

Storm King 461

Chapter 461: Diplomatic Mission III

"Ahh, Sir Leon Ursus," the hulking giant whispered from behind his desk. He was easily seven feet tall, and with a physique that Leon had only ever seen exceeded by Trajan. His skin was darker than most natives of the Bull Kingdom, but the way he spoke indicated he was far from foreign. His warm brown eyes glittered with intelligence, his face was square, strong, and handsome, his thick black hair was cropped even shorter than was the typical norm for the Bull Kingdom, and his lips were curled in the confident smile of a man completely in control of the situation.

And Leon couldn't blame him for that feeling of control, for there were seven other sixth-tier mages present. Even with his new seventh-tier power, Leon doubted he'd be able to take on all eight of these sixth-tier mages by himself. Anzu was stuck waiting on the main deck, and Maia was out in the bay behind several layers of thick enchanted hull.

"I've heard about you," the Consul of Discord, Sir Abronius said, his smile turning somewhat sarcastic and provocative. "The Thunder Knight, the *White Griffin*. I heard you were declared Lord of the Stone Giants by Prince August, that you killed ten thousand men and women with your own hand, that you were like a god of death in the forest reaping the souls of any foolish knight who wandered too far from his fellows..."

Leon did his best not to cringe, but his displeasure was still written all over his face.

"What's wrong, Sir Leon?" the Consul sarcastically asked. "You don't like these stories? Are they not accurate?"

"Not in the slightest," Leon replied through slightly clenched teeth. He took a moment to relax his jaw before continuing, "From what I understand, those on the losing side always make up stories about those who defeated them. Easier and less embarrassing to say that you lost because the other side had a death god rather than because of the failings of your own side."

"Well said," the Consul said, his smile turning genuine for just a moment before slipping back into provocative mockery. "But surely there must be a kernel of truth in there somewhere?"

"I won't deny that I've been rather successful on the campaign so far, but I'm far from what you've just depicted me as," Leon said.

Abronius chuckled.

"You'll have to forgive me, though," Leon continued, cutting off the Consul's chuckling quite effectively, "you've heard about me, but I confess I haven't heard much about you."

"Not surprising," Abronius replied, not taking any offense from Leon's statement. "The fleets don't see much use now, not since the Serpentine Isles were pacified fifty-some-odd years ago. The Samar Kingdom is no threat, so the fleets have had little to do except patrol the merchant lanes and watch for resurgent piracy."

Leon bitterly smiled. "I seem to recall the fleets getting in some work during Talfar's latest incursion, though not without some resistance on the part of the Legate leading Ariminium's fleet."

"Yes, Prince Trajan got in touch with me regarding that particular incident," the Consul said, his tone softening in empathy with Leon's obvious annoyance as the younger man recalled Trajan having to toss a Legate around like a ragdoll to get the Legate's fleet to move. "In fact, he felt it important enough to reach out with a comm stone rather than simply writing me a letter. I think he wanted to hear my explanation for my subordinate's behavior from me personally without having to come all the way down to the southern coast."

"This must've been after we returned to the capital?" Leon wondered aloud.

"It was, only a few months after Talfar was pushed back," the Consul explained. "You can rest assured that that Legate has since been 'convinced' to retire early. I was actually in the midst of promoting his successor when all this unpleasantness broke out and Sir Constantine seized Ariminium's fleet."

"That's good to hear," Leon said, taking some small delight in the arrogant fleet Legate's punishment.

"I would never allow such insubordination to happen from one of *my* people toward a Prince of such stature," the Consul said with a proud smile, his gaze momentarily flickering toward the other Legates in the room.

"But you *would* allow it against a Prince of lesser stature?" Leon inquired, his eyebrow raising in interest.

"Now, Sir Leon, do my ears deceive me, or is that the tone of a man finally getting to the point of his visit?" the Consul replied, his smile widening until it took on a more authentic look.

"Perhaps," Leon said, keeping his tone playful for just a moment longer before his demeanor turned completely serious. "I've been sent by Prince August to seek your support for his claim to the throne."

"Have you, now?" the Consul quietly breathed as he looked the young man over. He saw Leon's deep, dark brown hair, the unusual golden eyes, the strength in his body that his loose-fitting clothes and beautiful snow lion coat couldn't hide, and most of all, the power of his aura, which so dwarfed the Consul's own that Abronius couldn't truly perceive it, indicating a minimum of seventh-tier strength. "I don't deny your power, Sir Leon, and I quite respect you for achieving it so young... But I do have to wonder at the wisdom of Prince August sending someone so young on such an important task..."

"I would question it, too, and I did," Leon easily replied. "However, of all the knights in Prince August's service, I was the only one with a history with the Diplomatic Corps. It wasn't a long time I was with them, but I suppose that history made me seem like the best qualified to conduct such a task."

Leon could see the Consul lean back in his chair in what Leon hoped was an indication of being quietly impressed. He hoped this because Leon was, for the most part, making things up as he went along, he had no idea how this negotiation was supposed to work. For all his projected confidence, he truly wished August had sent someone more experienced in these matters like Aeneas or Gratian instead of him.

But Leon kept himself steady as best as he could. The past few months had given him some perspective and served to teach him many things, and while he was nervous now, he knew that he was doing so much better than he would've even half a year ago.

“Does Prince August have a specific offer in mind?” the Consul asked, one of his eyebrows rising to match Leon’s previous expression. “I can’t imagine His Highness would send someone all the way here just to ask for my support without anything *else*...”

Leon smiled again, knowing that the Consul wanted to see what August was offering before he made any decisions. He wasn’t going to blindly support August without seeing *some* benefits. Leon just hoped that there were some benefits included in August’s letter—he didn’t know for certain because the Prince had neglected to explain the letter’s contents to him; neither had Leon tried to open the sealed letter to investigate.

Leon reached into his soul realm and procured the letter. The Legates at the Consul’s side tensed for a moment as Leon channeled his magic and took a few steps forward, but he moved slowly and didn’t release any killing intent, so they kept their weapons stowed.

Abronius took the offered letter, examined the seal, and once he was satisfied as to its authenticity, tore it open and began to read. It was only a single page, so the Consul was finished quickly.

“Hmm. No promises made, no offers to try to persuade me, just a polite request...” Abronius’ demeanor had completely changed, his voice dripping in confusion, his brow furled in thought. “I have to admit that wasn’t the sort of letter I was expecting, Sir Ursus...”

“I can’t speak to that, I wasn’t told what was in it,” Leon replied.

“That’s... irresponsible,” Abronius observed. “You were sent here to negotiate with me, yet you weren’t given the terms of the negotiations?”

“It does seem strange when you think about it,” Leon replied, not too awfully bothered but still compelled to try and comprehend August’s thinking. “If... I had to guess as to his intentions, I’d say it’s not so much about the offer, I’m meant to be a threat.”

“You’re a seventh-tier mage,” Abronius replied, his confident smile returning to his face, “Prince August is betting that he doesn’t *need* to offer generous terms, only to spell out his position.”

“And it is a strong position,” Leon added. “Duke Duronius has been defeated and now flees this way with his tail between his legs. His armies have been shattered and scattered, and now, even Octavius’ greatest advantage, that of having two full Paladins on his side, has been neutralized. Prince August has two seventh-tier mages, control of the silver mines and mints of the Eastern Territories, and is now dominant in the Southern Territories. With his losses, Octavius is vulnerable in the Central Territories, and I doubt there are going to be any reinforcements from the west coming anytime soon. If I were in your position, I would seriously consider defection, because trying to fight against Prince August at this stage might not be the best course of action.”

“Indeed, Prince August is winning from where I sit,” Abronius agreed, though Leon was guessing that the Consul wasn’t letting on just how much he believed that—he’d seen the larger man twitch when Leon mentioned August’s control of the Kingdom’s silver mines. “I take it you haven’t gotten any word from the Northern Territories recently?”

“None that I’ve heard,” Leon admitted, letting his suspicions stew in the back of his mind for a moment.

"Octavius has been losing badly up there, too," Abronius explained. "At first, his forces were under the command of Marquis Grandison, but Dame Minerva and the Brimstone Paladin kicked him around the Great Plateau like a line-ball. Grandison was killed in the fighting, and Octavius' forces there haven't managed to recover. As far as I'm aware, Sir Clovis is now fighting on your side, making the situation in the north as untenable for Prince Octavius as it is in the south."

Leon cocked his eyebrow. "I hadn't heard about any of them, but I'm glad that the Consul of the North has seen fit to finally take a side. That should, not including you, only leave the Consul of the Ocean and Western Consul in Octavius' camp?"

Abronius hummed in agreement. "Those two have been politically marginalized with Octavius' latest... *reforms*." The Consul practically spat the word, making it clear to Leon what he thought about Octavius' ideas of reform. "I suppose that makes it my turn to choose a side, now, doesn't it?"

"Before you make a decision, there's something I'd like to ask you," Leon said.

"Go ahead," Abronius said, a look of intrigue spreading across his face.

"How's Prince Octavius' financial situation?"

Abronius almost did a double-take. Of all the questions Leon could've asked, that wasn't one he was expecting.

"I only ask because you seemed to look a little frustrated when I mentioned that Prince August has control of the Kingdom's silver production. Is something wrong in the capital?"

"What *isn't* wrong in the capital?" Abronius muttered in disgust. "I think I know what you're implying, Sir Leon, and you wouldn't be wrong. Prince Octavius hasn't the funds to pay the armies and the fleets anymore without eastern silver. He has control of most of the Kingdom's food production in the west, but clearly, that hasn't done him much good..."

"Not yet," Leon replied a little more smugly than he intended. "To be honest, supply problems have been present in Prince August's camp, which is why we've been relatively aggressive so far, not trying to fortify ourselves in the east despite being outnumbered. If we'd waited a few more months, we'd probably be starving if we reached this point. As it is, our supplies probably wouldn't last long enough to return our army to Ironford."

"Is that really something that you want to admit to me?" the Consul asked.

"Is the fact that you haven't been paid in how long something you wanted to admit to *me*?" Leon shot back. "A little honesty is good for us, I think. We deserve to know what we're getting into. How about this, you support August and furnish his people with the food that you've gotten from Prince Octavius—I'm sure he's given you plenty to spare?"

With Abronius' quick, hesitant nod, Leon continued.

"In exchange, Prince August will be able to pay your sailors and marines their due. Maybe even with a little bonus to make up for making them wait so long for their pay. The mints haven't shut down just because we're in a civil war, so I'm willing to bet there's a substantial stockpile just waiting to be paid out to those who... prove *loyal to the cause*."

"Sir Leon, be careful, you're almost sounding *reasonable*," Abronius said in mock warning and a bit of genuine amazement. "You won't make it far as a politician if you continue on like this..."

"Who says I want to be a politician?" Leon laughed as the idea of being an active figure in Bull Kingdom politics flitted through his head. He wasn't politically weak, of course, but he'd never be a proper courtier or bureaucrat in the Kingdom; he hadn't the temperament for it, of that he was certain. "So, Sir Abronius, what do you say? Will you support Prince August?"

Abronius made a show of thinking hard and staying silent as he stared at Leon, trying to keep his expression stoic and unreadable. But allying with August was his best choice, both he and Leon were well aware of that. His armada was essentially unassailable out in the Gulf, but August controlled the land and didn't *need* to assault his fleets. The only problem they might pose was if some of the ships made their way up the Naga River to reinforce the capital, but Leon doubted that would happen from what Abronius had told him.

And besides, if Abronius *did* decide to aid Octavius, his fleets would be much more vulnerable meandering through the southern wetlands than they would be out in the Gulf. Leon almost wanted Abronius to declare for Octavius just so he could see Maia tear some of these ships to bits.

"Let's say I agree, what do you think I ought to say to Duke Duronius' army when it arrives?" Abronius asked.

"Maybe make a show with your Flame Lances, make it clear that they won't be receiving any aid from your fleets," Leon said. "Prince August will extend an offer of surrender to them. If they're smart, they'll take it."

"Duronius is a proud man, he might choose death instead of surrender..."

"How many of his subordinates will do the same?" Leon countered. "Especially since he's lost just about everyone but the Legions. Hopefully, once they see that those who defected to Prince August were welcomed into his forces, they won't feel the need to fight to the death."

"*Hopefully*," Abronius said.

"If they fight, we'll beat them again," Leon said with a shrug. "We've beaten them at almost every turn despite having a terrible numerical disadvantage. How do you think another battle would go now that we outnumber them more than four to one?"

"Badly for them."

"Exactly. We're not foreign invaders, we're their countrymen, they'll surrender."

"You're mighty confident about that."

"Do you think I have cause not to be?"

Abronius couldn't help but chuckle, which soon turned into full-bellied laughing, taking Leon completely by surprise.

It took a moment for the Consul to settle down, and when he did, Leon asked in mild shock, "What was that about? Know something I don't?"

"Ahhh. Maybe I do. Maybe I know for a fact that Duronius won't surrender."

"What makes you so confident in saying that?"

"Because he didn't just roll over for me when I took him prisoner," Abronius said.

Leon blinked as he froze, his brain freezing as it processed what the Consul just said.

"You... took the Duke prisoner?" he asked. He knew that the Duke's army was still hours away, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made that the Duke would ride ahead.

"Indeed I did," the Consul proudly replied. "I suppose that means I threw in my lot with Prince August before you even arrived, Sir Leon. The old Spymaster got into contact with me before you even arrived, I was just waiting to find out what you would offer me. You can take to His Highness my acceptance, and my *expectation* that my sailors and marines will be paid what they're owed."

Leon laughed, both at himself and at the situation for how the Consul played this.

"I'll do just that..." he said as he regained his composure. "You won't regret this, Sir Abronius. I'll make sure of that."

"I may be a fool for doing so, but I trust your word, Sir Leon," the Consul said as the two men locked eyes. Mutual respect could be seen in both of their gazes. "I'll see you again."

"I look forward to it," Leon replied, giving the Consul a genuine smile.

With that, Abronius had one of his adjutants see Leon back to Anzu, and the young knight didn't stick around. He only took enough time to circle Abronius' flagship once before he was off. After all, the capture of Duke Duronius was a huge move, and he had to report back as soon as he could.

Chapter 462: August's Support

August couldn't help but feel energized as he rode into the rocky natural harbor in which the Consul of Discord's armada had been stationed. Laid out in front of him was the armada, well over a thousand ships strong. To his right and left, Duronius' Legions, which had surrendered once they realized they'd been caught between his army and the fleets. Behind him were his followers, numbering somewhere around a quarter million. Legions and noble retinues all together.

The south was his. It wasn't firmly in his grasp, but he'd been getting letters and other messages for days from nobles and Exarchs since his victory over Duronius pledging their support for his campaign.

Most of it was blatant bandwagon hopping, but he found it difficult to blame these people. Octavius held the capital and August had been declared a traitor and a kinslayer. The trial had been a sham, but many lower nobles and the Exarchs hadn't been present, so they'd only had the official word to go on. Now that it seemed like August was winning, however, it suddenly didn't matter too much what Octavius had declared him to be.

Riding just behind August were his champions, the strongest mages of his force who were supporting him: Roland and Leon. The two made for a spectacular sight, with Roland in full armor while Leon rode his griffin in resplendent formal attire, the former's aura strong and robust, the latter's towering over everyone else's.

A welcoming party met August at the small stone docks that had been hastily built at the harbor at which the flagship had docked. It was a true leviathan of a ship, too large to sail on most rivers save for those which were slow and deep, such as the Tyrrhenian or the Naga, but it boasted two Flame Lances, emplacements for enchanted trebuchets, ten ballistae to a side, and a deadly ram on the front. It was a floating fortress made of enchanted Heartwood with a crew of thousands.

And its captain had pledged it and all the rest of the ships to his cause. August had been surprised and elated when Leon returned with his news, but the reality of the situation hadn't struck him until his arrival, until he could see with his own eyes the scale of the force that had joined him.

He was both overjoyed and depressingly subdued about it. On the one hand, the southern armada was the final key he needed to fully assert his control over the Southern Territories, and with its transport ships, getting his army north to the capital would be child's play. On the other hand, it was at least a hundred thousand more people who could die in his war, probably more, and that responsibility settled itself over August's shoulders like a heavily weighted coat, crushing him so that he could barely express his joy at this turn of events.

He dismounted his horse and made only light conversation with the knights that had come out to welcome him and escort his command staff to the capital ship. He wasn't in the mood to speak right now, and as they continued on, his mind was more and more occupied with what he was going to say to everyone, for there was much he needed to say. The past few months had been eye-opening, to say the least, and he needed to express his revelations to his followers.

And so it was that August and several hundred of his followers and bodyguards were escorted over the dock and up the ramps to the flagship. There he was greeted by the sight of a good portion of the ship's crew standing on the deck in full dress uniforms and in inspection formation. At the front were a dozen individuals, all of sixth-tier strength and dressed in the telltale uniforms of Legates. In front of them was a lone man, dark of skin and large of build, handsome and powerful and dressed in the crisp, perfectly tailored uniform of a Consul.

"Welcome aboard the BKS King Anastasius, Your Highness!" the Consul cheerfully exclaimed, his expression one of joy and delight—it seemed real enough, but August was a little unsure. Regardless, he responded in kind, smiling and offering compliments on the state of the armada and its crew, all of the near-meaningless platitudes that were expected under such circumstances.

They stood there for several long minutes making their introductions, with all the Legates coming forward to greet the Legates and nobles in August's entourage. Leon and Roland, however, stayed at August's side, not straying far.

Finally, once the long introductions and traditional small talk were over, the Consul led August's group inside to the ship's largest formal meeting hall—which really wasn't that big in the grand scheme of things, but on a ship, was almost extravagantly large. There were only a handful of seats in the room, with August taking one, the Consul taking the other, and almost everyone else remaining on their feet, standing behind their respective commanders. The only exceptions were four of the Consul's Legates, the Duchess of Vesontio, Duke Gratian of Lentia, Marquis Aeneas, Roland, and Leon, though August noticed with some amusement that Leon only took a seat once the silver-haired knight at his side poked

him a few times and whispered something into his ear. August saw the ghost of a scowl cross Leon's face, but the young magical prodigy took his seat.

"Now..." the Consul began, taking the initiative to speak before anyone else, "let's get something over and done with right away. Bring in the prisoner!"

