
[130] [Gloves Off]

If there was one thing Rick hadn't expected about this whole "being a noble in times of war" business, it was the wait. Logically, he knew that this was perfectly normal for things to move slowly. Armies were slow things, with logistics and tactics and headaches all over. Who had command over what? What was the general strategy? Where would the humans be tucked safely? How would you make sure they weren't killed? Rick was all too familiar with the complications that came with handling an army... But that didn't stop him from wishing he was up against the Pinielf and her ferals again.

At least the ferals had the decency to just show up and lunge at your throat.

Meanwhile, the Dakrtons had marched up all the way to "I see your banners" distance, and... set up camp. No, that wasn't the proper term. They set up fortifications. By the end of the day they had proper dirt mounds and wooden walls with spikes, alongside a dozen lookout towers. It was the sort of "shoddy" hastily put together Elf-made wood that would rot away within a month. But they didn't need it to last that long anyway.

Still, it was unnerving to watch as they spent a whole day putting together a miniature fortified tent-city at his doorstep.

A tent-city that could house his own forces five times over.

"I still think we should be fighting from the walls," Eva said next to him, staring hard at the yellow and red banners the Darktons had raised over their camp.

"Then we'd die to their fliers." Rick sighed, sparing a glance at the twenty-odd figures circling overhead the camp.

As much as Rick wanted to trust Raphaella and her inventions, it was still one plane against an army that had a lot of flying maidens. The aircraft was too experimental and too untested to be trusted to fight one - let alone dozens if not a hundred or so - enemies in the air. A siege from an enemy that retained air superiority was a nightmare scenario; they might as well surrender or else risk the city being burnt to the ground... again.

Rick also didn't trust Sinco's citizens. Things looked peaceful and content right now, but that could turn on a dime if shit hit the fan. Rick gave them 50/50 odds they'd start plotting how to get past the tribe and throw him over the walls if rationing came back.

“I know we came up with this strategy, but I still don’t like how alien it feels.” The Vampire spared him a glance. “This is like trying to cast a ritual you only know in theory.”

“This whole thing could’ve been avoided if I hadn’t killed Thorley.” Rick rubbed the bridge of his nose. Thorley Darkton, the previous Lord of Sinco, and some sort of cousin thrice removed from the guy currently leading the Darkton household.

“Don’t say that too loudly. It wouldn’t do good for morale.” She chided in turn.

“Yeah, yeah...”

The annoying part was that Rick had hoped to sway the Aubrian court into being greedy.

One box full of richly dyed purple cloth, and promises of being able to make more by the cartful every month? That was more gold than most of them would get to see in a year. But he’d underestimated either just how greedy they could get, or how important it was that Thorley was dead. Eva would’ve wanted him to believe that the Darktons were here for honor, that murdering a noble in cold blood was the sort of loss-of-face that could spur generational wars.

Rick was more inclined to believe it was greed, though.

Still, there was a little hope negotiations could make the Darktons back off, it was the whole reason why he’d sent a message asking for a parley (according to Eva, it was protocol for the defender to ask, which felt dumb, but whatever).

“What do you figure our chances of getting them to leave are?” He asked as he noticed a figure breaking off of the Darkton encampment.

“Well, it depends. We’re not just facing the Darktons, we’re facing the court of Aubria. Right now their flags are displaying just one color, but once the official battle starts each of them will be sporting their own insignias.” Eva quickly chimed in. “The Darktons lead the court since the Viscount is the highest noble title among them, but they are still beholdened to the court. We don’t necessarily need to convince the Darktons to step back, just get the court to do so.”

“Mhm.” Rick’s brows furrowed ever so slightly when he noticed the one approaching was not the messenger he’d sent that morning.

“I never did bother to learn of the politics of other cities back when...” She lingered on the words, lowering her gaze. “Sorry, there’s just not much I know about the Aubrian court. The only thing that could be of use here is trying to minimize chances of needless friction. To convince them to step down, you’d need to present yourself as one of them, to make your case the way they would.”

He made a non-committal sound, gaze focused now on the Centaur that was approaching, decked in light armor and brandishing the black, red, and white checker-pattern of the Darkton household.

