

Chapter 3

Scuttle's hideout turned almost overnight from a calm, empty den into a hive of activity. Spies and informants at times even forgot about secrecy and protocol to bring in more information, whether relevant, truthful or not. Ever since Nubine sent all those missives and after it was confirmed that she had a grand meeting with numerous questionable persons all the spy circles and rings in Armello were watching for even the slightest movement of troops through the land.

Priorities shifted almost immediately, and the higher-ups in the Rat Clan demanded that the exact aims and objectives of Nubine's little army were confirmed. "Little" perhaps just a week or two ago, but now Nubine's army was turning into a horde.

Yet somehow most of Armello was not informed of this. Only the Rat Clan appeared to be aware of this growing danger. Scuttle could have sworn that some messages were either not making it through, or they were scrambled or lost.

What he did know, for certain, was that Nubine had an army. What he did not know was who exactly was in it. Chaos in his ranks, and in the whole information network seemed to grow. Sometimes during a single day he would receive ten messages on the same topic, but all contradicting each other.

Scuttle suspected, though he had no proof, that somebody was deliberately spreading misinformation. But to create this degree of chaos could not have been the job of a single spy, it must have been at least a compromised spy ring. It wasn't just the spies though, it was the informants as well. After all his circle was responsible for Nubine, yet even though he was just a day away from Nubine's own castle he was completely blind.

If Nubine managed to somehow cause this Scuttle was impressed, but he also doubted the old ferret could be capable of such a feat, but if not her, then who?

As Scuttle looked through the papers, and with one ear open listened to yet another claim, another report, he could not help but realise he still did not know what was Nubine's ultimate plan. If you gather an army you go to war, but if your claim was that you wished all of Armello to be conquered by your own hand where exactly would you strike?

The moment she attacked anybody news would spread like wildfire, through refugees fleeing from raided farms and settlements. There was no possibility that a single army could achieve such a goal.

Another spy entered, another spy left. Scuttle looked longingly to the open bottle of berry wine right within his reach. It called to him, his Man-castle, his servants, and he so wished to be there as well. Right now he had a job to do. A job that was driving him insane, and even angry, but a job none the less.

Suddenly an informant, panting like a dog perhaps because he was one, ran in and brought most dire news.

The Summer Festival was well under way. From the balcony of his office the Lion looked to the happy visitors to his town and castle. Flowers were everywhere, decorations, dances, song and food. Everybody was dressed in their finery and the people were happy. The first day was the most important to all of the peasants, but many of his guests would not arrive until after the festival was over. It turns out that most nobles of this land do not like mingling with the “rabble”.

Leon was not alone on the balcony however. Ferdinand was with him. He too dressed for the occasion, with his prominent white wig present.

“My lord! I told you this would be the best festival yet!” he squealed with glee. Leon had a hard time gauging whether this was the case, but if Ferdinand felt that way and the people did too that was all that mattered.

“You out-did yourself Ferdinand. I would like to thank you for all your hard work.”

“Oh, but it is a pleasure, my lord! But, we must not forget about-”

“Yes, I did not forget. We will have a meeting with the high priest, be present at the blessing of the offerings and then visit the craftsmen's stalls.”

“And?” Ferdinand interjected.

“Yes, I will go change.” and the Lion turned to head back into his office. Heading through the door he went to his personal quarters where his formal robes awaited. Unlike the purple and gold that Leon preferred Ferdinand insisted on trying something different, gold and blue. The steward explained that blue, in the eyes of Armellian's is a far more noble colour. And, apparently, it also matched the lion better, but Leon was no expert on fashion.

He removed his magnificent cloak, that was held by a chain and began changing into the new clothing.

It was about midday and a lot still remained to be done. Many of the attendees would not rest even during the night. The watch would certainly have its hands full with brawls and fights.

In the end the people deserved this. All their hard work now rewarded with a few days of respite.

As he finished dressing up and was about to put on a cloak that was specifically made for this day Ferdinand hammered on the door, shouting something.