From another door entered a second group of Legates, though they numbered only six. Between them in chains that glowed with bright white light enchantments came an older man, gray of hair but still clearly strong of body. His noble attire was a little wrinkled and dirty, but other than that, he seemed in perfect health, with not even a hair out of place.

Duke Duronius, August recognized, and he'd been well-taken care of by the looks of him, even if he didn't seem to have been given a change of clothes. August noted that the man was glaring at him as if he wanted nothing more than to wrap his chains around the Prince's neck and squeeze August's head off. He'd never be able to do so, however, for the six Legates escorting him had firm grips on his chains, and he couldn't even speak for his mouth had been roughly gagged.

"Our 'guest', Duke Duronius," the Consul of Discord proudly stated, his eyes locked on August. "As a symbol of my dedication to your cause Your Highness, I present to you this traitor, and await your judgment regarding what to do with him next."

August stared at the Duke for a long moment, his deep brown eyes never wavering even for a moment, not even as the Duke hatefully stared back with as much venom as he could muster in his state.

Finally, August simply and almost emotionlessly said, "Send him back to the brig. Any cell will do, so long as it can hold a man of his power."

"As Your Highness wills it," the Consul said. He subtly jerked his head and the Legates half-dragged half-walked the Duke back out of the room.

August glanced around the room, gauging the reaction to his order. He noticed some confusion and even disappointment here and there, and he could guess why: many were hoping to see him order the Duke's execution right then and there. But that wasn't what August wanted. Punishments and executions could come later; for now, all he wanted was peace, and the Duke was more valuable for achieving that aim alive than he was dead.

Before he began to speak, August also noted that the Consul was not one of those who seemed disturbed or otherwise surprised at his order. In fact, the Consul seemed to be completely unfazed by everything, smiling around at the room and waiting for August to speak with the patience of a man with nothing to fear.

August lightly sighed, steeling himself for what he was about to say. For what he needed to say, for he could not continue without making himself abundantly clear.

"Sir Abronius, I thank you for your hospitality and your offer of support," he began, deciding it might be wise to praise the Consul a bit to get on his and his people's good side. "Ancestors know that the entire Kingdom needs loyal and brave men and women like yourselves to stand up for it when cravens and traitors have hold over our sacred capital, the place where my Ancestor, the Sacred Bull, first Ascended to human form."

August paused to allow the Consul to respond, which he did in his deep, almost reverberating voice, “And we are honored for your presence and your trust, Your Highness. Each one of us not only considers it our duty to rid the capital of these vipers which seek to strangle us all, but we consider it an honor beyond all others to fight at your side and see your mission through.”

August gratefully nodded, making brief eye contact with all the fleet Legates and Tribunes who filled the Consul’s half of the meeting room.

“The honor is mine, to have so many brave and dutiful men and women believe in me,” he said, letting his voice ramp up a bit to now address everyone in the room rather than simply the Consul. Rising to his feet so that he could more emphatically make his points, he continued, “And my mission is one that requires such bravery to accomplish! For over the course of this war, I have realized the truth, the true nature of the task which my Ancestors have set before me! To see the Kingdom that has been built upon all of our labors brought to glory! The glory of freedom from the tyranny and oppression that my treasonous half-brother would see us all labor beneath!

“My half-brother would see all of us who are not of noble blood thrown out of their positions! He would overturn half a millennium of reforms enacted by my Royal Father, his father before him, and his before his! He would return us to a time when commoners were commoners, when peasants were peasants, when nobles were nobles, and when merchants were merchants, forever! If my half-brother wins this war, we would all be slaves to our class, noble and common alike! And all to serve his vanity! Nobles would be trapped in a cage of gold, where all the rest would be caged in iron and dirt, never free to pursue their passions and fit only to serve at the pleasure of my half-brother and those who sycophantically follow him!”

August paused to look around the room, gauging the response. For the most part, there wasn’t much, with everyone seeming to take time to digest his words and respectfully maintain their silence.

And an oppressive silence it was. August was a little downtrodden by this subdued response—he’d been hoping for something a little more exciting since most of the knights in the room were common-born.

As August turned, making eye contact with everyone he could, his eyes eventually landed upon Leon and Roland, the two strongest warriors in his camp—though it was arguable in Roland’s case. Roland smiled and nodded, his support never in question. Leon, on the other hand, had the more powerful response—especially since, due to his background, August was far more eager to have his approval—though it was far more subtle. His face remained stoic, his posture stiff and formal, his aura and demeanor calm, but as his golden eyes locked with August’s, a smile briefly appeared on his lips, giving August the swiftest of glimpses into Leon’s approval.

August took a deep breath to steady himself for the inflammatory declaration he was about to make and gave Leon a subtle and grateful nod.

“Friends, countrymen,” he whispered, breaking the oppressive silence in the room, “we are held back by notions of nobility. Notions of birth and inherited authority stymie our growth and weaken our Kingdom. It is time to set these things aside not just for the benefit of the Royal Family, as was my forebearers’ intent, at least in part, but for the benefit of all our people!

“When I went to Ariminium to aid my Uncle and relieve the Talfar siege, my uncle, Prince Trajan...” August halted for just a moment, and he was a little more gratified to see far more eyes turned in his direction with the mention of Trajan’s name. Even now, months after his death, his name still carried a great deal of weight with the Legion and nobility. “... promised to support me over my half-brother, but he only did so under the condition that I continue my family’s work in liberating us from the archaic notions of class that stifle our people and diminish their talents! I agreed, but it wasn’t until I saw the scale of death that our people have to endure in this war that I truly recognized its importance and necessity!

“All of us deserve the freedom to choose what to do with our own lives! We all deserve to thrive under our own powers, and to rise to greatness without being blocked by the jealousy of those who resent our skills and talents! And I would not have the support of anyone who does not share these ideals! I would not accept the support of any noble who would stand against the march of progress and resist the changes that are necessary to ensure the greatness of our Kingdom! If you support me, then you support my vision of the future, and you will work to see it come to be!

“Now, then, Sir Abronius,” August said, now facing the utterly baffled Consul instead of slowly circling in place so that he could make eye contact with everyone, “will you support me? Will you dedicate your efforts to see the chains that shackle us to mediocrity broken?”

August waited, demanding an answer from the Consul. There wasn’t much choice that he could make, though, since Duke Duronius was now languishing in a prison cell.

But August saw conviction in the Consul’s eyes, he saw the passionate fire of a man who believed.

“I will support you, Prince August,” the Consul growled, his baritone voice smooth and calm, betraying none of the thoughts or emotions that August felt were there.

Turning now to the next highest-ranking person present, the Duchess of Vesontio, August asked, “And you, Your Grace? Will you support me?”

This was the much harder question, August knew. The Duchess, if she agreed, would essentially be handing over her ancestral lands to the Crown if August were to win, something which no noble in their right mind would ever agree to. It may not happen immediately, but her noble rights and privileges would be forfeit.

August knew that the question would likely have been much easier if he’d chosen others to answer before her, to build up some momentum before giving her a chance to shoot him down. But he didn’t do that, he wanted to hear from her, first.

The Duchess fixed her cold gaze upon the Prince, but August showed none of his anxiety, he simply stood before her, wordlessly prompting her to answer.

“... You say freedom, Your Highness,” she said, her voice soft but still carrying to every ear in the room, “but what would that mean for me? If I were to agree, what would that make me? What would that make any future children I might have?”

“That would depend on you, Your Grace,” the Prince replied with a smile. “However, you can rest assured that your private property would remain untouched, even if political power must be returned to the Crown.”

And there it was. If there was to be any nail in August’s coffin, that statement would be it. He unambiguously stated that she would have to forfeit her title and political authority to him. She controlled her emotions well, giving nothing away, but August could hear disbelieving and discontented voices murmuring elsewhere in the room over his asking of such a thing.

“Your Grace, what is your answer?” August asked.

August felt like the Duchess’ stare was going to bore holes into him. She didn’t look around at the others, she didn’t try to pander to them, she simply sat there, thinking over the possibilities.

Finally, after an excruciatingly long period of time, she said, “I agree.”

The room fell silent, the quiet mutterings silenced by her unexpected agreement. But August gave her a glowing smile, then moved on, turning to Duke Gratian.

“Your Grace. Will you support me?”

Gratian’s control over himself wasn’t as great as the Duchess’s was. He stared, his mouth open just a bit to showcase his shock in August’s speech, his question, and in Vesontio’s answer.

But standing behind him, his younger brother Gaius stared at the Prince in something more akin to awe and wonder. As the youngest member of his House, Gaius knew that the most he could hope for was to remain a knight in his older brother’s service, maybe being granted a small castle or villa to live in and administer some of his brother’s land from. If what August was saying was true, then he could be whoever he wanted without the threat of his family disowning him or retaliating against him. If he wanted to follow in the Third Prince Antonius’ footsteps and become a scholar, he could do so without fear of political judgments. He wouldn’t even need to swear himself to any other Lord or to the King as the Legion knights did.

As if feeling his brother’s excitement, Gratian lightly scowled. He was a rich man, though Lentia wasn’t that rich of a Duchy. He’d be quite well-off even if he lost his title and some of his land. The more time he took to think, the more August could see his expression starting to turn.

“I will support you, Your Highness,” Gratian whispered, to the collective shock of everyone listening.

But August again smiled and moved on, giving no one any more time to recover. But from there, things went much easier. The rest of the nobles didn’t feel comfortable refusing when even the most powerful of their number were agreeing, and none of the Legion knights were particularly disposed toward disagreement, anyway. The support for August was nearly unanimous, save for a few of the lesser nobles who slipped away before August could call upon them—not that he cared too much, they had less than ten thousand troops between them, not enough to affect the war in any meaningful way at this point.

When August reached Roland, his friend almost leaped to his feet in expressing his support for the Prince. Leon, on the other hand, remained seated. August was hoping for a bit more from the young seventh-tier mage, but all he got was a quiet, “Your Highness has my support.”

August contemplated dangling the option of becoming a Paladin in front of him, but he resisted that urge, for he doubted Leon would take it up if he turned down even the Archduchy of the Great Plateau, and he could do without the embarrassment of Leon turning him down in front of everyone, as August was sure would happen.

But he was going to take what he could get. He had the support he needed, and pride bloomed in his chest with every person who continued to agree. By the time it was all over, he felt like he was floating.

“Thank you, everyone!” he shouted, his voice quavering with the emotion of a man who was just proven right, despite his worst fears. “When we retake the capital and throw my traitor half-brother to the curb, we will usher in a new era in this Kingdom!”

—

“What are you doing?!” Octavius demanded, hissing through his teeth in rage. He stood outside the Royal Palace, now nearly deserted save for a handful of Royal guardsmen. It was long past sundown, though given how few people still worked within, the time of day hardly mattered for there was so little foot traffic.

The subject of his furious question was his maternal uncle, the Earthshaker Paladin, Petrus Duronius.

The Paladin was just as furious as Octavius, and his aura and killing intent both radiated from him like light from the sun.

“I’m going to rescue my father and slaughter that Royal bastard like the swine that he is! And anyone else who gets in my way!” he shouted.

“You will do no such things!” Octavius roared in response, his eyes wild and his clothes disheveled. “You will stay here as you have been ordered! If you leave, I will declare you a traitor!”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Earthshaker responded, “because you have so little left, if you stand in my way, you’ll die! I will not stand idly by as your cause is destroyed out from beneath you anymore! But I will return, dear Nephew, and when I do, I shall have my father! And once we are back, we can fix this sinking ship you call a ‘Kingdom’!”

Earthshaker waited no more for Octavius’ rantings, moving on the stables to fetch his horse. With his magic senses, he could see the Sapphire Paladin standing by a few buildings away, but she wasn’t moving against him despite how much Octavius was screaming for her. He could see the embarrassment on her face as Octavius screamed himself hoarse right there in front of the Royal Palace for all the guards and what few people still remained within to see. She was the only one he was worried about, for if she stood in his way, then he might’ve been stopped.

As it was, Earthshaker was so preoccupied with the news that his father had been taken prisoner that he couldn’t even muster any lecherous thoughts about the beautiful blond Paladin, as would’ve otherwise been his wont.

Instead, he came peeling out of the stables without a single squire to act as his entourage. To wait for them would’ve cost him time, and he had others along the way he could recruit. No, his pride and honor demanded that he leave with all haste as soon as he could.

His eyes turned dark as he rode across the bridge connecting the capitol island to the rest of the capital city. He would do exactly what he just declared he would: he would rescue his father, murder August, and destroy anything in his way.

The possibility that he might fail in this task was not one that ever entered his mind, for he was a seventh-tier Paladin and the only seventh-tier mage that August had was hundreds of miles north. Getting his father back would be easy, Earthshaker just had to get there before anything could happen to him in captivity.

Chapter 463: The Last Push

Leon breathed in the cool, salty air of the Gulf coast. He was as happy as he'd been in a long while. He had Maia back, he and Valeria had made some measure of peace, and now, *finally*, it seemed like the civil war drawing to a close. August, once he had gotten the formal oaths of support from those who had verbally agreed to his declaration a week ago, had ordered his army to begin their march on the capital. That army was a little smaller since many of the lesser Lords deserted, but their forces accounted for less than fifteen thousand total knights, men-at-arms, and levies. August still had eight Legions with him, counting those who had defected to his side from Duronius' army.

August didn't mind these defections too much as far as anyone knew—there'd be time enough to deal with those nobles later. For now, he had to secure the Kingdom as a whole and couldn't get bogged down dealing with minor Lords.

There still weren't enough ships to transport everyone, though, even as large as the Gulf of Discord armada was. Constantine sent a letter from the Bull's Horns suggesting that he deploy the fleet he'd taken over to aid in this endeavor, but August refused, with the reasoning that Ariminium mustn't be left undefended at this most crucial of stages.

As a result, all of the Legions were packed aboard transports and sent off while the noble armies would follow along the coast, then up the river as closely as they could.

Leon was aboard the leading fleet's flagship, the Bull King's Ship Julius Quartus Taurus, a massive beast almost as large as the Consul's vessel. Its magic engine propelled them onward, the complex enchantments inscribed upon it soundlessly using the very water beneath the hull to push them through the waves.

The six merchant cities on the southern coast had already sent messages of submission to August, as had most of the nobles and Exarchs ruling the territory along the Naga and all its branches. That gave the fleets more than enough entry points into the river networks of the Southern Territories and beyond.

Leon could feel it in the air—the anticipation, the excitement. The civil war had only been raging for a few months, less than half a year, but the sailors and soldiers around him were ready for it to be over. More than a hundred thousand of their countrymen had already been killed in the fighting, and that number was only a conservative estimate. Leon was, himself, just as ready to bring an end to this thing, to bring justice to those who had murdered Trajan. All he had to do now was wait, wait as the ships bore him and the army he accompanied north, all the way to the capital.

His lips curled upward in a deadly smile. Yes, he was quite looking forward to ending all of this.

—

“Sir Leon, you’ll be given command,” August said as he and the entire command staff—comprising several dozen Legates and just as many high Lords—poured over a map in the center of their meeting room. “Think you can handle it?”

August’s tone was provocative. *Challenging.*

Leon smiled. “No question about it,” he replied with an ease he hadn’t ever had. “One of my knights, Dame Valeria, grew up in Calabria. Her father was the Exarch of the city for years. I don’t doubt for a second that we’ll be able to find a way in.”

“Excellent,” August replied. “The rest of us will take the larger ships up this other route further to the west. That’s going to be the only way we’ll get the dreadnoughts and their Flame Lances up to the capital. All the rest of the waterways are too shallow to bear their mass.”

“Your Highness, I still think it folly to send Sir Ursus up to Calabria, a *walled* city, without Flame Lances,” the Consul of Discord interjected. “We don’t need to split our forces so. We can simply sail the entire armada up this deeper channel and seize Calabria on the way.”

“That’s an option,” Marquis Aeneas conceded, though his tone made it clear he wasn’t agreeing. “However, time is of the essence. Octavius won’t take the loss of the southern fleets lying down. I imagine he’ll be sending the Consul of the Endless Ocean and his larger fleets to deal with us. We *need* to make our way up the Naga and bring an end to this war *now* before we get bogged down in a pointless naval engagement that will only serve to further weaken the Kingdom. Sending Sir Ursus up to seize Calabria now is our best option to break past it quickly before Octavius can send whatever reserve forces he still has to reinforce the city and block our passage. If we get sandwiched between river defenses in the north and the Consul of the Ocean in the south, we’ll be screwed.”

“I agree,” added Roland. “Dame Minerva, Sir Clovis, and the Brimstone Paladin have secured the Northern Territories and are beginning their march south from Teira. Whatever armies that Octavius has in reserve will be needed to block them, but I doubt they’ll be enough, not if he keeps both of his Paladins in the capital as he’s been doing. Octavius has been put on the back foot after our victories, but that doesn’t mean he’s lost. If we let our position go to our heads, we could find ourselves suffering a few defeats and losing all the gains we’ve made so far.”

Abronius shrugged. “I’m not saying we should wait, just that we don’t need to split our fleets.”

“I can do this,” Leon confidently responded, his voice strong and even. Confident and sure of himself. “Give me a fleet and a Legion and I’ll take Calabria before you even reach it. It will present no obstacle to our advance.”

—

“Please tell me I wasn’t talking out my ass back there,” Leon practically begged Valeria. The two were joined by only Alix as they were sitting in the cabins of the leading flagship that had been allocated to Leon. Both of the two knightesses had been present in the strategy meeting, so they knew what he was talking about. Maia, meanwhile, was out swimming. Apparently, riding a boat was a mildly uncomfortable experience for a river nymph, so she rarely came back aboard if the sun was still up.

"You weren't," Valeria replied, an amused smirk gracing her face as she softly chuckled. "I can get us into Calabria with minimal casualties if we have to storm the city. Should be pretty easy, actually."

"Like, how easy?" Alix asked. "Like eating ten sausages in one sitting easy or getting Anzu to like you easy?"

Valeria couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the strange comparison, the sign of a small crack opening in her stoic expression. "... um... the sausages...? I think? It'll be a walk in the park, that's my point."

"... All right," Leon replied, giving Alix a confused, searching look, all while she tried desperately to hold back her laughter.

"... what...?" she asked as evenly as she could. "You two... have been acting so oddly recently... Everything good?"

Valeria unconsciously rubbed her shoulder—the one that Anzu had savaged during Leon's confrontation—but said, "Everything's fine."

