flared, and the bull pushed through the fire none the worse for wear. It charged once more, but Leon dodged again, putting his back to the line and earning another scratch on his armor for his trouble.

Suddenly, a loud shriek pierced the air from behind Leon, and a white blur blasted past him. A powerful gust of wind hit the bull, knocking its rider from its saddle, while Anzu—for the white blur was, indeed, the griffin—slammed himself into the bull, his beak and claws ripping and tearing at the other beast.

The bull gave back as good as it was getting, but Leon could tell that Anzu wasn't in any way inferior despite Anzu's lack of armor, so he put his trust in his griffin and turned his attention to the rider, who was struggling to get back up after being so unceremoniously thrown off his war beast.

Honor as Leon understood it would dictate that he allow the man to get his feet back under him before continuing the fight. But Leon wasn't an honorable man, at least not by those standards, and he charged Duronius, his body flickering with arcs of lightning. Duronius just barely managed to right himself and deflect the killing strike with his lance, causing Leon's blade to glance off his helmet, leaving a deep gouge in the metal and the two fighting for leverage as they pushed against each other's weapon.

"Filthy savage! TRAITOR!!" Duronius shouted, but Leon wasn't going to give up the initiative so easily. He sent lightning through his legs to detonate at their feet, hurling both men back.

Leon remained upright, having properly prepared himself for the blast. Duronius, however, nearly lost his balance, and as he flailed about, Leon surged forward again, eager to exploit this moment of weakness.

Just before his blade bit into one of the few small gaps in Duronius' armor, however, a wall of stone erupted from the ground between them, protecting the Duke from harm. Leon simply peeled off to the side, swinging around the edge of the wall to get another crack at the Duke.

But then, the wall exploded outward, catching Leon off-guard, throwing him back and showering him in stony shrapnel.

"Not good enough, you up-jumped barbarian," Duronius said as he thrust again with his lance. "Let me show you just how worthless you are!"