“In courtly dealings, subtlety is the key. Little details speak loudly. What maidens you bring to the parley will send a message just as loud as what you say during the exchange. How you greet them is equally-”

The Centaur came to a halt a hundred meters or so from, and in one fluid motion, flung a sack she'd been carrying. Immediately the camp exploded into alarms, a dozen maidens surged, placing themselves between Rick and the incoming projectile. Before the sack had even reached its zenith, there were already three Orcs with shields between him and the other side, Eva having shoved him to the ground.

Half a second passed, no explosions, no bursts of violence.

“Can I get up now?” Rick asked, not a drop of sarcasm in his voice as he glanced up at the Vampire.

“Clear.” Someone called out, only then did Eva help him back up to his feet.

A Doggirl had approached, carrying the sack. “My Lord.” She spoke, immediately kneeling and presenting the open sack.

It was a head wrapped in purple cloth.

This was not a maiden bonded to him, she'd been someone from the militia. Everyone had known this might be a possibility. Rick's face became a mask of impassivity, gloved hands clenching. “I see,” he said in a cold voice, turning to Eva. “Could someone call for Rosalind? I think I've got a new message we need to deliver.”

Viscount Gabriel Darkton sat within his tent, carefully pouring over the various maps that the flying knights made that very day. Though they were all very alike to one another, the Darkton leader had long since learned of the information that could be glimpsed from the differences. Some of his knights were great at noticing the terrain itself, while another could pay closer attention to possible locations a maiden might hide in. By and large, however, it seemed that the information from knight-Sarina had been mostly accurate.

The self-proclaimed Lord of Sinco had chosen to meet them in battle away from his own walls. Instead, he'd created a labyrinth of open trenches that spread out hundreds of meters.

"This 'Lord Rick' is either a fool and a madman." The one to speak up had been Gabriel's own son, Carl. "Does he think this will protect him better than the city walls?"

Stroking his graying beard, Gabriel put down the map, glancing at his progeny. "Assume he is neither a fool nor mad. And look again. What do you see?"

Immediately the tent went quiet, a dozen different nobles focused their attention on the two Darktons, the current leader and the future heir. The young man realized the hidden test behind the question and set down the paper.

"I would assume these odd fortifications are mainly to protect from our cavalry, but the walls would be better for this in every way," the heir declared carefully. "They grant no advantage in height, they are not good positions to launch ranged attacks."

"Both correct." Gabriel nodded, his statement drew a slight smile of the young-man, one he quickly cut down. "So what do they provide that a wall wouldn't?"

Carl did not get his opportunity to answer the question, the tent opening as a knight hurried within. "My Lords!" She called out, falling down to a knee and lowering her head. "The enemy has sent a small detachment!"

"Of what size?" Carl had been the first to speak up.

"Thirty Orcs, and a Centaur."

The tent immediately burst into laughter.

"The enemy Lord is on the Centaur." The knight stated.

"A madman, then."

"Perhaps he thought the head we sent was to mean we were open to parlay." Gabriel chuckled, shaking his head in amusement.

"If that is the case, one would have to wonder at the barbarism of his world." Lord Haulbrun chuckled heartily. "Or perhaps it is that spending time with those wildlings has turned him savage?"

"Bring a small force, let us see the little Lord run off." The Darkton patriarch declared evenly.

Though his words had been jovial as the nobles began a friendly spat over who'd have the honor to "scare" the otherworlder off, Gabriel was slightly uneasy, and that was a feeling he'd learned not to ignore. So he turned to the knight, gesturing for her to stand. "Call for my captain, she will be accompanying me."

"Well I'll be, he did only bring thirty Orcs." Carl muttered from his Centaur next to Gabriel. Both of them had their knight captains at their sides, just in case anything unexpected happened.

Their camp had been set-up roughly four kilometers north from the enemy's own fortifications, a splotch of brown almost on the horizon. The land between them was a vastly open grassland with little cover other than the odd rock or tree. To the east was the start of the very edges of the Great Forest, to the west the grassland continued on through hills as far as the eye could see.