"We had some disagreements, but we've found some common ground," Leon explained in a little more detail, but when Alix leaned in with an expectant smile, he only said, "It's a private matter. Sorry."

"'Private matter', hmm?" Alix said with a mischievous look in her eye. "You two are fucking, aren't you? Don't think I can't smell the sex wafting out of your quarters!"

"What?!" Leon shouted in response, his neck popping as he did a double-take. "We're not... no, our rela—we're not having sex!"

Leon's tone was panicked and insistent, and he briefly glanced at Valeria to back him up. However, the young silver-haired woman looked mortified beyond speech. Her pale cheeks had turned scarlet and she seemed to be looking everywhere except Leon or Alix.

"Then who is it I hear moaning in the night in the throes of pleasure?" Alix challenged, her trolling smile growing wider. "It's not even a question in my mind, you two have been doing the dirty every night." Alix then turned her attention to Valeria exclusively rather than both her and Leon and said in a conspiratorial tone, "I'm actually kind of jealous, I haven't been able to find a guy I like enough to let him take care of me in that way anywhere on this ship. Tell me, is Leon good? I mean, I'm fairly certain he is, judging by what Lady Elise has told me, but she won't give me details!"

"All right, all right, all right, stop," Leon loudly demanded. "Alix, I think you're taking this a little too far. Honestly, if you were serving any other knight, you'd probably be seeing some punishment for comments like those."

"Hmm?" she said, glancing back at him. His sharp gaze seemed to break through her playfulness, and when she looked back at Valeria, she could see the embarrassment and discomfort on Valeria's face. "Oh... yeah, I think I might've... I'm sorry Val, I was just messing with you..."

"It's... fine," Valeria whispered as she did her best to regain her composure. "I'm fine. It's fine. All fine."

"Sorry about that, I took that too far," Alix repeated as she slid closer to Valeria. "I know you haven't been sleeping with Leon, it's Naiad I've been hearing." Alix then suddenly snapped back up, her gaze

turning back to Leon. “Where is our resident river nymph, by the way? I don’t think I’ve seen her in days.”

“She’s following the ship,” Leon said, only too happy to get away from Alix’s teasing.

“Oh. That makes sense. Will she be with us during the assault on Calabria? Assuming there *is* an assault, I mean?”

“She should be.”

“Good, then victory is as good as ours, especially with Val on our side!”

—

“They’ve made it far...” Earthshaker said from the riverbank, hidden in the marshy forest. His attention was turned in the direction of the fleet sailing its way past through the city at the mouth of the river, and he could see why the fleet was moving so fast: it wasn’t stopping at the city, despite being able to rest and resupply there. It could be thus implied that they hadn’t stopped at any other settlements along the coast, either.

The ships weren’t moving too fast, relatively speaking, and now that they were fighting the current, they’d be moving much slower. Still, there were quite a few, and Earthshaker wasn’t willing to take on so many right here, not when he had no idea where his father was.

Turning to the nobles at his side, he ordered, “Tell me what you know of these ships.”

The noble in question paled a little under the seventh-tier mage’s gaze. He was only a third-tier mage himself, and a rather poor Baron as well. He had, until about a week previous, been a part of August’s army, his territory situated deep in the Eastern Territories.

August’s declaration to abolish the nobility had caused him and a number of other like-minded nobles to desert. They’d largely stuck together so they could protect themselves if August sent his army after them, but they hadn’t been attacked. In fact, they’d run into the Earthshaker Paladin on the road barreling for the old site where the fleets had been waiting for Duronius. Unfortunately for him, Earthshaker had been too late to stop the armada from departing, but the nobles wound up following him after he declared that he’d be taking August’s head.

“I think that’s the fleet my cousin told me about, the one led by the Thunder Knight, but it hard to say from here, especially without their dreadnoughts,” the noble hastily replied, his voice weak and squeaky.

Another noble nearby, a southern hereditary knight with only a handful of knights loyal to him added, “Those big ships won’t be coming in on this route. Too shallow.”

“Good,” Earthshaker replied. “Won’t have to worry about Flame Lances, then.”

‘Still, that’s a lot of water between me and them...’ the Paladin thought to himself. As an earth mage, swimming wasn’t his forte, and he was reluctant to assault the ships so far out into the wide, slow-moving river.

As if sensing the Paladin's worry, the southern hereditary knight said, "If you're looking to stop this fleet, there's a good spot to assault it further upriver. This river will narrow a bit and pass through some hills. The forest will give some cover to advance, while the narrowing river will allow us to block it off and prevent them from simply pushing past us."

Earthshaker scowled. More and more ships were making their appearances until he could see a couple hundred coming in from the Gulf and passing through the merchant city. He wasn't sure if his father was among them, but searching them all would be a daunting task. Fortunately, he had more than ten thousand knights, men-at-arms, and all their levies at his back, but those numbers presented a challenge of their own—they were yet another reason why the amphibious assault wasn't going to work here.

"Then that's where we'll go," Earthshaker growled, hating that he was having to wait even a little bit longer. "When they reach that point, we'll take those ships."

A few of the nobles behind him audibly gulped. It was a daunting task, attacking those ships and their full complements of marines, let alone whoever else was with them.

Not that Earthshaker cared, of course. All he wanted was to free his father, and if he got to kill some Augustine troops and other traitors while he was at it, then all the better.

'Leon Ursus, so-called 'Thunder Knight'...' the Paladin thought to himself, his inner voice dark and filled with contempt. 'Not my pick for the first commander to kill, but I suppose he'll have to do.'

Chapter 464: Earth and Sky I

Maia collapsed into bed next to Leon, a sigh of satisfaction escaping from her lips. Both she and Leon were in his relatively small bedroom in the leading ship of the fleet doing their best to make up for every second they'd lost when they'd been apart. When they were alone, clothes came off and they practically glued themselves together.

Now, they lay in bed basking in the afterglow.

"I... I love you," Leon whispered as he tried and failed to steady his breathing. Even for mages of their power, they'd gone so hard at each other that they both needed a few seconds to catch their breath.

Maia giggled softly, cuddled up closer to him, and responded in a voice as light and melodic as a wind chime, "I... love you, too... Leon..."

The two were silent for a long moment after their shared declaration, unable to form any more words, simply enjoying each other's company. It was almost five minutes before Maia spoke again, and this time her breathing had steadied, though she continued to press her well-endowed figure into Leon, unwilling to separate from him in the slightest.

"How much longer until we arrive?"

Understanding what she was asking for as she had asked this same question at least once a day since they'd set off from the Gulf coast almost two weeks prior, Leon answered, "We'd reach the capital in a few days if Calabria wasn't in the way. As it is now, we'll get to Calabria tomorrow. We'll probably have to take the city, but with us, I can't imagine that'll take longer than a day, but then we'll wait for the rest of the fleets to catch up. Shouldn't take much longer than a week for that to happen. After that, we'll

move on to the capital. So, it'll be about a week and a half at the earliest before we'll be able to see Elise again."

"That's not soon enough..." Maia complained, but Leon didn't think she was being overly serious. They'd both agreed to move with the fleets just in case anything unexpected got in their way. Neither had seen Elise in almost half a year, but as much as they wanted to reunite with their fire-haired lover, they'd both agreed that doing something reckless and getting themselves injured, killed, or captured in an attempt to see her sooner was counter-productive. Better to be cautious and reunite properly and permanently rather than doing something stupid and having to leave again—assuming they managed to see her at all.

"I understand your impatience, every fiber of my being wants to be with her again, too," Leon said, slowly running one of his hands through Maia's light brown hair. "We'll get to be with her soon, though. Just a little bit longer."

Maia began to sensually stretch her body out, intentionally rubbing her body up against Leon's as much as she could. "Anyone who gets in our way will wish they hadn't..." she said as she gave Leon a predatory smile.

Leon was almost concerned about the implications of that smile until he saw the look in Maia's eyes. He saw no violence there, only heat and desire, and he realized that that smile wasn't her looking forward to violence, but rather something else entirely.

Knowing that their break was over, the hand that Leon had been using to hold Maia close against him drifted downward, stroking her back all the way down to her shapely rear. Once there, Leon grabbed ahold of her and flipped her over onto her back.

Maia gasped in delight and wrapped her long bronze legs around Leon's waist, ensuring that they stayed locked together.

With a provocative smile, Leon leaned back onto his knees, pulling as far away as Maia would allow, then set his hands upon her breasts, stroking and kneading, lightly flicking her nipples. Maia moaned with pleasure and desire, but as Leon began to lean back in, aiming to seal her lips with his, they both suddenly froze as a wave of magic power washed the ship.

Both irritated that they had been interrupted by someone using their magic senses again, they were on their feet in but an instant, clothing appearing over their bodies so quickly it was almost as if they hadn't been naked in the first place. They knew that what they had felt was no friendly aura, it was the magic senses of a powerful mage, at least seventh-tier, and within that power, they could feel a potent killing intent—whoever had been the source of that power was no friend of theirs.

A moment later, alarms began to ring out on the ship, loud high-pitched squeals created by magic that began to wake the entire ship from slumber—it was almost midnight, so most of the crew had been asleep. Now, the ship began to rock as sailors, marines, and soldiers began to spring from their sleeping arrangements and prepare themselves for battle.

Leon and Maia simultaneously projected their magic senses. Their waves of power rushed up the river, without the smallest stone on the shore going unnoticed.

They saw nothing of note for several miles—the landscape was relatively hilly and well-forested—until their magic senses caught up to the scout ships that sailed ahead of the main fleet. These ships consisted of three war galleys and a dozen other smaller boats well-suited to riverine warfare.

And all these ships were burning. A long stone bridge had been built across the river, similar to the one that Leon and August had used to escape the Central Territories at the start of the war, but that one was much farther north if it even still existed. It spanned the entire river, its arched supports allowing the river to continue flowing beneath it while rising above the water like a stone wall, ready to block the passage of the fleet.

On that bridge Leon and Maia could see hundreds of knights waiting for them, watching the scout ships burn and sink into the deep river.

Nowhere could either of them see the mage that had sent out that pulse of magic power. The knights on the bridge were led by a couple of sixth-tier mages, but the rest were much weaker—none of them had the power to startle Leon or Maia as they had been by that pulse.

Without missing a beat, the two darted out of Leon's room and out into the hall where a groggy Alix and relatively more alert Valeria were already poking their heads out of their doors.

"Wha's goin' on?" Alix mumbled in sleepy confusion. "I don' hear us bein' attacked..."

"The forward scouts have been annihilated," Leon quickly informed them. "We're heading up to the deck to prepare to defend this ship."

"Got it," Valeria said, conjuring her armor out of her soul realm. Leon found himself a little jealous—his armor was still heavily damaged, more than Legion blacksmiths could fix. He'd have to fight without armor until the capital was taken and he could get a Heaven's Eye smith to perform some repairs since the only other armor he had—consisting of cheap mail and gambeson—wasn't enchanted enough to be worth the light restrictions to his flexibility it would demand.

Alix was a little more sluggish getting ready, but in less than a minute, she was out in the hall with most of her lighter armor on and looking far more alert. Once the four were ready, they began sprinting up to the deck of the ship, stopping only once so Leon could release Anzu from his cell.

Once they hurtled out from beneath the deck, they found dozens of marines already there ready to repel boarders and preparing some of the ship's weapons, which amounted to a single trebuchet and a pair of mangonels. The ship was large enough to carry a crew of hundreds—bumped up to about fifteen hundred with many Legion soldiers hitching a ride—but it still wasn't large enough to have its own Flame Lance. Those were reserved for the dreadnoughts, the fleet capital ships, which were too massive to sail the same route that Leon's detached fleet had taken.

Fortunately, Leon could see the rest of the ships in the fleet—numbering a little over a hundred—preparing their own weapons, though that mostly amounted to marine archers and rams.

"Get into the water, I'll keep in touch from there," Leon whispered to Maia, who nodded back and in a flash was over the side of the ship and in the river. Since she'd returned, Leon had taken some old advice from Xaphan and asked her to teach him her ability to speak into other people's minds. Xaphan himself was reluctant to do so, citing Leon's 'lack of power', which Leon took issue with. Maia, however,

was only too happy to teach Leon what she knew. He hadn't managed to get a good hold of the technique, yet, but thanks to their bond after she told him her true name, it made things between them a little easier to make up for his lack of skill.

"What should we do?" Valeria asked.

Leon glanced around, noting that there didn't seem to be any enemies on the riverbanks. They were all concentrated further upriver, at the stone bridge.

"Wait here, I'm going to check in with the Legate," Leon replied.

He had been given command of the mission by August, but he knew next to nothing about ship warfare, so he was more than happy that a fleet Legate had been sent to command the ships of the fleet.

The ship's bridge was located in a tower near the center of the top deck, about four stories high. It wasn't a wind-powered ship, leaving no need for a mast, unlike many of the war galleys that accompanied them. In a single bound, Leon jumped from the deck of the ship all the way up the command tower and through the large observation windows of the bridge, taking advantage of the fact that they hadn't yet been closed.

"Sir Ursus!" the Legate cried out in alarm as Leon appeared, landing among the bridge crew.

"Do you know what's happening?" Leon asked.

"I have a good idea..." the Legate replied.

The two quickly caught each other up on what they knew. Leon, as it turned out, had more information, and didn't learn much from the Legate.

"... but who sent that wave of magic senses?" the Legate asked as their explanations finished. "And why would they do that? They tipped their hand and showed us what was ahead..."

"Whoever it was, I think they may have wanted to draw our attention to that bridge," Leon said.

"Regardless, they were powerful, at least seventh-tier. Given the presence of that bridge and the power I sensed in that pulse of magic senses, I think we may be dealing with the Earthshaker Paladin. And if we're unlucky, then Sapphire might be here, too."

Leon could hear several of the younger knights working on the bridge fail to suppress gasps of fear, and the expressions of many of the older knights grow far more serious.

"We need to be ready for an attack from either side of the river the entire way north," Leon continued.

"You're saying that this is a trap, meant to lure us further upriver where they have an ambush party waiting?" the Legate asked, before nodding to himself a moment later in agreement. "We have nowhere else to go, there aren't any other river tributaries of note between us and that bridge, none that we can use to go around it. If we want to proceed, we're going to have to go through that bridge, and that means they could ambush us anywhere between here and there."

"I could see Earthshaker building another bridge south of us to lock us in if we overcommit to this..."

Leon mused aloud. "If our ships get boxed in, we might take too many casualties to take Calabria... We could even lose the entire fleet in the worst-case scenario..."

"We do have options, though," the Legate said. "We have an entire Legion spread out among our ships and no reason not to let them off..."

"I like that thinking," Leon said, smiling. He could think of nothing better than fighting with solid ground under his feet, though he wanted to stick close to the river where Maia could cover him. "We let off a few thousand soldiers on either side of the river, leave a few ships behind to cover our rear, and then make for that bridge!"

The fleet had land support from the noble retinues that had shadowed them from the coast, but the nobles were eventually forced to take other routes. The land around the Naga was just too swampy for them to keep up with the ships, so they'd peeled off to take some backroads north. The fleet wasn't slowed down by them, but it also meant they couldn't provide the fleet with support from the riverbank.

"Sounds like a plan," the Legate replied. "Sir Ursus, if you could stick with us here on this ship, I think that would be for the best."

"Huh?" Leon was surprised to hear that. He wasn't keen on fighting on the ship, even one as large and steady as this one was. He was already having to constantly use the old technique that Xaphan had taught him to stave off motion-sickness, he wasn't looking forward to trying to maintain it and fight at the same time.

"I guarantee that this ship will be at the center of whatever engagement is going to happen," the Legate explained. "Whoever is leading this attack will almost certainly strike here. Sir Leon, we're going to need a mage of your caliber here with us, if only to lead the assault on that bridge if I'm wrong."

Leon suppressed his urge to grimace, but he could see many of the bridge officers subtly glancing in his direction, anxiety written all over their faces. He didn't like it, but... he couldn't abandon these people. The Legion he was traveling with was an experienced eastern Legion, he could trust them to do their jobs once on the riverbank. The Legion fleets, however, were far less experienced, and he could see the need to have a powerful mage backing them up. Or, more accurately, leading them.

"I... can do that." Leon carefully controlled his tone to project nothing but confidence, smothering any and all disappointment he felt in agreeing.

"Thank you," the Legate said with a strange smile. Or one that Leon found strange, at least. It seemed far more genuine than those he usually received from nobles and higher-ranked Legion knights, and it unnerved him a bit.

But it also gave a warm feeling in his chest that Leon couldn't identify. Perhaps the joy of acceptance? He couldn't say. Regardless, he said, "I'll be down on the deck, I'll leave the rest to you."

"Yes, Sir," the Legate replied, only a moment later barking orders to signal the plan to the rest of the fleet.

In only a matter of seconds, Leon was back on the deck and had Valeria and Alix caught up on the plan, but they weren't the only ones who needed to know. He directed his thoughts toward Maia, toward his river nymph lover, letting thoughts of her fill his mind.

He could feel her location on the ship's right, even with her as intangible water. He then projected his magic towards her, not as magic senses, but in a pulse that wasn't too dissimilar. Rather than projecting

his awareness, it was his voice and his feelings that he was sending. He could feel his bond with her resonating, aiding him in his wish to communicate with her.

[Maia... can you hear me?] he silently whispered, hoping that he did everything right.

[I can hear you,] she whispered back, her voice filling his mind and steadying his heart.

Leon smiled at his success, then gave her the plan, too.

[... so be ready, this ship will be the first to make contact with the enemy.]

[It doesn't have to be like that,] she replied. [I could be the first to make contact...]

Leon was hesitant to agree, he didn't want to rely on her for everything, but as he looked around at the assembling soldiers and marines, he set aside his pride.

[Go do some damage, my love,] he said. [But be careful. Come back to me uninjured.]

[I should be saying that to you, my mate,] she replied, relishing the title she used for him.

And then she was off, rocketing upriver, literally in her element. Leon almost felt sorry for the knights that were holding that bridge, they had no idea what was about to crash into them. Maia swiftly left the slower and more cumbersome ship behind, but the fleet followed her with as much haste as they could.

About five minutes later, though, the ship suddenly and violently shook as if it had run aground. The water of the river surged up, buffeting the ship and crashing up onto the deck. Half of the marines and most of the soldiers on the deck fell over, some who were too close to the edge even going overboard.