Leon opened it and saw his Steward's face as pale as the wig he wore.

“B-banners! Black banners approaching!”

Paul was sitting in one of the towers of the gatehouse, enjoying a quick snack that another guardsman brought him. A delicious sweetroll. The day has been calm so far. Gate duty usually was,

since there was no threat of bandits or even wild beasts for the past year, if not longer.

Holding the sweetroll in one hand he took another large bite out of it. The beaver wagged his tail in glee when the sugary sweetness toyed with his taste buds. It batted against the chair he sat on, forgetting for a moment that somebody might hear him.

Something caught his attention though. He stopped himself from taking another bite and his ears perked up. Paul could swear he heard something. As he sat there in silence he seemed to hear it again, shouts. But they were not the shouts of happy peasants, they sounded angry. Was there a brawl happening right in front of the gate? They seemed a bit more distant than expected.

He rose up, sweetroll still in hand and he looked through an arrow-slit facing the streets in the town. Everything seemed to be in order but he noticed a few people were pointing toward the gate, or something behind it? Paul turned around and headed to the other side of the tower, but before he even reached the arrow-slit he could see what was happening.

Looking through it he observed a horde of warriors, soldiers, charging toward the walls. The few people who were outside of the walls seemed to be running toward the gate in panic.

“Lock the gates!” the guardsman called! “Lock the gates!” he yelled again, throwing the sweetroll away and grabbing his spear that rested against the wall. He did not hear any answer, nor the familiar metallic clang of the portcullis dropping.

“Lock the damned gates!” Paul called yet again, as the horde was approaching. He could now see the banners they were holding, purple with a two-headed black bird. He was not familiar with that emblem, but the men holding them did not appear friendly, at all.

Still no answer.

He ran from his post to a lower section of the gatehouse, where the locking mechanism was.

“What is wrong with you! We are under attack!” he screamed as he ran down the stairs, thinking that maybe the other guards were asleep, or otherwise drunk.

“CLOSE THE-” and as he ran into the room, with all the chains and levers to close the gate he found a terrible sight. The guardsmen who were meant to operate the gate were dead, standing around them were black moles, clad in equally dark leather armour, longswords and sharp spades in their clawed hands.

One of them, the leader of the band of moles, smiled to the newly arrived victim.

“Surprise!” were the final words Paul ever heard when a mole snuck behind him and pierced his heart with his cruel dagger.

The lion returned to the balcony, over his formal robes he only had the time to strap on his breastplate and grab his blade. The first thing he noticed was the panic among the people below, and soon after the cause of the panic was apparent. The attackers were approaching and the gates were

not closing. Sabotage, or worse.

“Open the castle gates, let the people in!” he roared with all of his might. Even the roars of the invaders were briefly drowned by his booming voice and the few guards who remained at their posts began to usher the flood of people seeking safety.

He roared again, “To arms! All men to arms! Defend yourselves!” and soon after he turned to face Ferdinand. “Gather as many men as you can and head to the castle gates, find the captain and inform him of the situation if he does not know yet. We must hold the castle at all costs.”

Without waiting for a response from Ferdinand the lion left his office and began his journey to the courtyard. If the whole town made it into the castle it would be tightly packed. As long as the castle's gates were sealed they would be safe, but what if the saboteurs were inside the castle as well?

Heading down to the courtyard he saw the faces of countless terrified people, some of them just starting to catch their breath while the others, as they ran in, screamed in panic while the sounds of battle rang out behind them.

“Hold the gates! Make way for the guard!” roared out Leon, as he pushed through the crowd to the gate. “Guardsmen! With me!”

In the chaos it was hard to tell at first who was friend from foe, but as the Lion passed through the gate with a handful of his guards that managed to follow him he could see the attackers. The invaders were heavily armed and armoured, attacking anybody who stood in their way. They did not belong to a single group or house, but he could spot the black banners again, held by some of the troops.