Exactly half-way between the brown splotch that was the enemy camp and their own was a Centaur leading a group of thirty large green figures. Gabriel's eyes were not what they used to be, but he trusted Carl's affirmation of their numbers was valid enough.

"Do you sense anything, Cecilia?"

At his question, the maiden next to him stirred, her wings ruffling for a moment. "I do not, Viscount. Though if the reports are accurate, he possesses a Sabertooth among his ranks. If she is in his shadow, sensing her at this distance would prove impossible."

"Should we head out and greet him, father?" Carl offered with an amused chuckle.

Behind them, a hundred and fifty knights shifted slightly. Further back, the camp had been agitated, and there was a great deal of maidens and humans that were peeking over. Who would want to miss whatever... this was?

"No." Gabriel finally decided.

"Maybe we could send out the cavalry and catch him." Lord Haulbrun spoke up. "Once he's in our grasp, there isn't much we need from Sinco."

The patriarch shook his head slowly at that. "Where's the honor in that? We've not had a good battle in decades."

Of course, everyone present knew the main culprit for that, though none spoke up about it. The Aubrian court was nothing if not loyal to the Earl, Vittchat had guaranteed their coffers filled out. But though growing rich was nothing to complain about, Gabriel remembered the time before the Earl had taken his title. A time with the noble houses being far more willing to test their mettle against one another.

“Looks like he’s doing something. About time.”

Gabriel squinted, the Centaur had come to a stop roughly a kilometer away from the camp. He couldn’t make-out any details of the rider other than that the rider was fully decked in armor. There were no banners, no flags, no uniform. He might as well have been some vagrant knight commander looking for a noble house to join.

The rider pulled out something that’d been hanging loosely at the side of his saddle, a large cone. Were the sun not approaching the horizon, Gabriel might have missed the telltale glow of enchantments.

A moment later, a voice boomed out, clearly empowered by the spells on the item. “Ahem, testing, testing. One two. You guys hear me, right? Could one of you wave your flag or something so I’m sure you’re listening?” He waited a moment. “There we go, awesome.”

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder back at his forces. Indeed one of the flags was being waved around from within the encampment. He made a note to seek out who’d done that and whether they were important enough to avoid punishment.

“Ahem, to all the people in the camp following the greedy fuckwits that are the noble houses. The sole reason why you are here is because I know how to make purple dyed cloth. The people in charge of you will get you killed, horribly, because they want their coffers nice and full, probably to compensate for having small dicks or something. Not really my business, but certainly yours.”

There was a very long stunned silence, Gabriel’s eyes had widened in shock, unable to believe his ears.

“That-”

“To the leadership currently at the head of this shitshow. If I lose, I have set things up so that you will never be able to make the purple dyed cloth. All facilities will be destroyed, the secrets of my methods erased, and you will be left with nothing. Use your truth telling enchantments if you must, but know that you have no way of getting what you want from me through this battle.” The statement was followed by a laugh, drowning out the barked commands from the nobles and maidens. “I am, however, making a promise. To any

man, woman, or maiden. Leave now, do not fight today, and I will give you the same purple cloth your masters are willing to get even if it costs your life.”

“Prepare the cavalry!” Carl roared at the maidens and nobles, fury and anger flaring in equal measure.

Gabriel was no less angry, but decades of experience tempered his fury. The man was trying to sow dissent, it would not work, but it was worrying that not a single word had been caught as a lie by his own enchantments. There was trickery afoot, no doubt the amplifying device was protecting any spells from being able to detect intent.

Even if that wasn't the case, it would be the truth he would tell the other nobles to keep them from getting any funny ideas.

“One last thing!” The armored man shouted, voice carrying a growl even through the amplification. “All of you who think the noble assholes leading you to your death aren't worth fighting for, get away from the front lines and run the fuck away. You have ten seconds before this gets painful. Ten!”

“Whoever runs will get fifty whips from my own hand!” Gabriel commanded before his forces could fall into a panic, ignoring the countdown. He was happy to see there was a semblance of discipline.