"What the fuck?!" Alix shouted as she hit the deck.

Valeria barely managed to keep on her feet, but from the way she was glancing around in panic, Leon could see Alix's sentiment mirrored in her.

With a quick pulse of his magic senses, Leon saw the issue: a massive stone wall had erupted from the riverbed and crashed into the underside of the ship. The ship was too sturdy to take too much damage, but Leon could see that many of the lower compartments had been breached and the ship had been halted in place.

A moment later, Leon saw knights and men-at-arms appearing on either side of the wide river, rushing down from the cover of the trees to the riverbanks. The bridge continued to rise, pushing the stem of the ship higher into the air, until the ship began to slide backward, its magic engines failing to push it over the bridge. It took only a few seconds for the bridge to rise above the water, giving the Octavian knights on the shore more than enough opportunity to attack the ship.

"ARCHERS!" Leon roared, his aura towering and his voice commanding and authoritative. "ON YOUR FEET AND GET SHOOTING!"

His command was obeyed without complaint. Hundreds of archers began to shoot down at the advancing tide of knights and men-at-arms. Unfortunately, these men and women attacking the ship were well-armored, and few fell to the hail of arrows. The mangonels and trebuchets had a little more

effect, hurling exploding stones that killed many and hurled even more into the river, but the Octavian forces continued, undaunted.

Before they even reached the halfway point, Leon's gaze slid back up to the tree line where he could see many more knights carrying small boats down to the river. They weren't going to rely only on the bridge to reach the fleet.

Behind Leon's ship, the rest of the fleet began to react, firing arrows and their own ship-borne weapons, but having only marginal effect due to their range. Leon could see even more Octavian forces down the river were appearing upon the nearby hills and were hastening down toward those ships, too.

However, Leon couldn't spare them any more thoughts, for a moment later, a huge pillar of stone erupted from the riverbed right next to the ship, carrying several dark figures several dozen feet above the deck.

Leon's expression darkened. His hunch was at least partially correct, for he recognized the foremost of those people: the Earthshaker Paladin, his blond hair shining in the moonlight, his classically handsome features shaped into an arrogant smile as if everything on the deck beneath him was also beneath him. The expression alone was enough to make Leon instinctively want to take the Paladin's head. The Paladin wore the gleaming white plate armor of his station, but in his arrogance, he'd left his head bare.

He and his companions had been hiding under the river the entire time, though how they escaped Maia's notice Leon had no idea. Regardless, here they were.

Leon's eyes slid off Earthshaker for a moment and landed upon his allies. He recognized most of them as the nobles who abandoned August, though he had no idea what their names were.

'Damn traitors...' Leon thought, feeling a slight ironic thrill at his use of the term.

[Maia,] he said, projecting his voice to his river nymph lover. He could sense that she was building up for a massive attack on the Octavian forces holding the bridge. From what he could tell, the sturdy stone bridge was about to be washed away as if it were made of twigs.

[Leon,] she said back.

[We're being attacked here. No need to worry, keep going, but keep an eye out for another seventh-tier mage, a user of water magic.]

[I can't imagine this other mage would provide anything resembling a challenge, so if you're in trouble, don't hesitate to call, I'll be there in only a moment.] Maia's voice was tinged with concern for him, but Leon wasn't worried at all right now.

[I can handle this. Don't worry, I won't be prideful if I end up biting off more than I can chew. If things turn bad, I'll call for you.]

[You'd better...] Maia whispered as she let loose with her power upon the unsuspecting Octavian bridge force. Leon wanted to watch, but he had other things to deal with, so he turned his attention back to his ship and its immediate surroundings.

During their brief exchange, Earthshaker's stone pillar stopped rising and the Paladin and his people jumped down, crashing onto the deck of Leon's ship. An instant later, Earthshaker threw a pair of fist-

sized stones into the air, which promptly exploded, showering the surroundings with stony shrapnel and killing a handful of the Legion soldiers and marines who the Paladin had landed amongst.

“LEON URSUS!” he bellowed, conjuring a halberd from his soul realm and pointing it directly at Leon. “COME FIGHT ME, ‘BARBARIAN’!”

Leon was only too happy to accept this challenge, but he took a moment to address his retinue, first.

“Deal with the others as you see fit,” he growled as lightning magic filled his body.

“We’ve got your back!” Alix vigorously declared, drawing her sword and moving to engage one of Earthshaker’s nobles. Valeria and Anzu did likewise, as did several Tribunes who were also on the deck.

Earthshaker was unable to come to the defense of his allies, for in the blink of an eye, Leon appeared in front of him, his Adamant weapon already raised and falling down on him, the blade sparking with golden lightning.

The Paladin raised his halberd and just barely managed to block, though the force behind the blow forced him down to a knee. A few small bolts of lightning arced off the blade and sent root-like burns snaking along the plate covering the Paladin’s arms, but he didn’t seem to care. He dug his heels into the wooden deck and pushed, using the considerable physical strength that his earth magic granted him to force Leon back, their weapons locking together.

“That was weak!” Earthshaker taunted, his handsome face twisted in a mocking smile. “I expected more from a member of House Raime!”

Leon immediately disengaged, his surprise momentarily sapping his strength. Earthshaker cackled like a madman as Leon gained some distance, the rest of the Augustine troops on the deck making way and giving the two dueling Paladin-level mages as much room as they needed to fight.

“And now... you run!” Earthshaker shouted in between guffaws. “I can’t imagine my information is correct! How can this savage be the heir to House Raime?! No, you’re nothing more than a foreign upstart, a nobody! Your magic means nothing! Your blood is weak and ignoble!”

As the Paladin ranted, Leon conjured a lightning spear in his offhand and hurled it at him. For a moment, it seemed like Earthshaker was about to try and take it, but at the last possible moment, the Paladin ducked and let the bolt fly right over his head and strike one of his comrades right behind him, killing the fourth-tier Octavian noble instantly.

Earthshaker glanced over his shoulder, shrugged, and turned his attention back to Leon.

“Nice throw,” he admitted. “Now, savage, I will give you one chance to tell me where my father is, and if you do that, I won’t sink your little toy fleet.”

Earthshaker stared at Leon, completely disregarding the screams and the clashing of blades and the dying all around him. The Octavian troops on the bridge had come close enough to drop ramps and board the ship and were already pouring out onto the deck despite the best efforts of the Augustine archers to stop them, but Earthshaker had eyes only for Leon.

Leon took a deep breath to steady himself. It seemed that the rumors started when he unleashed his power fighting Duke Duronius had spread. If that was the case, then there was no reason to hold back.

He smiled and began to channel the power of the Thunderbird without restraint. His body began to sparkle and pop with lightning, the golden lightning turning into streaks of silver-blue as they forked all over him.

His aura grew to match his power, rising to reflect the divinity that he had inherited from his Ancestor. Within his soul realm, he could feel both Xaphan and the Thunderbird turning their attentions upon him as he, for the first time since he'd learned how to conceal his powers, consciously called upon his unfettered magic.

[Embrace my power, Leon!] the Thunderbird suddenly implored, her voice echoing from every corner of his mind. [Defeat this man and prove yourself worthy to be the sole inheritor of my legacy! Hide no longer! Show these pathetic imbeciles the power of our Clan!!!]

Leon disagreed with the idea that he had anything to prove, but this wasn't the time to respond.

Thankfully, Xaphan's statement was a little more subdued, but only just.

[I've got fifty-fifty odds on you fucking this up, boy,] he growled. [Personally, I think I'm going to bet on you coming out ahead.]

[Thanks,] Leon replied sarcastically.

Earthshaker had murdered Trajan, Leon wasn't going to let this opportunity pass him by. Earthshaker was going to lose this fight. Leon could allow no other possibility to exist. To that end, he decided that he'd answer Earthshaker's demand in the only way that seemed appropriate.

Leon let his power rush into his blade, causing innumerable arcs of silver-blue lightning to erupt from the blade, and charged.

Chapter 465: Earth and Sky II

Leon had no armor, he had no real defenses. So, Leon had to rely on the speed and devastating power of his lightning magic and his family's powerful offensive fighting style. He didn't discard thoughts about his defense entirely, but he committed to the idea that if he didn't want to be hit, then he'd have to put enough pressure on the Earthshaker Paladin to prevent a counter-attack.

Leon's body blazed with the silver-blue lightning of the Thunderbird, the distinctive power of House Raime. He glared at the Earthshaker Paladin, then charged. He'd show the Paladin the reason why the Thunderbird Clan had conquered this plane so many millennia ago and why his House reigned as the most influential family in the region for so long after.

For his part, as soon as the Earthshaker Paladin saw Leon's lightning, he felt his heart almost stop. He'd never borne witness to the power of House Raime, and now that it was before his eyes and magic senses, he took an unconscious step back. He could sense a frightening power in every arc of lightning that Leon emanated; if possible, he did *not* want to confront that power head-on. This was almost counter-intuitive since as an earth mage, head-on fights were his bread and butter, but in this case...

He could fit no more thoughts in, for in an instant, Leon was upon him.

Leon raised his blade with his charge, then brought it crashing down upon the Earthshaker Paladin as soon as he was in range. It was almost a mirror to their first engagement, and in a panic, Earthshaker

tried to block it as he had before. He raised his halberd to stop Leon's blade, but Leon only smirked and packed every ounce of power he could into his swing.

The Adamant blade glowed a brilliant silver as it sparked and cracked with the Thunderbird's lightning. As soon as it came into contact with the wooden haft of Earthshaker's halberd, the wood melted away like ice before the flames of the hottest hell. Leon's sword cleaved right through it, chopping the weapon in half.

But the sword didn't stop there. Leon pushed on, slicing the long blade into Earthshaker's shoulder, cleaving through the Paladin's beautiful white steel pauldron, but finally stopping when it hit the underlying mail.

Leon's sword stuck in the Paladin's armor, but that was right where Leon wanted to be. Lightning surged down his arm and into his blade, then from there, it transferred into the Paladin's armor. The armor had been spectacularly enchanted, but lightning mages were few and far between in the Bull Kingdom, so the armor's enchantments that protected against lightning were light and almost token. Silver-blue lightning shattered those enchantments with barely any resistance, quickly scorching everything from the Earthshaker Paladin's right shoulder all the way down to the bottom of his ribs.

Earthshaker screeched in pain as he felt his body begin to seize up. He circulated his mana as best he could to fight off Leon's terrifying power, and he felt his body begin to loosen again. He then hardened his skin, it now having been proven that his armor was insufficient, and he jerked and twisted his body to throw Leon off. With a mighty heave backed by his earth magic, he managed to tear Leon off his shoulder, sword and all, and toss him back several dozen feet. A good chunk of his burnished armor and more of his blood than he wanted to quantify went with the prodigal Raime, but after it had failed to stop Leon's magic, Earthshaker hardly cared.

With an animalistic growl, Earthshaker reached into his soul realm and retrieved a huge straight sword, long enough that a mortal would have to use it two-handed, but Earthshaker twirled it like it were as light as a marching baton.

Leon smiled, having landed on his feet. He'd come out the undisputed victor in that short exchange despite Earthshaker's seeming lack of debilitating injury, and he charged again without delay, hoping to recreate or surpass that success. His sword glowed with power, and with a clap of thunder accompanying him, Leon was on the Paladin once more, wildly swinging his weapon.

Earthshaker defended himself admirably. Leon's blows rained down upon him and he blocked just about every one. But now and then, one of Leon's strikes penetrated his defenses, ripping through his plate and tearing into his mail and cloth padding. The only reason the Paladin wasn't bleeding from a dozen wounds after only thirty seconds was due to his hardened stone skin, which even Leon's lightning had trouble getting through.

With a mighty roar, Earthshaker threw Leon once again. Before Leon's feet hit the deck of the ship, Earthshaker conjured one of a handful of boulders he kept in his soul realm for just such an occasion as this—without earth beneath his feet, he'd have to use his magic to conjure stone just as a fire mage would use their magic to conjure fire, rather than using the stone and earth that was already available. For an earth mage, this was terribly inefficient, so Earthshaker had taken to carrying stones around in his soul realm just in case.

The boulder he conjured was roughly the size of a small carriage. It hovered next to the Paladin for only a moment before being crushed and reformed into a spiked ball and hurled at Leon.

Leon saw all this happening practically in slow motion as his silver-blue lightning coursed through his veins, its power raising his speed to new heights. As soon as his feet touched the wood of the deck, he was sprinting forward, aiming to slide just beneath the stone ball.

However, as he passed under it with barely a foot to spare between his hair and the spikes, the boulder suddenly and violently detonated, throwing down finger-sized stones onto his face and sending stone shrapnel tearing through his clothes and skin.

Leon felt the familiar fiery bite of pain, but his wounds weren't serious. He pushed himself back up as swiftly as he could. He managed to struggle back to his feet just in time to dodge a blow from Earthshaker, who had taken the opportunity to charge at the seemingly stunned Leon.

Angrier than he was before and determined to give Earthshaker only that one blow, Leon stomped his foot on the deck and let loose with his lightning magic. The two seventh-tier mages were inundated with arcs of silver-blue lightning, their ears were assaulted by booming thunder, and the shockwave traveled right through them and stunned many of the nearby troops. Earthshaker was thrown back with a terrible howl, while Leon was left completely unaffected.

They paused their duel to take a breath. Leon was covered in small lacerations from the exploding stone, while Earthshaker was covered in burns from Leon's lightning and his armor had been almost completely stripped away, save for a few tattered bits of mail and gambeson.

All-in-all, Leon felt like he'd gotten the better of the Paladin, and a confident smile bloomed on his face.

"All... right..." Earthshaker said, his voice raspy and pained. "I'll admit... there may be something... to those rumors... after all..." The Paladin fixed Leon in a stony stare, one utterly devoid of warmth or kinship. It was a look that spoke of nothing but steely determination and hostility. "You probably are... a Raime... You ought... to be enough... to ransom for my father..."

Earthshaker seemed like he had more to say, but Leon had no intention of listening to the man who murdered Trajan and committed who knows how many other crimes. Leon knew of a few from Gaius; he knew enough to be disgusted. With barely a moment missed, Leon summoned a lightning bolt and hurled it in Earthshaker's direction.

Earthshaker panicked for a split-second, but he managed to hurl himself to the side. Leon's lightning bolt, however, had been aimed at his feet, not at his chest, and it exploded upon the deck where Earthshaker had just stood. The Paladin managed to avoid the worst of it, but he was still showered in white-hot sparks which set his tattered gambeson aflame.

Cursing, Earthshaker ripped the remnants of the cloth armor off his body, leaving him wearing nothing more than silkgrass trousers and his greaves which had been burned black by Leon's lightning. His exposed body, however, wasn't as vulnerable as others might be, as his skin was mottled gray and resembled grey limestone more than flesh.

With a wave of his hand, Earthshaker conjured another boulder, but instead of hurling it at Leon, he crushed it with barely a thought. In less time than it took even Leon to blink, the boulder had been rendered into a thick cloud of sand which began to whirl around Earthshaker like a desert tornado.

Leon didn't give the Paladin any more time. He lunged forward again, conjuring several small trick weapons he'd built during his experimentations back in the capital. On his wrists appeared wind blade bracelets, while on his fingers he materialized three iron rings of fire that could launch a single fireball apiece. None of these weapons were particularly powerful, but he hoped that they might prove to be something of a distraction that might create an opportunity to do more serious damage to the Paladin.

Rushing forward, Leon opened first with a quick blast of lightning, doing exactly what he hoped Earthshaker was expecting. His silver-blue lightning tore through the sand wall, melting much of it. For just a moment, Leon managed a glimpse of the madly grinning Paladin as another boulder came tearing out of the sand.

But Leon was ready for it and dodged to the side, letting the boulder glide right over him. With a burst of speed, Leon whipped right past the sand tornado as the boulder detonated, showering everyone around them, Augustine and Octavian alike, with stony shrapnel.

With a better idea of what Earthshaker was doing, now, Leon channeled his magic into his trick weapons and then conjured a lightning spear. In but an instant, he fired all three of his prepared fireballs into the sand, letting them splash across the raging shield that Earthshaker kept. Even more of the sand melted, becoming unusable and giving Leon one more opportunity. He took it without hesitation, hurling the silver-blue lightning spear with as much power as he could bring to bear.

Earthshaker had been about to throw another boulder, but he saw the lightning bolt just in time and brought the boulder in to protect himself. The lightning struck the boulder with terrifying force, obliterating it entirely and sending its superheated fragments exploding back into Earthshaker's face.

The Paladin screamed as he found himself unable to adapt his hold over the stone quickly enough to prevent himself from being battered by it. Chunks of his stony skin were torn from his exposed face and he was given a few more burns to add to his growing collection.

Only a second later, Leon let loose with his wind blades, aiming just to Earthshaker's sides. The Paladin was distracted by pain and the sand shield-tornado had weakened. Leon's two wind blades sliced right through it, harmlessly scattering the sand across the deck of the ship.

Earthshaker, now bleeding from numerous cuts on his face, was left almost defenseless. He still had his stonesskin, but Leon didn't think that would be enough. He rushed forward, channeling more of his magic power into his sword with every step. He was upon Earthshaker faster than the Paladin could react, his sword blazing silver with a halo of blue around its edges, and he drove the blade straight into the Paladin's chest.

For a moment that seemed almost an eternity, the blade caught on Earthshaker's stonesskin. Leon felt his heart seem to stop as his blade failed to penetrate. His magic reserves were starting to feel taxed, and he knew that if this strike failed, he'd have to take a more conservative approach to the fight.

And then that moment was over. Leon's lightning ripped the stone clean from Earthshaker's body, along with whatever chunks of flesh it was attached to. The blade then bit deeper, sliding between the

Paladin's ribs and impaling his lung. The channeled power now poured from Leon's sword, covering the Paladin in sparks and arcs of brilliant silver-blue lightning.

Earthshaker's torso blackened as his flesh was seared in the intense heat. His impaled lung shriveled in his chest as it was cooked from the inside. His eyes turned red and his skin bruised as the lightning surging through his body ruptured his veins, arteries, and capillaries.

Leon could feel the Paladin fighting back. As devastating as his strike was, Earthshaker was as durable as his chosen element. With a great heave, the Paladin managed to push Leon away, the blade in his chest being torn from his chest at the same time.

