
[133] [Leadership](various)

“He fights like a coward!”

Viscount Gabriel Darkton watched the head of the Norward household scream his lungs out, cursing this otherworlder. It was a reasonable reaction, seeing as he was now missing an arm and most of his face had been left scarred beyond recognition. The only reason he had even survived was the heavy protection of his armor and the proximity of healers. According to the doctor, the real threat to his life had been neither the flames nor the bleeding from a mangled limb, but rather the rupture of several of his organs.

His centaur had fared far better, ironically.

“Forget his damn secrets, that monster needs to be flayed alive!”

Gabriel ignored the screechings of the weakling, turning his attention back to the map. Their first attack had been a disaster thanks to explosives hidden underground, and now their second one had been turned away because they couldn't afford to let the damnable Sabertooth run rampant.

But they had been winning. Captain Cecilia had been able to protect the spellcasters, and although the defenders had a concerning number of Dark Elves, it had not been enough to subvert the assault. Could they take the same approach? Compact their forces and prepare a counter-measure to the Sabertooth champion?

Possibly, but it would also be a disaster in the making.

Such tight formations could only work if there was no dissent or disunity, and one look at the Norward noble was all Gabriel needed to know that was not a possibility. The man's honor had been bruised beyond measure; no doubt he would pounce at the first chance to draw blood.

“Father.” Carl approached, giving the Viscount the proper bow of respect. “Could we discuss privately for a moment?”

Gabriel noticed the slight concern in the young man's voice, then glanced at the rest of the command tent. Too many nobles were furiously beating their chests and screaming for blood; tempers were high. There would be no way to get anything done until they cooled off.

“Very well.”

Walking out into the cool night air, Gabriel spared a glance toward the healer’s tent.

“How is the captain doing?” Carl questioned softly.

“Her injuries are severe, but she’s not crippled. She will be ready for combat in a day.”

The young man hesitated. “I have an idea, but before I speak it, I must know: is retreat truly not an option?”

His words were laced with concern, and Gabriel knew better than to refute them outright. They marched quietly as he measured his words. “You know of the issues with the elemental mine in Sinco, do you not?”

“I do, Father,” Carl nodded. “It was why we had sent Thorley.”

“And yet, even then, the amount they have produced has continued to dwindle,” Gabriel intoned. “How much longer until it runs dry? How much longer before our enchanters have no more stones to work with? If this trend continues, the Darkton name will become nothing but a pitiful shadow of what it is today.”

He looked around the camp, at the listless faces. The noble could feel the seeds of resentment; their enemy had mocked them, then destroyed them without even showing his face. Thrice he had slapped them across the face, and thrice he had gotten what he wanted.

“Know this, my son, you must not just look at the battle you fight today, but at the ramifications that will come tomorrow.”

Carl nodded firmly, any hesitation within him vanishing entirely. “Then I have a suggestion, Father.” He clenched his fists and stared at the Viscount intently.

Gabriel listened, and a smile slowly spread across his lips.

They might get their glorious fight yet.

Rick came to slightly appreciate the time between attacks due to how it allowed them to patch up and heal the wounded. This wasn’t like a normal war; unless you lost a limb, most non-lethal injuries could be fixed with some magical elbow grease in a matter of

hours, if not minutes. Dia had been running herself and her crew ragged getting everyone back into fighting condition.

But what frayed his nerves was that their counterparts had also taken that time to recover, and they undoubtedly had way more healers available than he did. By the second day, Rick was fairly certain they had patched everyone back up to full health, while his own non-Orc troops were teetering at the edge of being “still tender” from the magical barrage.

Healing had not been the only thing they’d been doing, though.

After some brainstorming, they’d commanded every available maiden with the capacity to grow plants to come over. They’d been instructed to plant oak seeds into the trenches themselves and force them to grow so that their roots would reinforce the earthworks, while the trunk and leaves would provide cover. It was a dying forest, the trees that had been coerced into such a state were already turning brown. Even with the tribe having enchanted them to make the wood slightly more fireproof by being an approximation of Orc-wood, they’d still rot within the week. But they were necessary to grant some semblance of obscurity and protection from anything coming from above.

And it was on that second day that the Darktons were making a move.

This time, the Mikilia had appeared in her massive bird form, taking to the sky and surrounded by the other flyers. At first, Rick had thought she would hang overhead while the army made their way to start another attack, but as soon as he realized they were going ahead of everyone else, alarm bells began to ring.