“Three! Two! One!” There was a pause, a moment of silence as the armored man lowered the cone and stared at the camp. Several long seconds passed with nothing happening.

There was a slight shrug, and a shake of the head. Then, the enemy Lord raised his hand, and from behind him there were thirty explosions.

The Orcs had brought with them large cylinders, and those very cylinders now unleashed thirty projectiles. Each projectile moved forward through gouts of fire, leaving smoke in their wake as they arched up and up and up, before starting to fall towards the camp. The arch they followed looked slow, but Gabriel knew it was an illusion from the distances involved, these objects were moving much faster than any arrow.

“No elemental energy, Viscount.” Cecilia declared.

“Ha! He was bluff-”

“Shut up.” Gabriel cut his son off, the fool not realizing Cecilia's words had not been in confidence but confusion. “RAISE SHIELDS!”

The command was obeyed immediately, next to him Cecilia's form shimmered, expanding massively, stony wings encircling around him and Carl. All visibility was cut off by the protective embrace of the Mikila, but not enough to block the sudden wave of heat and light.

Cecilia's wings retracted half a second later, the maiden pulling herself away from Gabriel, screaming. Her rock-like feathers were melting under the flames. It was like no fire he'd ever seen, blindingly bright, white and sparkling viciously. The heat and light were so intense he could barely stand to look at them directly. Cecilia shrieked as she flapped her wings, throwing the feathers off and embedding them into the soil before the fire could dig into her any further.

Gabriel could not believe what he was seeing.

All around them everyone was screaming themselves ragged. Even knights that had fallen under the direct contact of the burning light were now desperately looking to remove armor and escape heat that penetrated through the metal. In some cases it had already chewed through.

"Second wave!" The enemy Lord shouted.

All eyes turned to the sky, seeing another barrage, there was no more mirth to be had, only dawning horror.

"Get out of the way!" Gabriel screamed at those that could hear, already the Centaur-mounted lords had scrambled to get out of the way to avoid the attack. The Viscount watched with disbelief as the next wave of projectiles exploded above the camp, raining down more of that blinding screaming fire.

"Third wave!" The enemy Lord chanted.

His thoughts ground to a halt, almost stuttering in a mix of confusion and bewilderment. Those who'd been touched by the fire directly were struggling to put it out, only the armored knights had avoided the brunt of the fire. Even then, some had been caught by the worst of the barrage. The only time he'd seen such persistent fire had been from the wings of a Phoenix! Was this oil? No, oil did not burn like this, not this persistently, not this brightly, nor this intensely.

"Fourth and last!"

This one was not aimed at the camp but at the ground between the camp and the attackers, creating a splatter of sparkling fires. They weren't enough that they would stop

them from being able to chase, but it made it clear that any pursuers would be met with another wave of that hellish fire.

“Consider this your only warning.” The otherworlder spoke, this time not speaking to the camp, but at the Viscount directly. “Leave, or things will get worse than just a little bit of thermite and flammable glue.”

The amplifier cracked, and with a shrug the man dropped it. With a shrug, he urged his steed to turn to leave.

“He’s running away!” Carl called out from his steed. “Father, should... should we pursue?” His voice was hesitant, the young man pale as he stared between the burning camp and the escaping Lord.

Gabriel turned to Cecilia, the maiden had gone deathly still. “The Sabertooth is right behind those flames.” She whispered under her breath. “I had not felt her, she’s making her presence known.”

“It’s clear that chasing after him would be troublesome.” Gabriel spoke calmly, but his jaw clenched and loosened, fury boiling within from this humiliation. “We don’t know what other traps he might have set up, and our own forces are too much in disarray. We’d be opening ourselves to a trap.”

The fact that this odd flame had managed to chew through some of the knight’s armor was also severely troubling. The enchantments they’d prepared had been mainly in expectation of facing Orcs and Dark Elves, specifically meant to be resistant against blunt force and external attempts at disabling elemental energy. A few knights still carried anti-Vampire enchantments, if just to protect from the blood-suckers in case they indeed were present in Sinco.