Earthshaker howled in pain and fury as blood poured out his body while Leon wisely retreated to take stock of the situation. The Paladin was gravely injured—were he any weaker, Leon would've even confidently stated that the wound was mortal. However, before Leon's very eyes, he saw stone spreading across Earthshaker's chest, swiftly covering his injury and preventing further blood loss.

"You..." Earthshaker growled barely coherently. "You... and your fucking family... even dead, you're still..."

His voice trailed off as he began to wheeze, his injured lung having deflated. Leon wasn't so naïve as to assume that this meant the Earthshaker Paladin was any less deadly, though, so he began to prepare himself for the next bout.

He didn't have long to wait. Acting purely on instinct and rage, Earthshaker charged, all of his skin turning back to stone. However, he moved almost in slow motion in Leon's eyes, who nimbly dodged Earthshaker's incredibly powerful but cumbersome swing. Instead of biting into Leon's flesh, his sword sliced deep into the deck of the ship, cleaving through the potent enchantments that were supposed to prevent that sort of thing.

Earthshaker tried to pull his sword free of the ship, but it stuck in the thick wooden planks, and the Paladin was in too much pain to think straight. Under normal conditions, he would've abandoned the weapon, but as he was, it only pissed him off even more, and he strained to pull his sword free.

Leon wasn't about to miss this golden opportunity. He surged forward one last time, aiming a deadly thrust right in between Earthshaker's shoulder blades.

Leon could feel his strength starting to wane; it took a great deal of power to cause meaningful damage to the Paladin, and his reserves were now running perilously low. As a result, it took a second longer for his lightning to rip away Earthshaker's stone skin, but the Paladin was already in such a state that he wasn't able to capitalize on that extra second—Leon's sword ripped through his skin, severing his spinal cord just below the neck, and exiting his body just to the side of his sternum.

Earthshaker, blinded by pain and kept standing only by magic, could only stare at the blade sticking out of his body as his lifeblood flowed down along the blade and dripped off the point. Weakly, he raised a hand to touch the blade, but Leon wasn't going to give him time to come to terms with his death. Lightning once again lit up the Paladin's insides, surging through his body and destroying everything it touched. Organs were liquified, bones were scorched black, skin sizzled, and muscles seized up.

Earthshaker's body lost all strength, lost all ability to resist, and he went as limp as he could with so much of his musculature seized up tight enough to start tearing itself off of his bones.

Leon stood there behind the Paladin holding up his body for a long moment, panting with exertion, flooding the Paladin's body with lightning. He just kept pushing his power more and more into the Paladin, venting every frustration he had endured over the past half-year into his defeated foe. He began screaming as the Paladin began to glow with lightning, his skin becoming momentarily transparent as it arced along Earthshaker's bones from the tip of his head down to his toes.

After a few more seconds, Leon realized that he was screaming and that finally brought him back to his senses. He went silent and halted his attack. Earthshaker's body had completely blackened from burns, looking like little more than a burned piece of meat on the end of Leon's blade.

Leon stared at it, unable to do anything, unable to even realize that the battle around him had halted, all eyes turned to him and the dead Paladin.

Finally, Leon pulled his blade from the back of Earthshaker's body and let it fall. It crumbled into ash as it hit the deck, becoming nothing more than a black stain on the wood.

Slowly, other knights and men-at-arms began to throw down their weapons. They were those who had abandoned August and thrown in their lot with Earthshaker when they'd met him on the road, but now that they'd seen him fall, all fighting spirit left them, and they began to surrender, a few at first, but more and more as the silence continued.

Leon surveyed the deck in a daze, somewhat aware through his elation at achieving some manner of revenge, winning his duel, and his fatigue from the fight and the war as a whole that the battle was over; at least on this ship.

And his side had won.

Chapter 466: Calabria II

The Earthshaker Paladin was dead, his body charred to ash. Leon was still standing, his aura mighty even as his mana reserves dipped perilously low. The noble armies that had accompanied the Earthshaker in his attack on the fleet were surrendering, and as Leon glanced around the deck of his ship, those who didn't surrender quickly leaped over the edge, landing either on the stone bridge or in the river itself.

The Augustine troops, on the other hand, began to madly cheer. Their casualties had been remarkably light, the scouting fleet aside.

Alix and Valeria approached Leon, while Anzu bounded forward to press his head into his human's hands. However, before anyone could say so much as a word, the consequences of Maia's assault on the bridge which had blocked the scouts became apparent.

A great wave of water came flooding down the Naga River, big enough to buffet even the largest of the ships in the fleet. Carried by this great wave were hundreds of bodies and many great chunks of stone—the remains of the bridge.

"EVERYBODY HANG ON!" Leon roared, his order relayed up and down the ship and echoed across the fleet.

Right before the wave hit them, Leon glanced at the rest of the fleet. The Augustine rebels and the Octavian troops that had accompanied Earthshaker had surrendered on his ship, but they yet to do so on the rest of the ships they'd managed to board. However, many of those that had been on the shore had fled, for the Legion was already assembled on both sides of the river and were advancing upon them. It looked like the battle had been won, but the fighting wasn't over, yet.

'That's going to be messy...' Leon thought, wondering just how many people were going to die because they couldn't stop fighting long enough to brace themselves against the imminent flooding of the river.

Leon closed his eyes, got down on the deck, and braced himself as best as he could. The rest of the people around him did likewise, with even Anzu huddling down and lowering his center of gravity. Everyone waited for the wave to hit the ship.

And they waited.

And they continued to wait.

Long seconds after the wave should've hit them, they waited still.

Leon hesitantly opened his eyes to see just what in the hells was happening. He saw the great flood of the river parting around them, avoiding the ship by some power that he could only assume was Maia's doing. The rushing, corpse-filled river got close enough that Leon could've stuck his hand over the side of the ship and brushed it. It crashed past the ship, rising almost halfway up the ship's bridge tower.

But the ship remained steady. No Augustine troops were washed overboard.

The same, however, could not be said for those who had attempted to retreat by jumping off the ship. The water spared no strength as it hit them, crushing nearly all of them beneath its immense weight. What was left of them was quickly swept downriver, where many of their fellows who had tried attacking the other ships also found themselves washed away.

Even better, those ships that had been boarded were quickly fighting off their attackers, while the Legion that had been dropped off on the riverbanks advanced on those who remained on land.

Leon smiled, relishing the victory, his chest swelling in pride at the thought of finally having gotten some measure of the revenge he'd craved against those who were directly responsible for Trajan's murder.

[Well done, boy,] the Thunderbird said, her voice dripping with as much pride as Leon felt. [Your power is growing quite nicely.]

[Thank you,] Leon replied.

[Yes, you're almost not an embarrassment,] Xaphan added. [I might even tell a demon or two about you once I return to the Void.]

Leon frowned, his mood dampening a bit at the thought of Xaphan leaving. Over the past few years, he'd gotten used to the demon's presence, and the reminder that their arrangement was temporary wasn't one that Leon enjoyed.

He was silent for a long time, long enough that his opportunity to respond came and went. He felt the attention of both the Thunderbird and Xaphan turn away from him, while Alix, Valeria, and Anzu all

turned back to him, waiting for his orders. He glanced at them, then around at the gathering soldiers and marines. It seemed that everyone was waiting for him to make some kind of speech, or at least to acknowledge their victory.

“We’ve won!” he shouted, keeping it simple. But as simple as it was, it was enough, for several hundred Augustine troops on the deck immediately began shouting and screaming in elation, making it clear to the entire fleet that victory was theirs.

—

With their victory and the routing of the surviving Octavian forces, the fleet decided to stop roughly where they were for a few hours. The prisoners taken during the battle were secured to await judgment by Prince August, the Legion elements on the riverbank were taken back aboard their respective ships—the battle had been over so quickly that a few battalions hadn’t even the opportunity to disembark—and Maia returned to Leon’s ship. She’d done so in a dramatic fashion, too, leaping aboard the ship like a fish from water, landing on the deck of the ship right next to Leon. A few startled marines almost went for their weapons, but Leon had quickly pulled her into a hug, showing everyone that this wasn’t an issue.

Once all of this was taken care of, the fleet got moving north again. They had a schedule to keep, and neither nighttime nor an attack by a Paladin was going to stop them. During the next few days, however, their situation changed a bit.

The prisoners they’d taken during the battle were interrogated, and intelligence was gathered and corroborated indicating that Calabria’s garrison had been left understaffed after the Earthshaker Paladin came in and took most of their knights for the attack. Hearing this, Leon and the fleet Legate ordered them to pick up the pace and sent numerous scouts further ahead to confirm the situation.

By the time they finally got in sight of the city, it seemed that those reports were true. The Legion they were transporting was let off and began moving to secure the city gates and the districts outside of the walls, but it hardly seemed necessary, for the gates never closed. The Legion was able to march straight into the city, while the fleet sailed unimpeded right up the river.

Leon, still aboard the fleet’s command ship, could only watch from the bow of the ship in disbelief as they went completely unchallenged. In fact, he saw just about no one in the streets next to the river, and his repeated pulses of magic senses confirmed that most of the citizens who remained in the city had hunkered down within their homes.

The Exarch’s palace was a little different. A garrison remained there, but in the palace courtyard what seemed like a reception was waiting—the man who seemed to be the Exarch that replaced Justin Isynos and his assistants and retinue were standing there, all dressed to the nines as if they were expecting the King himself to visit. Notably, Leon didn’t see a single weapon amongst them, though there were a few mages strong enough to conceal their weapons and armor in their soul realms.

Many of the fleet ships entered the river ports and began disgorging marines to secure them. Leon, his small retinue, and a battalion of Legion soldiers disembarked here, as well, and started marching through the streets toward the Exarch’s palace, guided by Valeria. She’d grown up in the city and knew it like the back of her hand. Along the way, they met up with more Legion battalions advancing through

the streets, each one as baffled as Leon was that there were no signs of resistance by the remaining Octavian contingents.

A few minutes later, Leon and co. were striding into the front courtyard of the Exarch's palace. Little had changed about the place since he'd last been here when he'd accompanied Trajan and August back to the capital from his time at the Bull's Horns. The only real difference was the palace's inhabitants, most of whom seemed to be standing out in the stone courtyard.

Before anyone else could speak, the Exarch—or the man Leon assumed to be the Exarch—stepped forward and loudly said, "I would speak with His Highness Prince August's representative!"

Leon continued to calmly walk forward, growing more confident with every step that what seemed to be happening was, indeed, happening. He approached the Exarch, Valeria to his right, Alix to his left, and Maia and Anzu right behind him. The Legion battalions were spreading out in the courtyard, facing the Exarch's knights and maintaining their vigilance.

"Are you the man to whom I should be speaking?" the Exarch asked, his tone deliberately neutral, though Leon saw a moment of recognition in his eyes when the Exarch took to inspecting him more closely.

"Suppose I am," Leon said. "What's on your mind?"

A little tightness appeared in the corners of the man's mouth as if he were straining to keep up his stoic mask under the insulting pressure of Leon's informality.

"I wish to surrender this city to Prince August," he declared. "Neither my retinue nor the remnants of the city garrison have any intention of resisting His Highness in any way!"

Leon smiled, nodded, and pointedly glanced at the rest of the assembled knights, all of whom were either watching the exchange or keeping an eye on the Legion soldiers that were still pouring into the courtyard.

"What about them? Are they surrendering too?"

"Of course..." the Exarch said, his tone almost questioning for he thought the answer obvious.

"I ask because apparently some of the garrison joined the Earthshaker Paladin in his attack on our fleet..." Leon explained. He smiled as many of the knights began to look a little more nervous and the Exarch himself sprouted a few small beads of sweat on his brow as the implication of Earthshaker's failure settled in their minds.

"Our knights were pressed into service..." the Exarch hurried to justify. "We had no choice! And it wasn't like there were many of our knights here in the first place! We couldn't say no to a Paladin!"

Leon looked around again, noting that many of the remaining knights were incredibly nervous. Terrified, even. He could understand, given their circumstances.

"I suppose, then, that there's no reason for me not to accept your surrender..." Leon said, choosing not to hold the actions of Earthshaker against them. He could leave that to Prince August—though, even if it were his place to punish these people, he probably wouldn't. Their surrender was enough for him. "In the meantime, it'll be best if you and your people remain in your quarters until His Highness arrives."

The Exarch seemed to let out a held breath. "Thank you, Sir Leon," he said, understanding that Leon wasn't making a suggestion and that he was being remarkably merciful by only placing them under house arrest.

"You know me?" Leon asked in surprise.

"Of course I do..." the Exarch replied, though he seemed a little embarrassed about his admission.

"We've been getting plenty of news here, especially about Prince August's commanders. Word of the Thunder Knight's exploits has probably reached the furthest ends of the Kingdom by now. You're being spoken about in the same breath as Dame Minerva, Duke Duronius, and the Brimstone Paladin."

It took a moment for Leon to move past that revelation. A moment where he had to fight with every ounce of strength he had not to visibly cringe or groan.

"What... what a splendid... occurrence..." he sarcastically muttered, not even wanting to think about what Elise thought about his 'titles'.

The Exarch looked mortified at the thought of having offended Leon, but before he could make any apologies, the Legate in charge of the Legion accompanying Leon's fleet arrived, and Leon was quick to have him take charge of the knights and have them escorted to their chambers where they'd await the Prince's judgment.

For the most part, with this handled, Leon's job was almost done. The Legion's Legate and the fleet Legate could largely handle the burden of command, so apart from a few meetings to ensure that they coordinate and were properly supplied, Leon didn't have much else to do with the city now in Augustine hands.

—

The sun had set and Leon was ready to head for bed. He'd taken the same room he'd stayed in during his previous visit to the city, leaving the fancier rooms for others who would arrive in a few days.

But even though Leon was ready to turn in for the night, the city was still swarming with Legion soldiers taking control of the streets, establishing patrols and filling in for the guards and military garrison that Earthshaker had depleted during his ill-fated attack on Leon's fleet. As a result, Leon felt a little guilty going to bed so early when so many others were still working, and to try and take his mind off of it, he decided to go for a walk through the palace.

The grounds were fairly extensive, and there were plenty of places for Leon to aimlessly wander around without getting in anyone's way. The first place he decided to go was the closest private courtyard, a place that should be deserted at such a late time. He'd heard it had some training platforms and he figured some physical exercise would help settle him down enough to get to sleep.

His assumption of how populated it would be was proven wrong when he strolled into the courtyard and found someone had beaten him there.

She wasn't training, she was actually on a nearby terrace staring down at the central training platform in the courtyard. Her silver hair sparkled in the moonlight, her deep blue shirt and pants alluringly hugged her figure, and her normally serious and stoic face had relaxed into a gentle smile.

Leon debated whether or not he should disturb her.

"I can see you, Leon," Valeria said, suddenly turning to stare down at him over the stone railing of the terrace.

Feeling a bit sheepish, Leon waved and made his way to her, going up a nearby staircase.

"Can't sleep, too?" he asked as he joined her on the terrace.

"... No," she whispered, not once turning to face him. She let him approach from behind, silently communicating just how much trust she was putting in him to be so willing to keep her back to him.

Leon had no intentions of betraying that trust, calmly joining her at the railing while maintaining a respectful distance. A distance that shrank a bit as Valeria subtly edged a bit closer while adjusting her posture.

"Any reason for that?" Leon asked.

"How about you?" Valeria evasively countered, flashing him a quick, friendly smile.

Taking her obvious deflection in stride, Leon made a bit of a show out of thinking, before sighing and saying, "Most of the fleet and the Legion are still up. We don't have much else to do, but it still bothers me a bit that we've got the extra time to go to bed before them."

"I get that. We'd only be in their way if we tried to stick around, but I get it."

"Yeah. I guess without paperwork, people working at our level don't have much else to do," Leon said with a wry smile. "Your turn. What brings you out here so late? Craving some training?"

"If that's what I wanted, I'd be down there, not up here." Valeria nodded meaningfully down at the training platform.

"So what is it, then?"

"Any reason why you're so curious?" Valeria smiled again at Leon, her expression turning teasing and playful, neither of which Leon had seen very often on her face. "I'd assume you could just sleep with Naiad. I get the feeling she'd wear out even the most energetic lover, and then some."

"She can be quite vigorous in her affections," Leon admitted. "However, I'm not really in the mood for that right now. Felt like going for a walk but didn't want to go very far."

"So, here you are..."

"So, here I am..."

The two were silent for a long moment, Valeria staring down at the training platform, Leon staring up at the dark near-midnight sky.

"What's really troubling you?" Leon quietly asked.

"Why do you care?"

"You're my knight," Leon said without pause, but after taking another second, he added, "And, I like to think, my friend."

"Really?" Valeria skeptically asked, cocking an eyebrow at him.

"Despite everything, yes, I like to think so. I can understand if you don't think the same."

Valeria frowned and turned back to the training platform, not answering Leon's implied question.

"It's strange being back here," she murmured, her tone full of melancholic nostalgia. "Everything's exactly the same, but so different at the same time. I spent nearly my entire childhood within these walls with my father and all of his household... I —"

She crept a little closer to Leon, her voice cracking as she held back her emotions as much as she could.

"— I haven't heard anything from them. Not a word. I know you hate my father, but he's still my father, and I can't help but feel... lost without him..."

From the way she said 'lost', Leon knew that wasn't the only thing she was feeling. Scared, worried, abandoned, he could imagine she was feeling all of that, too, but she wasn't ready to express it.

She took another step toward him, and this time, he took one toward her and laid a hand on one of hers that rested on the balcony railing.

"Tell me about him. Your father, I mean," he said.

Valeria took a deep breath, likely pushing down whatever was going through her mind, and slowly began.

"I... My father had me start my training young. Nothing too fancy, and it was mostly just playing at the time, but he trained me personally. After I turned eight, though, he had me train with the palace's master-at-arms right down there."

Again, Valeria took another step closer to Leon as she waved down at the training platform below. The two were practically touching, now, and all it would take for them to be leaning on each other would be for one to shift their posture just a little bit.

"He'd often watch from one of these terraces, giving me pointers and criticisms. He always did his best to look out for me, to teach me not only to be a better fighter but to be a better person."

She paused long enough for Leon to glance at her and found that she'd turned her eyes to him. For a moment, they made eye contact, and Leon found himself almost irresistibly drawn into her remarkably blue eyes. She moved closer again, turning her body to face him as he instinctively responded in kind.