Their preparations had been to grant light protection, not against a full aerial assault.

“Call Embla,” he commanded, glaring up at the approaching forces. “Eva, that bird...”

“Is not good,” she confirmed. “Keeping that form is energy-intensive, and Mikilias have great endurance, but one would want to save up as much energy as possible for a battle.”

“Figures.”

The Malumari reached him within barely a minute after he’d sent the order. “You need me for something?” There was a lingering silence at the end of that which left Rick with the impression that all parties involved were wondering whether she should’ve added “my Lord” or not.

“Yes.” He pointed at Sinco. “Go to the city and call for Raphaella and any flyers we have. Tell that crazy Metalmouse the plane needs to take off, and that you’re going to be her passenger.”

“What’s going on?” She glanced over at the approaching forces in confusion.

Rick glared up at the sky. “If I’m right, the only reason they’d bother to send that bird at maximum size from their camp is that it’s carrying something or someone.” He pointed his finger. “Do you think you can disrupt that transformation?”

“A transformation is purely internal; I’d need to penetrate through her defenses. That’d be impossible for me without physical touch.”

His lips thinned. “I need you up there.”

The dark maiden frowned. “You want me to die.”

“You’ve seen the parachute tests. Get one. I’d send Monica, but she weighs three times as much as you.” She also happened to terrify the mice while Embla merely unnerved them. He was sure Raphaella would still fight this decision, but he couldn’t very well just march out of here to make it clear there was no alternative. “Either we kill that bird and whatever’s on it, or we’re going to get bombarded from a range we can do nothing about.”

Embla frowned. “And if you’re wrong?”

The question made him flinch. What if this was a feint? No, that wouldn’t make sense... not unless they had information about the plane from the militia that had gone missing. Would the Darktons know? Were they trying to draw it out into a trap? It’d certainly make for a big target for their rockets, but would they prove effective?

“If you’re not needed up there, then you can be deployed alongside phase 2,” he said, gritting his teeth. “If it’s a trap... we’re all fucked anyway.”

Their eyes remained locked on one another’s before, finally, Embla gave a very slow nod. “Very well.”

He watched her go, a knot forming in the pit of his stomach. “I really hope she’s not about to grab Barry and make a run for it.”

Eva didn’t comment, but he could feel her own concern through the bond. The Vampire’s attention was on the Mikilia as it continued to move further and further ahead of the main army, the shadow it cast making its way towards the camp. Rick guesstimated it would take them three or so hours, but it was hard to be sure.

What were the Darktons thinking? What was their plan? How confident were they about to get a down and proper aerial bombardment? How much more was he willing to commit to that guess?

It all hinged on him, and a mistake here would cost lives. Hundreds of lives.

“I know that look,” Eva emerged from his shadow, looking up at him with concern. “You’re about to do something Dia would call stupid.”

“I don’t plan to put myself at risk again, but I shouldn’t be making these decisions,” I spoke almost too softly, staring at the army as it marched once more.

“It was your decisions that made it possible to force them to retreat. Twice,” she nodded.

“They still outnumber us two to one.”

The Vampire grabbed his hand and squeezed. “We have you. Wherever you lead, we will follow, my Lord.”

Eva’s words carried such iron-clad conviction it was almost frightening. But Rick did not allow his own feelings to seep through the bond; he knew it would hurt her to find out his true thoughts. It was a different kind of terrifying than the ease with which Monica disregarded life. Different from even Urtha’s raw primal enjoyment of violence. It was even different from Dia’s, where the Rapha willingly insisted on putting herself beneath him; Eva elevated him above herself.

He took a deep breath to calm his nerves.

“We will commit everyone to phase two,” he stated, ignoring the slight surprise on her face as he took a second breath to steady himself. “Also, bring me Thorley’s armor and two Elves.”

She nodded, gone in a swirl of shadows.

He waited for a heartbeat. “Monica,” he called out to the presence that had not left his shadow since the last fight. “I’m going to need you to do what you did the other day again. But this time you should be ready to fight properly.”

The feline gave the barest measure of assent.

And Rick truly hoped this was the right call.

Because one way or the other, this would be the last clash with the Darktons.