Some of the distraught guardsmen were trying to hold a line, but they were badly outnumbered, at the point of breaking. Among the sounds of battle he could hear the pleas and begging of those wounded and innocent as they were being mercilessly killed. That drove him mad with anger.

With a loud roar, that briefly drowned out the sounds of battle, and shook the hearts of the attackers the lion joined the fray. With his sword and mighty paw he attacked with no mercy to offer to these brigands.

The twisted evil visages before him at first recoiled while the lion was cutting down any who dared approach him, but they soon realised how outnumbered he was, and with newfound bravery they tried to overwhelm Leon.

“Pull back with me! Hold the line!” the lion ordered, trying to retreat along the street toward the castle gate. As they moved slowly however it became apparent that the town was being swarmed. Leon could hear fighting to his left and right. If they remained here soon the enemy would come from the flanks, or rear.

“Run to the castle, I will hold them, GO!” the lion ordered. The Guard, exhasuted and terrified of the onslaught obeyed. Soon the Lion found himself alone, trying to buy time for his guards.

“Kill! Kill the black mane! Bring me his head!” came a voice from the offenders. Though they tried to swarm him, even grip at his arms the lion cast them aside like ragdolls, cutting at the horde with his blade. There were simply too many. He held them back for a few moments, enough, he hoped, to give his men enough time to reach safety, and then after one final swipe of his blade against the shield of a heavily armoured knave he turned tail and ran, as quickly as he could, toward the castle gate.

As he ran he could hear the bloodthirsty cheers of those behind him, giving chase. Running down the street, while his guardsmen, from the castle's walls, began to fire arrows upon his pursuers.

The lion passed through the gate's arch, and the portcullis slammed down behind him, followed by the quick rush of his men closing the wooden inner gate.

And as the lion was trying to catch his breath the destruction of his town continued, just beyond the wall.

All the survivors were brought inside the castle itself, to make as much room in the courtyard as possible. It was still hard to gauge how many of his men remained after the brief battle in the town, but if the walls held help would eventually arrive. There was plenty of food within the castle, a well with fresh water, and unless the besiegers mustered the strength to strike immediately Leon believed a lengthy siege was possible.

But the thought of saboteurs within the castle haunted him. He posted twice as many guards in those places he deemed critical. The captain of the guard went missing so he had to direct what remained of the guard himself. A few lesser nobles and knights who survived, albeit without their weapons and armour, were given what could be found. Even if Leon wanted to there was not enough weapons to arm every willing soul, he had to be selective.

What worried Leon the most was that despite being besieged there were no terms for surrender sent forth, no demands or expectations. Those who attacked him now waited like hyenas around his castle, waiting for the right time to burrow their fangs. They did not answer his summons either. And those flags, they were not of any lord or lady he recognised, from within or outside of Armello. The army was varied too, and Leon recognised some of the mercenaries now serving this unknown ruler.

Who was rich and powerful enough to gather such a host? And ultimately, what did they want of him?

He gazed from his balcony to the now ransacked town. Every house now occupied not by his people but by these savages. He dared not think what happened to those unfortunate enough to remain beyond the castle. But his helplessness made him angry as well.

There was no way to avenge the fallen, to take the fight back to these monsters. All he could do is wait, and hope for relief. But if he was to die he would die defending his people. That much he decided.

A soft knock came to the door and Ferdinand, without permission, entered the office.

“My Lord?”

Leon did not look back, he was still taking in the scene before him.

“Ferdinand.” he said.

“How do you feel?” the swine asked.

Leon could tell him of the anger building up in him, the helplessness and a distant despair that was gripping at him, but if he showed even a bit of weakness it would spread like a fire through the rest of the defenders.

“I am fine.” was the only answer he gave.

“Everybody is still shaken, nobody knows... why this happened, or who attacked us... Do you...?”

“No.” was the simple answer the lion could give.

“My Lord, we cannot stay here.”