"He always did his best to be a good man. He ruled this city with justice and fairness foremost in his mind. He never abused his position for personal profit, he ensured that I grew up knowing nothing but warmth and kindness. The people here loved him, I know that."

Leon was feeling more than a little awkward now, but he didn't move. He wanted her to keep talking, and... he had to admit that he was curious where this was going. He didn't back down.

"I can't help but dread the moment when the two of you meet," she admitted, her eyes turning glassy with unshed tears. "I don't want two of the most important people in my life to try and kill each other. I can't think of anything more terrible than that."

Leon nodded, maintaining eye contact with her as she pushed forward again, pressing herself into him. She was a little bit shorter than Leon, standing at the perfect height for him to kiss her forehead if he were so inclined. Instead, she pushed herself up onto her toes and pressed her lips against his.

It was a chaste kiss, but it was one full of emotion, both fear and love. Leon's arms unconsciously gently wrapped themselves around her waist as she curled up in his embrace.

And then they separated, Valeria moving back a few steps and easily breaking out of Leon's arms. Leon didn't pursue, letting her put some space between them again.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that," she said, her voice quivering with panic. "I... uh, look, can we pretend that didn't happen?"

Her cheeks turned scarlet, and she looked in Leon's general direction but didn't once make eye contact.

Leon took a deep breath, steeling himself for what he was about to say.

"Valeria..." he hesitantly began, "... I like you, as both a friend and as more than that. That hasn't been an easy thing, given the history between our families, and I've run from those feelings before. But... I'm committed to trying to make peace between us. The last thing I want is for you to be my enemy. I don't want your father to be my enemy, I... I want to try this peace thing. Fuck, I'm bad with words... I guess what I'm trying to say is that at the end of all this, when we finally find your father and get this thing hashed out, I hope that we can still be friends."

"Just 'friends'?" she asked, her tone turning a bit playful, but it sounded forced to Leon's ears as if she were trying to make it sound like a joke that she could play off if he said that friendship was all he wanted from her.

Leon measured his response. He liked her, to be sure, and he knew that Elise would be ecstatic if the two of them were to start something more intimate, but he didn't want to get her hopes up only to disappoint her. He had no idea how the conflict between him and Justin Isynos might be resolved, he'd never even spoken to the man before. But he also wanted her to be more than a friend, that much he was willing to finally admit.

"Let's start with friends and see where we go from there?" Leon suggested with a genuine smile. "I don't want to promise anything I can't deliver on, and I can't see the future. Most of all, I don't want to hurt you any more than I already have. So let's take things slow."

Valeria smiled and quickly composed herself. "I can do that, Leon," she whispered.

Chapter 467: Fulfilling an Order

August arrived in Calabria only three days after Leon, sailing in with a fleet so large that many of its ships had to moor themselves in requisitioned docks, run themselves up onto the riverbank, or simply anchor themselves in the river.

On the same day, the noble armies that had taken the land route to Calabria arrived, causing the Augustine forces around the city to outnumber the city's inhabitants more than two-to-one. The army was so large, in fact, that most of the Legions and the noble retainers had to make camp beyond the city's outskirts.

Leon met August down at the docks, leaving most of his higher-tiered Legion knights to keep the palace secure, just in case. There, he told the Prince of the Exarch's surrender and gave him a brief rundown of the battle with Earthshaker. He'd already sent messengers with the same information, but he wanted there to be no misunderstandings between him and August.

It was a sentiment that August appreciated even though he didn't seem too happy about it on the surface, and he didn't speak much until Leon escorted him and the rest of the command staff to the palace, where they met with the Exarch. August quite graciously pardoned them for any part they played in acting against his people and released them from house arrest.

Given that they'd surrendered, this wasn't unexpected. Leon, for his part, knew that it would simply be better for everyone if August left behind the previous administrators to continue governing Calabria after they departed, otherwise he'd be obligated to leave behind a military garrison to keep the peace.

After that, August and the rest of the command staff retired to plan their next moves. They couldn't stay long in the city without risking putting a burden on their supplies, and they had to move quickly to reach the capital at the same time as Minerva and Brimstone.

Their only concern was what Octavius might do in response, as they had received reports that he still had a substantial force guarding the capital, one big enough to meet either of the Augustine armies in the field if he were so inclined.

—

Octavius stared out at *his* city, as he'd taken to doing after relieving Avidius, the previous Consul of the Central Territories. The sheer *incompetence* of those around him was stressful, and there was only so much he could do to compensate for their failures. Staring out at the majestic city that he possessed was one of the few ways he was able to relieve some of that stress.

He'd been doing it more and more lately, as news of mounting defeats kept coming in. After Earthshaker abandoned him, Octavius had barely been seen in public at all, spending most of his days in his private chambers and refusing to see most people.

He'd done great things, he knew that. He'd gotten rid of all the dirty-blooded people that were stinking up the palace, replacing them with those of proper breeding. He'd passed a few laws denying commoners the ability to be knighted, as well as several others that cemented the nobility into their proper place above the commons. He was slowly but surely returning the Bull Kingdom to what it *should* be, a Kingdom that valued its old traditions and ceremonies.

A place that valued *respect*.

But he wasn't getting much of that anymore. He was surrounded not only by incompetents but also by traitors and men and women with weak hearts, many of whom had quit the capital when news that Duronius had been defeated reached the city. With August closing in and winning in both the north and

south, the rats that were abandoning his ship were only growing more numerous. The only reason everyone hadn't abandoned him, he knew in his heart of hearts, was because Sapphire was still with him.

As if his thoughts were a summons, the door to the terrace opened and Sapphire walked through, her light blue clothes hugging her body in all the right places, her golden hair glittering in the light of the setting sun.

"My Prince," she whispered, her voice soft and supplicant, "we've received word from down south..."

She paused, hoping for some reaction from Octavius. He'd not even acknowledged her appearance, let alone seemed willing to have a conversation with her.

Her clear blue eyes slid past him and landed upon the city in the distance. Even from here, she could see the effects that the war was having—nearly thirty percent of the city's inhabitants had fled, leaving great swathes of the city dark and bereft of people. Her heart sank as the thought that she'd backed the wrong horse played itself through her mind once more. It was a thought she'd been having more and more, lately.

"Octavius..." she murmured, hoping to get her Prince's attention.

"I want my coronation to happen as soon as possible," Octavius suddenly said, acting as if he hadn't heard her previous words. "All the Court shall attend. I'll have a parade, too, I want the people to see their new King. They've gone too long without a King, they need to know that everything is right with the world."

"Julius, Love," Sapphire repeated, the word 'love' leaving an ashy taste in her mouth, "Petrus has been defeated on the Naga. Leon Ursus has ascended to the seventh-tier, and most of the southern nobles and many of our Legions have now declared for August. They're sailing north as we speak, they'll be here in a week or less!"

"Ah, I see," Octavius replied, his tone as light as if Sapphire had only said something about the weather. "Well, be sure to send a message to my uncle. If he attends my coronation, I'll forgive him for leaving me. If he doesn't, I'll have no choice but to view him as a traitor and have him arrested and charged."

"Petrus is dead, murdered by August's pet savage," Sapphire replied, her tone growing in strength and insistence, slowly demanding that Octavius actually *listen* to what she was saying. "There are *other* rumors about him, too..."

"I doubt that, my uncle can't be killed, he's the strongest man in the Kingdom," Octavius breezily replied, speaking as if a child had just tried to tell him the sky was green rather than blue. "Find whoever relayed this blatantly false information and have them meet the headsman. They're willfully spreading propaganda to weaken us and support my bastard half-brother."

Sapphire didn't move. She simply stared in disbelief at Octavius, wondering just where her Prince had gone.

"Your Royal Highness," she began, her tone sharpening and her aura spiking, hoping that that would be enough to get Octavius to pay attention and treat these matters with the seriousness they demanded, "the traitors Minerva and Brimstone have defeated our forces in the north. They've gotten the Consul of

the North to ally with them. They're marching south! If we don't do something quickly, then we're going to be boxed in by August in the south and them in the north!"

"Send the troops we have to cut them off," Octavius said, still not turning to look at his 'lover'. "They'll be exhausted after so much fighting. They'll flee before our mighty armies like ice flees from fire."

As a user of water and ice magic, Sapphire felt mildly insulted by his last statement, but she kept herself in check. But she knew that her days of sleeping with the Prince were over. If *this* was going to be how he acted, then she knew she was never going to be the Queen.

"Yes, Your Royal Highness..." she replied, not even bothering to relay the rest of her information about just how many people were fleeing the city or about how the noble and Legion troops they still had were hemorrhaging manpower as their people deserted faster than they could be replaced.

Instead, she turned around and left the Prince alone, an ugly look in her eyes. A number of possibilities flitted through her mind, from kidnapping the Prince and taking him into the Western Territories to continue the war there, to making her stand here in the capital. Whatever she decided, though, she wasn't ready to declare this war a failure. She wasn't yet ready to give up on her dream of being the Queen.

—

Emilie watched from the window in her office as the Octavian troops moved through the streets, hurriedly setting up barricades and other hasty fortifications. Some Legion magic engineers even went so far as to demolish abandoned houses and set up small forts within the city, as well as blocking off entire streets with stone walls a couple dozen feet high.

The city's garrisoned army was getting ready for a siege, but that wasn't all. She could see numerous ships leaving the lake and making their way north along the Naga River. There were only a few war galleys among the group with most looking more like appropriated fishing craft, but Emilie guessed these ships were ferrying troops north to meet Minerva's south-bound army, but there couldn't number more than twenty thousand even with all the ships she could see.

There were also many Legion soldiers mustering to the south of the city and setting up more fortifications in that direction, including laying the foundations for hasty city walls, which the capital had never needed before in the entire five-thousand-year history of the Bull Kingdom.

She sighed in dejection. If she had her way, she'd have leveraged the power of Heaven's Eye to have Octavius deposed, but unfortunately, Heaven's Eye was officially neutral in all political matters. If any of the other Kingdoms got word of Heaven's Eye meddling in political affairs, the powers-that-be in the Central Empires would probably move against Heaven's Eye. Her superiors would then lay her out to dry in order to save the Guild as a whole.

So her hands were tied. She couldn't *directly* act against Octavius, no matter how concerned she was about the people of the Bull Kingdom—or, more specifically, about the man who she was certain would become her son-in-law relatively soon. The last thing she wanted was to see Leon killed in all this fighting. Already she could see the toll it was having on Elise, who was so depressed about not having directly heard from Leon since he left Ironford that she could barely work up the motivation to get out of bed most days.

But they both understood that Leon wandering around the swampy south was hardly the best of positions to be sending messages from, so Elise and Emilie were patient. Despite their worries, they had both been confident that he'd find a way to return home.

That confidence was paid off when an official declaration from August sent to her informing her about his move on the capital had been given a personal post-script from Leon asking her to tell Elise that he would be home soon and that he loved her. That quick word alone had been enough for Elise to leave Emilie's palace and finally join her in the Tower.

"How long do you think he'll be?" Elise quietly asked as she joined her mother at the window.

"A few days at the quickest," Emilie replied. "They only left Calabria last night, Butterfly. He'll be here soon, but they're sailing against the current."

Elise took a deep breath to steady herself for what the two were about to do, then backed away from the window to make sure she was ready. Emilie stayed there for a few minutes more, for she had no need to check to see if she was ready—she *knew* she was.

Only about fifteen minutes later, one of Emilie's assistants poked his head through her office door and said to the two waiting ladies, "He's here."

"Send him in," Emilie replied, her tone all business and lacking any sign of her usual frivolity.

"Last chance to back out..." Elise whispered once the assistant closed the door.

"Not a chance in any hell that's happening," Emilie murmured back.

Not even a minute later, the door was opened once more, letting in a man who appeared about middle-aged, but judging by his vigorous aura—which Emilie, with all her seventh-tier powers, couldn't see through—indicated that 'middle-aged' was likely at least several centuries old. He wasn't particularly handsome, but he walked in with attractive confidence that showed he was perfectly well aware that he was the most powerful person in the room.

Despite this, when his clear gray eyes met Emilie's bright green, they stayed there, not straying even a little. He didn't leer at Emilie's alluring figure, shown off by her tight, black formal dress. His eyes didn't drift to stare at Elise, they stayed respectfully fixed on Emilie.

"Lady Emilie, a pleasure to finally meet you," he whispered in the distinct sing-song accent of people from the Sacred Golden Empire.

"Doctor Vissarion," Emilie replied, a smile breaking out onto her face, though it was one that lacked personal warmth. This was a business deal first and foremost, and it was one that could get her in a *lot* of trouble if too many people heard of it. "I'm glad to finally meet you, too."

The two met in the center of Emilie's office, where she introduced Elise to the doctor as well, who remained respectful and not arrogant in the slightest, despite the extreme difference in magical power—he was dealing with powerful members of Heaven's Eye, after all, and Heaven's Eye as a whole was far more powerful than he would ever be.

Once the three had taken their seats on a pair of sofas, the doctor wasted no time getting right down to business.

“So, to what do I owe the honor of a personal invitation?” he asked, his tone pleasant and inquiring.

“Oh, nothing too dramatic,” Emilie replied. “I merely wish to inform you that we’ve been contracted by a private party to ensure that you receive everything you need for your job.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow. “I thought that Heaven’s Eye couldn’t fulfill my order. I believe that Prince August himself attempted to fulfill it, and you weren’t able to accommodate in a quick fashion...”

“That indeed was the case, but that was at least six years ago. With the intervention of this person—who wishes to remain anonymous—our options have... *expanded*...”

“Have they...” the doctor replied, his expression turning into one of understanding as he paused to think for several long seconds. Crucially, he didn’t ask about who this mysterious benefactor was or question the timing of this news. “So, you’re telling me that the final ingredients I need...”

“... are ready,” Emilie finished. “It took more than a bit of arm-twisting, but it shouldn’t be too difficult to finish with what we’ve collected in the past few weeks...”

With a dramatic flourish, Emilie retrieved a sheet of paper from her soul realm, written upon which were several dozen ingredients that were critical in the brewing of potions that could help repair a body’s connection to their soul realm.

The doctor took the paper and quickly examined it.

“I’ve actually gotten a few of these thanks to Prince August,” he said. “The Heartwood Amber, mana from a seventh-tier beast who focused on earth magic, and crystal powder from the mines on Tetsu island have all been acquired. The rest of this I need, though.”

“Then consider it yours,” Emilie replied. “And I wish you good luck in your endeavor.”

Chapter 468: Stunning Announcement

Leon breathed in the cool morning air, grateful to finally stand upon solid ground again. It had been a long trip up from Calabria, almost a week from the city whereas it only took a couple of days when he’d last sailed down the river.

But now, after almost six months, they were back. *He* was back. He could see the capital about a dozen miles in the distance, just waiting for the Augustine forces to take it. And they were ready to do so; to his left stretched out seven Legions, slowly arraying themselves into their distinctive checkerboard formations on the plains to the south of the capital. To his right on the other side of the Naga River were the noble armies, arranged in more-or-less a straight line with their cavalry on the right flank. The fleets, meanwhile, covered the Naga River so completely that it almost seemed the river was made of wood and nothing more.

August had other forces, too, with several more Legions and loyal nobles he could call upon, but they were to stay in the south and keep the place peaceful in the absence of a Prince or Consul—the Consul of the South having been killed in the last battle between August and Duronius.

Once everyone was in position, they would begin to advance upon the capital. Their advance would be slow since their scouts had indicated serious fortifications were being constructed by the Octavian troops, but Leon had no doubts they’d overwhelm everyone in their way. At least three Legions from the

Western Territories had come to defend the city along with an unknown number of noble levies, but with August's force advancing from the south and Minerva's from the north, they'd be hard-pressed to defend the entire city.

The scouts had also mentioned a steady stream of deserters and city inhabitants fleeing the city, but without solid numbers, Leon was just going to be safe and assume the capital was fully staffed and ready for a long siege.

Leon was looking forward to seeing Minerva again, too. It had been months since he'd last seen her, and he wanted to see her reaction to his ascension and the death of Earthshaker. He wasn't sure if August had told her about both events in their communications, but he hoped the Prince had refrained and kept it a surprise.

More than that, though, was the knowledge that Elise was waiting for him and Maia to come back. It was hazy in the distance to most of the army, but to Leon's seventh-tier eyes, the Heaven's Eye Tower was still perfectly visible in the western districts of the city. Elise was there or in her mother's palace at the Tower's foot, and every fiber of his being yearned to make his way there first and foremost.

But he doubted that the city's defenders would be so accommodating as to just let him make his way to the Tower. He could see the walls they'd constructed in his way, which would have to be surmounted before the Augustine forces would enter the city. The walls were pretty short, but still tall enough that he couldn't see anything immediately beyond them.

It took almost two hours, but *finally*, everyone got fully formed up and in position on the banks of the river. Roland and August were in the lead dreadnought, and when the signal horn was sounded and the flares were launched, that ship began leading the way north. The signal was relayed west by the Legions and east by the nobles, spurring the entire army to begin their march.

Leon gave his signal to Anzu, who began trotting out in front of the Legions. Maia was riding right behind him, lightly grasping his waist to keep herself balanced since she was riding with both of her legs on one side of the griffin rather than astride. She was ready to jump back down once the fighting began.

Behind Anzu were Alix and Valeria, both of them riding borrowed horses. Leon had been quietly hoping that Marcus and Alcander would join him again, but they'd opted to ride with the nobles for this one last push, which Leon could understand—both of their families were in that division of the army—but he was still a little disappointed.

The Legions quickly crossed the plains, occasionally making their way through a few small groves of trees. But as they drew closer, Leon began to feel a quiet sense of unease. He couldn't hear anyone on the other side of the walls reacting to their presence. His senses were sharp enough to be able to pick up on troop movements and horns, despite still being miles away, but he heard nothing.

'What's going on?' he wondered to himself. *'We're too numerous to have gone unnoticed, they have to have seen us... Did they abandon the city? Is that why they're not reacting? Were those reports about desertions underselling just how bad it was?'*

As soon as they drew to within ten miles, Leon projected his magic senses, hoping to see what was going on. He didn't expect it to work, thinking that there would be enchantments in the low walls that would

block that very tactic, so he was more than a little surprised when his magic swept over the walls unimpeded.

He was even more surprised to see that the walls were completely unmanned. There weren't even Legion soldiers or city militiamen behind them.