Knight Captain Cecilia flew within the ranks of her fellow flying knights. The sun shone brightly without a cloud in sight, and the ground below was as clear as it could be to her supernaturally sharp eyes. Her current form was that of the mythological Roc, a beast with a wingspan dozens of meters in length, covered in stone-like feathers that were impervious to most normal attacks. Cecilia's feathers still itched, many of them fresh, having needed to be regrown after the assault from the otherworlder's flames. She had endured the agony, as had been her task, yet now flew warily, high enough that there would be time to hopefully avoid those ranged attacks.

"They grew a forest," Cecilia pointed out to her passengers. "Can you see past the canopy?"

"Negative," her fellow captain proclaimed, the Sorceress glaring down at the enemy fortifications. "It doesn't change anything."

"Good."

For a moment, Cecilia turned her attention to the enemy commander. He stood on the elevated mound just behind the small forest, high enough to have a good view of the battlefield. It had been the exact same spot from where he had witnessed their retreats, unmoving, staring them down. Today there were a few differences, however. Mainly, that he now wore a familiar set of armor, no doubt stolen from Thorley Darkton's armory.

Something felt off about that.

"Do you see the otherworlder?" Cecilia asked her passenger.

The Sorceress peered, then frowned. "The Alchemist has no guards with him."

Alchemist. It was the name some of the maidens and knights had begun using to call the man. Cecilia scoffed at the notion. This madman did not use elemental energy; his creations were in defiance of all natural laws. Apparently, the Sorceress disagreed, but that was neither here nor there.

"Is he trying to lure us into a trap?" one of the other knights spoke up.

There was also the possibility he had chosen to run, but unless there was a secret tunnel leading from the trenches to somewhere else, then Cecilia would have likely seen it. Her concerns, however, were on the discipline of the knights and lower ranks currently

escorting her. The Darktons had placed a hefty reward for whoever caught the Alchemist alive, and an equally severe punishment for anyone responsible for his death.

After the man's rambling that first night, it was an open secret that the court wished to acquire him more than even the city itself.

"We're at the location, change to stationary formation."

At her command, the flock began to lazily circle, making sure that there were bodies between Cecilia and the enemy.

The Sorceress and the Witches alongside her began to intone their spells, the Mikilia's back itching from the raw elemental energy they were condensing into a singular spot. After a full minute, the spells were released, raining down fire on the terrain ahead of the trenches.

"Primary detonations confirmed, I don't see secondaries," Cecilia informed. "Switch to electric."

They followed the commands, the next rain of attacks thick with lightning. Then came ice, then water, and they even tried more esoteric elements. Each attack moved slightly further away from the trenches, covering slightly more terrain, yet not once were secondary explosions initiated. With each attack, the terrain became a bit more muddled, a bit more destroyed.

"Either the method to create those explosions is unreactive to elemental energy, or there are no explosives," the Sorceress declared.

Cecilia kept watching the terrain for another few minutes, her focus then turned back to the otherworlder, noting how he had turned his head so he could peer at them through his visor. What she would give to be able to hear his thoughts and unravel the trickery.

If their assumptions were wrong, then the rest of their army could be obliterated in an instant.

"Send two flares, one green and one orange," she commanded. This was a signal to declare no objectively confirmed threats of buried explosives, while also informing that there was no objectively confirmed lack of them. It would be her Lord's call on how their assault would unravel.

After a minute, two green flares shot out from the Darkton army.

Full speed ahead.

“Change long-range aerial to assault while the main force approaches,” Cecilia commanded. “Begin bombardment of—!”

Her words choked in her throat, eyes widening.

“Captain?”

“The otherworlder. Where is he!?” Cecilia roared the question. She had been too focused on spotting potential signs of those explosives. Had he—?

“He walked underneath the canopy, captain,” one of the Valkyries informed. “We can’t attack the trenches if we don’t know his location, not without risking—”

“I know!” Cecilia hissed.

The Sorceress swore. “We can soften them up in more indirect ways. Water will turn all that soil into mud, and wind will tear their cover away.”

The Captain considered this for a moment, then nodded. “Focus on one area at a time,” she directed, then glanced at the others. “Knights, you will be diving into the locations that become exposed. Your job will be to guarantee the otherworlder is not there. Upon this confirmation, we will blast that section from the sky! Everyone else, help strengthen the gales. Once you’ve exhausted yourselves, return to camp.”

With a chorus of confirmations, they set to their tasks.

One way or the other, today would be the last fight.