But this was something they could not ignore. Adjusting the enchantments to have mild resistance to fire and heat would take two days, so Gabriel expected it would take them four days to be at an acceptable level of protection. Yet that would come at a price, as it would require reducing the effectiveness of the other wards.

Which ones? Any day spent here was another day the enemy could adjust their own strategy to fit against them too.

The most troublesome part was the weapon’s reach and rate of fire. One kilometer was well beyond most of their means of attack, their one Sorceress could match that, even beat it, but not at that volume.

“We will need to pacify the court and rally their spirit.” Gabriel declared. “Change the guard formations, fliers are to spread out in wide formations beyond our fortifications and harass anything getting that close. Everyone else is to spread out and keep from being easy targets.”

“What if they have some other weapon against the fliers?”

“Then they will be forced to reveal it if they wish to attack us like this again. Better in some small skirmish than in the battle to come.”

They were Darktons, as long as they had the chance to adapt to their enemy, to weave the proper enchantments and wards, then there would be nothing that could stand in their way. In a war they who were better capable of neutralizing the enemy’s capabilities would win.

The thought of retreat or of leaving didn’t even cross Gabriel Darkton’s mind.

He knew a cornered rat when he saw one.

This Lord might have a painful bite, but that was all he had.

Rick hopped off of Rosalind, the girl was practically shaking, pale as a sheet. If he hadn’t pressed for soothing calmness through the bond, he was half-certain she would’ve bolted far earlier. “There there, you did a good job. Go take some rest, you’ve earned it.” He praised her, letting her quickly trot away and towards the safety of the camp. “Think this’ll work?” He asked his shadow.

Eva made a vague noise of affirmation. “Enchantments and wards have compounding effects when synergized for a singular task. If done properly, three wards of fireproof stacked together grant far higher resistance than the sum of its parts,” she said. “So long as they dedicate some of that space against heat, then it’ll make our force far more capable of damaging them.”

“Fingers crossed.” Rick grumbled, removing his helmet and shaking off the soot.

Rollo’s newest invention had been a great spectacle. Portable Orc-wielded rocket launchers, the tribe was having a blast with those. But for this little sortie he’d used up over half the thermite he’d been able to produce so far. The sulfur pools had made it

possible to start working with sulphuric acids, one of its applications being the extraction and purification of aluminum.

It was just a bitch of a process when there was no bauxite ore to go around.

“We should save the remaining thermite missiles and have the tribe switch to standard explosives for the next engagement.” Eva suggested, emerging out of the shadows to walk alongside him. “The heat missiles should be reserved for enemies that’re clearly geared for handling concussive damage specifically.”

Nodding along, he felt more than saw Dia’s gaze on him, the healer already in an interception course to confirm whether he’d even gotten a scratch somewhere.

“How long until they attack, you figure?”

“At least a day, probably two.” Eva guesstimated. “Urtha should have returned from her stay with Camilla by then.”

Rick nodded along. This whole ‘suddenly the blizzard is gone’ had been a wrench in a lot of plans. Poor Urtha hadn’t even been able to properly work up as his “representative” over at the court for more than a handful of days.

“Think she’ll bring help from the Elves?”

The question lingered, and Rick thought on it, then shook his head. “I get the vague feeling she’ll have sent an observer, but otherwise won’t involve herself in this.”

There was also a not-ignorable likelihood that the Elf Queen might kidnap him if things went sour. No doubt Kiara had set up a plan along those lines already, something to get him out of Sinco and into the grove. And no doubt the reason the Succubus (or anyone) would not tell him of such a backup was because it’d leave him completely in the hands of Camilla.

Rick had little doubt the Elf Queen would treat him well, but that was a debt he did not want on his shoulders. Who knew what someone like the Green Empress could turn that into, given the chance? At best, he’d end up becoming some sort of figurehead and political mallet against the kingdom. At worst he’d end up like Barry, in a gilded cage.

He sighed, shoulders slumping. “This feels like it’s going to be a very long fight.”

“Battles usually are, yes.” Eva pipped up. “It’s not unusual for two sides to clash repeatedly over the course of several days.”

“Fuck me I need a vacation.”