"What in all the hells?!" he muttered aloud.

[What is it?] Maia asked, her embrace tightening a bit in apprehension.

"Nothing... nobody's preparing to meet us..." Leon replied.

He felt Maia project her senses after his, and a moment later, she confirmed that what he was seeing—or, more accurately, what he *wasn't* seeing—was real. There weren't even any troops in the streets or suburbs immediately neighboring the walls.

Leon scowled. He momentarily contemplated calling the army to a halt, but he wasn't in a hurry to do so. Seven Legions, an army of nobles at least a hundred thousand strong, and hundreds of ships don't just stop on a whim, even if he didn't like what they were marching towards.

But they still had some time.

"Dame Alix! Dame Valeria!" he called out. The two ladies riding behind him quickly advanced almost parallel with him and looked to him for orders. "I need a message passed on! Make sure that the Legates know that there don't seem to be any defenders on those walls and to advance with caution!"

"Yes Sir!" Alix and Valeria replied in unison. Alix peeled off to the west to speak with the Legions while Valeria went east to the riverbank to send a message to the fleets.

They'd just have to deal with whatever this was, though. Leon doubted that August or anyone else would want to call this attack off in favor of sending out more scouts.

A few minutes later, Alix and Valeria returned, their messages relayed to the rest of the commanders. Leon felt a few waves of magic power pass over him as Legates and nobles alike projected their own magic senses to corroborate his report as they drew closer, but no one called the army to a halt. They kept on moving.

Leon took a deep breath to steady himself. Whatever this was, it unnerved him.

It took about two hours to cross the remaining land between them and the walls. Leon and the stronger members of the army could've done it in a matter of minutes, but they were slowed down by the need to stay in formation with the weaker members of the army. But they made it, and not a single Octavian fighter showed himself to challenge their advance. Even as Leon, Anzu, and Maia leaped into the air and landed on the top of the wall, no one revealed themselves to contest their advance. It was as if the entire wall had been constructed, then immediately abandoned.

Or, perhaps more accurately as Leon got an up-close look at the wall itself and the land immediately behind it, abandoned before it was finished. It was only about ten feet high, after all, barely enough to defend against mortals, let alone experienced and powerful mages. It had no crenellations, no towers, no fortifications of any kind. It wasn't even enchanted, so it only took a little bit of applied force from a few sixth-tier mages, and holes were punched into it that allowed the Legions to advance. The same

happened for the nobles, but there were no such obstacles for the fleet to bypass, allowing them to proceed unimpeded.

The Legions that Leon accompanied streamed past the wall and, after only a few thousand more feet, finally began to enter the suburbs of the city. This far from the commercial centers of the capital, the houses were small, though free-standing. Only a few apartment blocks could be seen here and there. What really drew Leon's attention, though, was the utter lack of people on the streets. He could see a few terrified faces in building windows staring at them as they marched past, but there wasn't a soul to be seen outside as the Legions entered the city.

This trend continued as they pressed further in, without a single inhabitant of the city seen outside, guard, soldier, or citizen notwithstanding.

Leon's sense of unease grew with every step he took through the deserted streets, a feeling which seemed to be shared.

"Where *is* everyone?" Alix asked from just behind him.

"The civilians are still here hiding in their homes," Valeria observed, "but I haven't seen a single enemy soldier since we arrived..."

"Neither have I," Leon said, keeping his magic senses projected to scan the city, looking for anything that might indicate where the enemy had vanished to—they'd been there only a couple of days beforehand, when the Augustine scouts had first shown up, leaving Leon more than a little confused.

"Maybe they all left?" Alix suggested.

"That's a possibility, but don't take it for granted," Leon said. "For all we know, they're hiding somewhere in the city ready to ambush us, so keep your guard up."

Leon was believing that idea less and less as more of the city fell into range of his magic senses. Most of the commoners' houses and apartment blocks didn't have the necessary enchantments to block magic senses, so he could see that there were still hundreds of thousands of people at least in the city, despite the empty streets. However, he couldn't sense hide nor hair of any Octavian troops.

[Do you sense anything?] Leon whispered into Maia's mind.

[Nothing concerning,] she replied. [I can't find anyone who might seem hostile. The only possible place they could be hiding would be the palace in the center of the lake or in that one place in the southwest...]

Leon understood what she was saying. Only the Legion headquarters southwest of the city or the Royal Palace had enchantments strong enough to block her magic senses, and she couldn't see any Octavian troops outside of those places.

A few flares went off in the distance, colored bright yellow, the agreed-upon Augustine signal for advancement—it seemed that Leon's group wasn't alone in finding no one to block their passage. Leon quickly fired off a yellow flare of his own and pressed on.

All throughout the city, the Augustine forces advanced without challenge. There was no fighting, no one stopped to pillage the houses or attempt to sack the capital. Everyone was just as unnerved as Leon was with the silence in the city.

After a few hours of slow and steady marching, Leon eventually reached the noble district. But that distance only confused him even more, for he saw through his magic senses that the northern forces had entered the city, as well, meaning that the city garrison had clearly not sallied out to face them.

Minerva and her Legion reached the bridge to the capitol island before anyone else, with Leon coming in only a few minutes later. Minerva herself seemed barely changed in the few months since Leon had seen her last, with the same cold expression and air of professional detachment about her. She was dressed in shining plate armor, but she had her helmet off revealing her sharp features and tied-back black hair. She had dismounted from her huge gray charger to wait at the first of the bridge's gatehouses, which was also curiously missing its guard detail.

When Leon came riding up on Anzu, Minerva's stoic face momentarily warmed, then morphed into shock as she registered his aura, as well as that of Maia riding right behind him.

"Sir Leon!" she called out as Leon approached, Legion battalions in tow. "You're looking quite well!"

"As are you, Dame Minerva," Leon heartily replied as he slid off Anzu's back to greet the knightess. The two briefly clasped each other's wrists. "How was the march south?"

"Not as eventful as your journey north, I should think," Minerva replied. "After leaving the Northern Territories, we didn't see any of Octavius' people at all. Kind of a disappointment, to be honest, I was hoping the Sapphire Paladin might make an appearance so we could match the defeat of Earthshaker that you and your people managed. Good job with that rat bastard, by the way."

With a dark chuckle, Leon said, "I definitely enjoyed that one. That pig-fucker deserved far worse, but I made it painful."

"I can't deny that I wish I'd been there for that. I would've made it *last*. He deserved nothing less than the full might of every hell brought down upon his worthless ass. We'll have to get together once all this is over so you can tell me all the details that I didn't get in my report."

Leon smiled. "Still looking for some vengeance?" Minerva nodded and smirked at him as if he'd just asked the stupidest of questions.

"What we've done up north has hardly quenched *my* fire," she growled.

"Then I suppose we'll just have to find Sapphire and drag her to justice if she won't be so accommodating as to come to us. Maybe wring some catharsis out of her for you."

"Good idea. And congratulations, Leon, on your ascension. Truly, you're putting the rest of us to shame with how quickly you're rising."

"Thanks," Leon replied. His eyes then turned to the lake, which August's fleet had just entered from the Naga River. "We should get moving, don't want to fall behind. And I want to see just what in all the hells is going on here. These guys can't have disappeared too long ago, or the city would've descended into anarchy. They've *got* to be here somewhere..."

“Right...” Minerva agreed, her tone shifting as she stared out over the bridge. “Who’s securing the Legion Headquarters?”

“The 10th and 11th Legions,” Leon answered.

“Ah, yes, I remember. I suppose that leaves this as the only place where there might be some violence...”

“Maybe...” Leon replied as he and Minerva walked out onto the bridge, their followers not far behind. He was starting to relax, having concluded that if there was going to be any fighting, it would’ve started by now.

They pressed on, passing each gatehouse without incident for there still wasn’t any sign of guards. It wasn’t until they finally reached the last gatehouse that someone finally revealed himself, and it was quite possibly the last person that Leon expected.

He saw walking along the road from the Royal Palace toward the bridge the armored form of the Bronze Paladin, his brown armor polished to a mirror shine and glistening in the sunlight of the early afternoon, his immense ax slung over his back. He radiated power, his aura thick and mighty. Though they were both seventh-tier mages, Leon couldn’t help but feel a little intimidated. Bronze, if his aura was anything to go by, completely outclassed the Earthshaker Paladin in sheer power.

“Hail! Dame Minerva and Sir Leon!” he called out to them, his tone stiff and formal, his aura suddenly weighing down upon them in a clear threat, but not enough to truly hinder them. “By the order of His Majesty, King Julius Septimius Taurus, you are all ordered to stand down immediately!”

Leon froze in surprise. His shocked question, which he wasn’t even able to give voice to, was echoed in the minds of every other person behind them in some form or fashion—save for Maia.

‘The King’s awake?!’

Chapter 469: Unexpected Peace

The Sapphire Paladin’s heart raced in her chest. It was midnight, and she hadn’t been able to sleep for almost a full day—there was just too much going on, and even in the few hours she had to rest, sleep wasn’t coming. How could she? After all, August would arrive in the city by morning, and their defenses were not anywhere close to being finished. Cold dread had long settled into her stomach, for she knew that there was no way she was going to be able to hold the city for long.

Prince Octavius had holed up in his room, refusing to leave or to acknowledge the position he was in. He was still acting as if August were hundreds of miles away, as if Duke Duronius weren’t captured, as if Earthshaker hadn’t been defeated, as if their northern army were still intact.

At this point, it was Sapphire alone who was keeping Octavius’ cause alive, and given how many nobles and their retainers were fleeing the city as August’s fleets drew closer and closer, she wasn’t going to get any help. The Royal Palace was almost completely deserted, save for herself, Octavius, and a Legion. Nearly all of the bureaucrats had abandoned them, fleeing into the city to hide with their families or quitting the city entirely.

Even now, Sapphire wanted to leave. Being a noblewoman, she wasn't too attached to the Bull Kingdom as a state, and she knew that as a seventh-tier mage, she could find employment no matter where she went. If she wasn't going to become Queen, then leaving the Bull Kingdom would be the best option.

But if there was one thing she hated, it was quitting. All wasn't lost here, there were still noble armies waiting to be called upon in the west, along with a few spare Legions. If she and Octavius left the capital, they could still salvage the mess that had been made of this whole endeavor.

Committing herself to this one last chance, Sapphire rose from her bed where she'd been trying to get just a little bit of sleep and quickly dressed. Before she could leave her room, however, a loud rapping came from her door.

She rolled her eyes in annoyance, presuming it to be one of her assistants bringing her word about some other problem that everyone else was too braindead to solve without her. Again, someone knocked on her door, irritating her to no end—this was the middle of the night during the brief time she'd set aside for sleep, disturbing her might as well be a death sentence given the circumstances.

Straightening out her clothes, she walked over to the door as the rapping continued, angrily opening it and shouting, "WHAT?!"

Any further shouting died in her throat as she registered who was on the other side of the door. Two men stood before her; the first was thin, short, and possessed third-tier strength. He was one of her lower-ranked assistants, one of the few who was assigned to stay outside her chambers during the night shift.

The other man was far larger, extremely tall with broad shoulders, his powerful frame clad in bronze armor with gently glowing runes along the joints.

"Dame Sapphire..." the Bronze Paladin growled, clearly annoyed at her attitude. "Come with me."

His tone brooked no argument. His aura pressed down upon her, showing full well that any resistance on her part was going to be futile. She'd never beat him in a straight fight, and as the senior Paladin, he technically outranked her.

She quietly followed him, quiet as a mouse and almost as meek. If the Bronze Paladin was here instead of guarding the King, it meant nothing good for her, she knew.

They didn't go far; Bronze led her to Octavius' conference room where numerous others were already waiting for them, consisting of the three Legates of the Legions stationed in the city, along with a dozen other administrative Legates and a few of the handful of bureaucrats still in the palace.

"Have a seat," Bronze said as he sat down to the right of the head of the table. "We have a serious matter to discuss."

Sapphire did as she was bid, not saying a word, and keeping her eyes on Bronze the whole time.

Bronze was silent for a long moment, just letting his aura completely overpower everyone else's in the room, exerting his authority by his presence alone.

After what seemed like an eternity, he finally said, "King Julius has woken up."

—

“I apologize for the abruptness of all this,” Bronze said as Leon and Minerva stared at him in abject shock. “I had a message sent to Prince August, but it clearly didn’t arrive in time to stop the advance. I had the Legions defending the city pull back, though. They’re currently staying at the Legion Headquarters and here at the palace.”

Minerva and Leon continued to stare at him for a moment longer. Minerva was the first to find her words, and she loudly said, “Hold on, hold on, hold on!”

“Dame Minerva,” Bronze intoned, his deep voice and deeper aura settling into something that felt more like appeasement than threatening as it became clear that neither Minerva nor Leon were going to fight him, “time is of the essence, here. His Majesty only awoke for a short time, but it was long enough for me and Penitent to explain how badly things have gone over the past year. He gave only one order: for everyone to stand down. I hope you comply with that order, I’d hate to have to fight Sir Leon, here. Or should I say, ‘Thunder Knight’? Maybe ‘the White Griffin’?”

“Uh... neither of those, please,” Leon murmured as the reality of what was happening started to settle in his mind. He turned around and said to the equally baffled people following them, “Looks like there’s going to be no fighting today! Hands off weapons!”

With Leon’s loud shout spurring her on, Minerva turned around to give even more specific orders, having all but a single battalion fall back to a few large squares around the far side of the bridge to wait.

“Thank you,” Bronze said as the Legions began to slowly shuffle back off the bridge, relaying what they had just heard as they went. He then turned his attention to the lake around them, where he could see Prince August’s ship making for the capitol island while the rest of the ships spread out on the lake. “Looks like Prince August received my message if he’s coming with only a single ship. How about we go and meet him, and we can talk for a while on the way?”

“That’s fine with me,” Minerva said, glancing at Leon who nodded in accordance.

“Very well!” Bronze said, his aura lightening considerably as his mood turned far more cheerful. He then started walking off toward the capitol’s docks where August would try to have his ship moored. Minerva, Leon, and their retainers closely followed.

“By the way, Sir Leon,” Bronze said as they walked, “congratulations. I sensed your power as soon as I saw you. Seventh-tier at your age? Truly, words can’t express how impressed I am at your achievement.”

“Thank you,” Leon replied.

“And who, may I ask, is that young woman riding your griffin?”

Leon smiled and said, “That’s Naiad, my lover.”

“I see...” Bronze murmured. “I suppose she’s not a threat, then? Her power does worry me a little bit.”

Leon glanced back to see Maia smirking at him as they discussed her.

“Oh, she’ll threaten you for sure if you do something to piss her off,” he said, winking at his lady as he spoke, “but she doesn’t pose much of a threat to anyone if you don’t attack her first.”

“Wasn’t going to do that,” Bronze said, chuckling. “I may be an old man, but I’m not so old that I’m ready to die!”

“Sir Bronze,” Minerva said, her tone deadly serious, “please tell us more about His Majesty. What happened with the King?”

“I can give you the broad strokes, but as I don’t want to tell this story a thousand times, I’ll not get too detailed until we meet up with Prince August,” Bronze replied. “That doctor that Prince August hired from down south, the one from the Sacred Golden Empire. Do you remember him?”

“I do.”

“He managed to get his pompous mitts on the last of the items he needed to brew a potion to assist the King with his recovery.”

“I knew he was injured and indisposed—I mean, who hasn’t at this point? —but why now?”

“Can’t speak to that,” Bronze replied in a mildly amused tone. “I can tell you, though, Penitent and I were more than a little surprised when he showed up with the potion in hand ready to heal His Majesty. Regardless of all that, it worked. The King woke from his slumber for a few minutes before returning to sleep. He should wake again soon as he begins to regain his strength, but for now, Penitent and I are doing what we can to ensure that no more citizens of the Kingdom die in this war.”

“About damned time,” Leon said, not bothering to lower his voice. “If all it took was the two of you making a move, you should’ve done so sooner.”

“I understand your anger, Sir Leon,” Bronze replied, not fazed at all by Leon’s accusatory tone. “However, legally speaking, we Paladins are not allowed to move without the King’s permission. His Majesty will be perfectly within his rights to have my colleagues who pledged themselves to the Princes sent to the headsman.”

“Hiding behind the law, huh?” Leon countered. “Prince Trajan was murdered by these people, and you could’ve stopped them.”

Bronze went quiet, but he directed a disapproving glance over his shoulder to Leon.

“I agree with Sir Leon,” Minerva quietly stated. “If His Majesty had to choose between the Kingdom as it is now after months of war or having to punish a few of his most loyal Paladins, I think I know which one he’d prefer.”

“You two don’t have to agree with my decision,” Bronze responded, his voice sounding like it was passing through clenched teeth, “but I hope you can understand why I chose to do what I did. I am a Paladin, and my first duty is to the King, not the Kingdom. I won’t raise my blade against my own countrymen unless I am fulfilling direct orders from my King.”

Everyone seemed to recognize that they were getting nowhere at this point, so they went quiet and proceeded to the dock in silence, but the heavy atmosphere of accusation remained.

For his part, Leon wasn't too angry, but his opinion of the Bronze Paladin had diminished greatly since he had come to Trajan's aid during the war with Talfar.

'I guess he could choose the Kingdom over the King then, but not this time...' he thought.

August's ship couldn't easily come in to the dock given its size, so rather than waiting for a solution, Leon watched as August, Roland, and a number of their subordinates climbed into rowboats and were lowered into the water. Leon could see even from hundreds of feet away the look of anxiety and desperation on the Prince's face as he was ferried to the dock.

That look didn't seem forced, for as soon as August climbed out of the boat and onto dry land, he almost ran to Bronze and demanded, "Where is my father?! Take me to him at once!"

"He remains in his villa, Your Highness," Bronze said, his voice cheerful enough that it was impossible to guess the contention he'd just had with Leon and Minerva.

Without waiting for another word, August took off down the streets of the palace complex toward the villa, moving as fast as he could while still maintaining his Royal dignity.

"Sir Leon, you and I should follow His Highness," Bronze stated. "Dame Minerva, you should take charge here and prevent any violence from breaking out. With the King awake, this war is over."

Minerva briefly glared at Bronze, but she made no arguments, instead silently walking down the docks toward the disembarking soldiers and cutting Roland off before he could follow the Prince. Leon and Bronze, meanwhile, turned to do just that, walking after August while Alix, Valeria, Maia, and Anzu waited by the docks.

Leon had some ideas about why Bronze wanted him to follow, but if what he was saying was true and that the war was over with the King awake, he didn't think there was much harm in seeing what was needed of him.

They walked in silence for a long time, long enough to leave just about everyone else behind. With August and his small entourage hurrying ahead of them, they were practically alone.

"You know..." Bronze hesitantly said, "you'll probably be offered a position as a Paladin once His Majesty fully recovers."

"Good for me, I guess," Leon replied. He then took a deep breath and said, "I'm going to resign after this war is officially concluded. I'm not cut out to be a Legion knight, and I have other things to do than stick around. If I'm offered a position as a Paladin, then I'm going to turn it down."

Bronze's response was merely a quiet, "I see..."

The two proceeded onward in silence from then on, passing the checkpoint to enter the private forest where the King's villa lay, and finally laying eyes on the villa itself. Leon had never been to the place, so its relatively small size struck him as a bit odd, but the robust defensive enchantments dispelled any doubt as to where he was—no mundane place would be so heavily fortified, especially not one that lacked outer walls and towers.

Bronze wasted no time leading the two of them inside, through the courtyard where August's small guard detail had been left, and to the back of the building where the King's bedroom was.

Upon entering, Leon was momentarily shocked to see the King himself, the thin, weak, unhealthy looking man laying asleep in a large bed that made him look even smaller. His aura was as weak as his body appeared, but Leon could feel a hidden power there that defied his attempts to perceive it. If he had to guess, then he'd say the King was probably eighth-tier even though by all other accounts he looked weaker than a first-tier mage.

The man next to the King's bed likewise drew Leon's attention, for his aura indicated he was stronger than the seventh-tier, too. However, before Leon could make any more observations about the man, he noticed that the Sapphire Paladin, Prince Octavius, and the Penitent Paladin were all waiting in the corner of the room.

Octavius looked miserable, despite being dressed in clothes fine enough to sell for a mid-sized farm in the countryside. Sapphire was equally downtrodden, her lustrous golden hair now matted down and unwashed, her face lacking any makeup, her clothes simple and unbefitting of a woman of her status under normal conditions—she looked like she was getting ready for bed, not about to present herself to the Bull King.

Penitent, meanwhile, was dressed in shabby brown robes. His aura was potent, though, even more so than Bronze's, leaving Leon to conclude that he was probably the most powerful of the two elder Paladins.

Someone Leon almost wasn't expecting to see was on the other side of the room—Leon recognized the bookish and scholarly looks of Prince Antonius, the Third Prince. Both of them politely nodded to each other in recognition, but neither spoke a word.

Finally, Leon's eyes landed upon August, who was kneeling next to the bed, the King's hand in his.

The only people in the city who Leon figured would be considered missing from this meeting were Roland and Brimstone—both of whom were still coordinating August's occupation of the capital with Minerva.

"How long will he be awake for?" August asked the disturbingly powerful man preparing something by the King's bedside table.

"I can't say, could be a few minutes, could be as long as an hour," the man replied, his tone lacking any and all respect that would normally fill someone's voice when speaking with Royalty, but he didn't seem to care in the slightest. Leon noticed that no one else seemed to care, either, for no one spoke up to chastise him for his casual demeanor.

"You can't do better than that?" August asked, to the doctor's—Leon could think of no one else this man could be—obvious displeasure. He set aside what he was doing to look the young Prince in the eye

"August, your father has been unconscious for years. That doesn't mean he'll be full of energy when he wakes up. It's going to be a few days or even weeks for him to recover enough to get out of bed, I'd say, let alone stay awake for longer than a few hours. But worry not, he'll make a full recovery in a matter of months, I can assure you of that now that he's managed to wake up once."

August audibly gulped and forced himself to remain calm. "Thank you. Thank you."

“Don’t thank me, I’m just doing what you hired me to do,” the doctor replied as he turned his attention back to what he was doing. Only a few seconds later, though, it seemed he finished his work, as he was left with a handful of some kind of rough white-ish powder wrapped in a handkerchief. He then held the handkerchief under the King’s nose for a moment, letting the King breathe in some of the powder.

And then the King opened his eyes.

Chapter 470: King Julius

The King opened his eyes excruciatingly slowly, but Leon could tell that even then, it took his mind a few extra minutes to catch up. His gaze was hazy and unfocused, his blank expression barely changing even as August began frantically calling out to him.

“Father! Father, I’m here! Can you hear me?!” August practically shouted as he hurriedly took the King’s hand.

“August!” the doctor interrupted as August began to lightly shake the King. “Give your father a moment! Step back!”

The doctor’s aura spiked, impressing his will upon the young Prince. August was forced back, and the doctor stepped between him and the King.

“I’m... sorry, I lost myself for a moment,” August whispered as he took a few steps backward and composed himself.

Antonius walked over and clasped his shoulder. “We’re all excited that Father is waking up, but let’s give him some space to come to his senses.”

“Yes, yes, you’re right,” August replied as he let Antonius lead him away from the bed and closer to the opposite wall from where Octavius was waiting.

Leon redirected his attention to the Second Prince, and he saw that Octavius was quite blatantly not looking at the King, and instead staring at the floor. Every few seconds, though, he’d look up and hatefully glare at August, Bronze, Penitent, and even once or twice directed his glare in Leon’s direction. Otherwise, he looked pathetic, barely holding himself up with anything that might resemble noble posture, bags were forming under his eyes, and his clothes were wrinkled.

Leon, relishing Octavius’ current circumstances a bit, returned the Prince’s glares with a victorious smile. He wondered how much the Second Prince knew about his exploits under August since he didn’t seem to be too wary of Leon even though Leon’s power now vastly outstripped his own fifth-tier powers.

He was a bit worried about the Prince’s punishment, though. By all accounts, Octavius hadn’t been nearly so far gone when the King secluded himself as he’d gotten by the time the war started, so Leon could see the possibility that Octavius might be forgiven by the King. If that happened—

“... Kyros...?” asked a weak, hoarse, pained voice.

Leon’s heart almost stopped as he recognized the name of his grandfather, and he slowly turned his gaze away from Octavius and back to the King. He saw the King’s eyes stuck on him, but still unfocused enough that his eyes almost seemed to be staring at the wall behind Leon.

"... Kyros...!" the King repeated as he began struggling to push himself up in bed, his eyes still fixed in Leon's direction.

The doctor rushed to the King's side while everyone else stared at Leon in utter bewilderment. Most of them knew who he was, of course, but it was still beyond startling that the King had been able to recognize him as a member of House Raime despite the state he was in.

"I'm not Kyros Raime," Leon said, not knowing what exactly else he could say.

It didn't seem anyone else was listening, though, as their eyes quickly turned back to the King as the doctor managed to get him up and tucked enough pillows behind him to keep him comfortable for a little while.

"Be quick, I can't say for sure how long he will be awake," the doctor said as he then stepped back, his movement drawing the King's attention away from Leon.

"Father!" August cried out as he rushed forward, ignoring Antonius' half-hearted attempts to hold him back. The youngest Prince fell to his knees at the side of the bed as he took his father's hand and brought the King's knuckles to his lips.

The King took a deep breath that seemed to steady him a bit, and his eyes focused on August.

"I... know you..." he quietly stated. "August...?"

"Yes, Father, it's me!" August said as tears began to fall from his eyes. "You're back!"

"That... can't be..." the King muttered as he squinted at him. "August... is..."

"Your Majesty," Penitent said as he stepped forward, his surprisingly mild and neutral voice cutting straight through to the King's mind as far as Leon could tell, for the King immediately turned his eyes toward the Paladin. "You've been asleep for a long time. Many things have changed in these past few years. Do you remember what Bronze and I told you the last time you were awake?"

"The... last time...?" the King murmured as he scrunched his face up in thought. "Things are... cloudy, I can't..." The King went silent as his expression cleared up into one of deadly seriousness. "I remember you telling me something about a war."

"Yes, Your Majesty, there have been two, but the most pressing concern has been the conflict between your sons, who you left to steward the realm in your absence."

"Conflict... Yes, I'm starting to remember," the King said, his voice growing stronger with every word until it sounded almost normal, if a little tired.

"Your Majesty," Penitent continued, "the perpetrators of this violence have been brought before you. The Princes Octavius and August have been fighting for months, now. The death toll stands in the hundreds of thousands."

The King didn't verbally respond, but he managed to sit up a little straighter as a hint of color appeared in his deathly pale cheeks. He turned to look at August, still kneeling at the side of his bed, and at Octavius, who was sitting down and refusing to meet his father's eyes.

"Your Majesty, we need guidance in this critical time, so much is different than what it was only a few years ago," Bronze said, his deep voice taking on a pleading tone that Leon hadn't thought him capable of.

The King took a deep breath as the room fell into a silence that swiftly became oppressive. No one wanted to speak while the King considered the problem as best as he was able.

"The Legions?" he finally managed to ask after what seemed like an eternity. "Where are they right now?"

"A couple have been completely destroyed, but most of them are currently deployed in and around the capital," Bronze replied.

"Send them back to their assigned locations," the King ordered, before immediately reconsidering. "Have five remain around the capital, I'll leave it to you to decide which to choose. What about the nobles?"

"Many of them have seen their personal armies destroyed and many more have been killed," Penitent explained as quickly as he could. "There are others still deployed in the field with their retainers, however."

"Send their retainers home, too," the King croaked. "Tarry not, I want them back in their palaces and castles as fast as human legs can carry them. Their Lords, however, must stay and give an accounting of themselves to me personally. All who disobey are to be branded traitors and subject to all punitive measures that apply."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Bronze said, wasting not a moment as he ducked out of the door to relay the King's orders to the waiting soldiers outside, who would then pass those orders on to everyone else in the capital.

Leon briefly contemplated how everyone would take it. The King was back, so there was cause to celebrate, especially since it heralded the end of hostilities. However, August had come so close to seizing power in his own right and his supporters had come so far that he could easily see many nobles and even some Legates pushing him to oust his father and take the throne now that they were so close to it.

He didn't think such sentiments would get very far, though, given what he could sense about the King's injured aura and with both the Bronze and Penitent Paladins enforcing the King's will.

"Where are the others?" the King inquired. "My wife. Isabelle, Stefania? Trajan? Why are so few here to see me?"

"Most of them are out of the city," Penitent replied. "The Queen is currently being held in house arrest, while Brimstone is out in the city ensuring that order is kept while it remains under Legion occupation. Earthshaker is dead, killed by Sir Leon over there." Penitent gave Leon a quick nod of acknowledgment, while his tone lacked any tone of accusation that might've worried Leon some.

"Sir 'Leon'?" the King asked as his eyes returned to Leon. "You look familiar, yet I don't know you. Identify yourself."

Leon didn't take a single step forward, nor did he genuflect before the King. Instead, he simply said, "I am Leon Ursus, Your Majesty."

The King looked Leon over completely, taking full stock of Leon's appearance—no armor, the simple sword strapped to his hip, his build, hair, facial features, aura...

"You don't look like a Valeman," the King said after taking Leon's measure. "You look more like a Raime."

Leon sensed the eyes of everyone else in the room flickering back to him, but his gaze remained unwaveringly fixed on the King.

"So it would seem," he said, neither confirming nor denying the blatant accusation in the King's words.

King Julius glared at Leon for a moment before seeming to let the matter rest. He turned instead to his children. He didn't, however, speak to August or Octavius first.

"Antonius!" he said as a warm smile broke out across his face. "Come here!"

The young scholarly Prince put on a beaming smile as he strode forward and embraced his father. King Julius held the Third Prince close for a few seconds as they whispered into each other's ear, and when Antonius pulled away, he had tears in his eyes and a smile wider than the Naga River plastered over his face. He returned to where he'd been standing in the room and politely went quiet.

"Now, you two," Julius growled as he turned to regard his feuding sons. "What in the name of our Honored Ancestors have you two done?!" He was clearly gaining strength as he more fully woke up, and by his voice alone Leon might've thought him recovered in full. The only thing that proved this vigor didn't extend into the rest of his body was its complete lack of energy; the King remained in his bed barely even moving his head to glare threateningly at August and Octavius.

"Father..." August began, his voice cracking as he went quiet. Octavius wasn't even able to get that much out as he could only sit there in his chair, hunched over like a beaten dog, and tellingly not meeting his father's gaze.

"Eh? What was that?" Julius loudly said as he tried to lean forward. "You must forgive me, your father is an old and sick man, so I can't hear you! I mean, you *must* be speaking now, because I *know* you would *never* defy me when I demand answers! So speak up!"

"Uncle Trajan is dead, Father!" August cried as tears began flowing down his cheeks. "He was murdered by the Earthshaker Paladin on Octavius' orders!"

The King sank back into his pillows as shock froze his expression in place. He stared at August in disbelief. Then, his head began to slowly turn towards his second son. Still, Octavius didn't make eye contact.

"A damning accusation," the King murmured. "Octavius, my boy, come here."

Julius extended a shaking arm out to Octavius, his hand outstretched for the Prince to take.

But Octavius ignored it and said not a word.

After a long, tense moment, Julius let his arm fall down upon his bed covers. "Will you not even speak in your own defense?" he quietly asked. "Is this crime that your younger brother is accusing you of true?"

"He's not my brother," Octavius whispered.

"I must've not heard you correctly," Julius said, his paradoxically vibrant light brown eyes narrowing in anger, "repeat yourself, and *speak up*."

"August is a bastard!" Octavius shouted. "He has no right to our name and no right to call himself a part of our family! He's nothing more than a baseborn bastard and if you had *any* sense in your skull you would've given him and that whore mother of his to the elements upon his birth!"

Julius was speechless as he stared at his son in shock. Leon could practically see the man's heart shattering before his eyes, and he couldn't help but feel terrible on the King's behalf. Leon had no idea what kind of family dynamic existed before he became embroiled in their disagreements, but if the King's expression of utter shock and surprise was anything to go by, it had been, at least on the surface, relatively harmonious.

And now the King was seeing just how badly it had splintered.

Julius didn't languish in sadness for long. Only a few seconds after his face fell, he began struggling to rise as his face contorted in fury. "You would *dare*... to speak of your family in... such a way!" he sputtered as he struggled, with August, Bronze, and Penitent all rushing forward to aid the King as he tried to stand.

"Please, King Julius," the doctor said, though it seemed clear to Leon from his unenthusiastic tone that it was a token effort at best, "you need your rest, don't try to stand."

"I'll damn well stand!" the King shouted, his voice shaking. His eyes had locked Octavius in place, the Prince shrinking down into his chair like a child that knew he was about to be punished.

For a moment, Leon saw Octavius glance at Sapphire pleadingly, but the blond Paladin didn't once look in his direction. She simply stood by, unmoving, as if she were a statue and nothing around pertained to her.

"I... *will*!" the King shouted as those who'd come to help him began entreating him not to rise. However, his weakness was not one he was yet able to overcome, and Julius slumped back down into his pillows. "You there! Sir Leon!"

Leon looked up in surprise, unprepared for being called out.

"I order you to do what I cannot! Discipline that insolent child!"

Leon fought to contain his smile as the King's furious look told him exactly what to do. With his lightning magic and without any hesitation, he seemed to cross the room in a single step to the sound of thunder. Antonius and August held their ears in pain from such a loud sound in such a closed environment, but everyone else was mildly irritated at worst.

Octavius, however, barely had a chance to move his hands upward before Leon's open hand struck him across the cheek so hard that it lifted him out of his chair and sent him sprawling across the floor.

"Y-You!" he shouted as he turned back up to Leon, blood flowing from a cut on his lip and his cheek rapidly turning red. He looked more pained by the humiliation and surprise than the actual pain, though.

And that didn't satisfy the King. "AGAIN!" he roared, to which Leon was only too happy to comply.

The lightning mage backhanded the arrogant Prince, sending him face-first into the wall.

"You *will* explain yourself to me!" the King wheezed. "What did... you *do*?!"

"Give him some space, everyone," the doctor suddenly interjected as he pushed August aside to take the King's arm and rested his fingers against his wrist.

"Arrest... arrest him..." the King groaned as he sank further into his bed, his eyes slowly closing.

Leon then took a little initiative and kicked Octavius in the stomach, ensuring he wasn't going to try and get off the floor. Leon wasn't going to get the immediate execution he'd wanted, but he knew that the arrest order was likely the best he was going to get, at least for the time being.

For his part, Octavius did little more than lay there on the ground not even trying to get back up. It was as if all Royal dignity had left him, leaving him not even capable of trying to get back to his feet.

"I'll escort the Prince back to his chambers and set up a guard detail," Bronze said as he picked Octavius up by the scruff of his neck like a kitten. "Let's go, boy. If I have to carry you out of here, I will, but it'll demean your entire family, so I'd prefer if you walk out of here on your own two feet."

Bronze practically pushed Octavius toward the door, making little attempt to be gentle. The Paladin gave Leon a quick nod as he walked past, and though Leon was tempted to ignore it, he at least gave Bronze a quick nod in return.

The King had fallen back to sleep, whatever the doctor had done to wake him back up having worn off. Everyone else was quiet for a few seconds following Bronze taking Octavius away, but once it was clear that the King was out again, August turned to the doctor and asked, "How long until my father wakes again?"

"I can't say for certain, but it should be sometime tomorrow," the doctor replied. "He should have enough strength then to eat on his own, so ensure that his servants are ready. He'll be confined to his bed for at least a few days, perhaps as long as a week depending on how his recovery goes. He should be fully ambulatory and no longer need my assistance after that, though, so I will go and prepare my things for my departure."

Without another word, the doctor quite unceremoniously followed Bronze out of the room.

"I think I'll go and see to my affairs, too," Leon said before anyone could respond. "I've got some things of my own to get in order."

"Sir Leon!" August cried out, stopping Leon in his tracks. "Please, stay awhile, there're many things we have to discuss!"

"Whatever you have to speak with me about can wait," Leon replied. "I have a couple of ladies waiting on me, and they are where my priorities lie."

August looked like he wanted to argue, but then he thought better of it.

"I understand, Sir Leon. I'll send for you tomorrow."

And like that, Leon left them to work out their own devices. He was a bit curious as to what would happen with Sapphire, but at this point, all he wanted to do was to get Maia and his retinue and then find Elise. Everything else could wait.