That statement surprised Leon a bit, and he turned his head around to look at Ferdinand, but it wasn't just Ferdinand standing in the room. Next to him stood a rat, dressed in the red of the Rat Clan, seemingly unarmed, but these rogues knew how to hide a knife.

The lion moved back into the office and leaned against his desk.

“What is he doing here? Did he come to admit to working for these beasts? Is he the one responsible for this tragedy?”

The rat raised his hands defensively.

“Hey now, we are on the same side here, same side of the wall at least.”

Leon normally did not accuse anybody without proof, but his mood from the entire situation was rather sour.

“Your kind are known for acts like this. Sabotage, assassination. Why did your clan work with these... monsters?!” the lion began to growl, and while Ferdinand seemed to quake at his lord's rage, even though it was not directed at him, the rat seemed completely untouched by it.

“We wouldn't work with them, not for any sum of gold. No no, this was somebody else's doing.”

“WHOSE?!” the lion roared out. It was very likely that both the castle's defenders and the besiegers heard the sudden outburst, but the rat, again, as if to annoy the lion merely rubbed one of his ears, as if he heard a brief, deafening bang.

“Well, if you really must know, it was the Moles. Dug up right into your gatehouse, killed off your

guards and kept the door wide open for the rest of your guests. Granted, they did not have the time to find a way into your castle, yet, but it's a matter of time."

"The Moles? You want me to believe that somebody managed to make them their ally? They listen to no one, they follow their own rules, and they wage their own wars. If you do not want your skull crushed by my paw for this nonsense then tell me who is leading this army."

Yet still, despite the ever growing threats the rat remained relaxed.

"It was Baroness Nubine."

The room fell completely silent.

"Baroness Nubine... The Baroness Nubine?" Leon asked, as if just being told that the grass is in fact purple, not green.

The rat nodded, and Leon simply rubbed his forehead with one of his massive paws.

"In any other circumstance I would had thought that a bad joke, but right now I feel like you are insulting me, and Nubine. She would had never done something like this, and you are confirming my suspicions."

"Now listen." the rat suddenly interjected. "We could not believe it at first either, and you have no reason to believe me, but Nubine is responsible for all of this. For the past weeks something has been happening to her, we do not know what. And suddenly she calls for everybody and anybody of ill-repute who has ever walked this world, and asks them over for a glass of wine and to bend their knee."

The Lion still looked suspiciously at the rat, as any sane man would.

"You did not tell me why."

"Nobody knows that, not me, not the rat clan, not anybody. Only Nubine herself seems to know of her own plans, and I doubt we will have the chance to ask her."

The lion folded his arms.

"Even so, we can wait here till the other lords and ladies of Armello react to this unjust act. Moles or not it would take them days to breach the walls, weeks. We can remain here, and we will survive."

"I am afraid no help is coming."

The rat's words sounded even less believable.

"Let me guess, everybody is on Nubine's side? And we are the last castle to stand against her?"

"Not exactly." came the rat's response. "She is moving against everybody, and nobody is prepared

for it. Even if somebody hears of your plight they will not be able to help you.”

“That's impossible.” came the lion's response.

“So we all thought, but here we have a living example of a single ferret taking control of one of the largest and most dangerous forces in the world, and she desires all of Armello.”

“But you just said that you did not know what Nubine wanted.” the Lion noted.

“That is what she claimed, but if she truly wanted to conquer your land would she not had taken it, instead of destroying it? Whatever Nubine's true intentions they are not for our good.”

Leon could not trust this rat. For all he knew he was toying with him, trying to bring his guard down. Perhaps as they spoke his “friends” were clearing a way for the besiegers. Then he remembered about Ferdinand also standing in the room, and he turned his gaze to the swine.

“Do you trust him?” came the lion's simple question.

“N-no my Lord, not exactly, but he is right about one thing, the people outside these walls want us dead. We must escape and seek help, where possible.”

“Escape? Escape how? We cannot break through this siege, and I doubt anybody could sneak out of the castle. Besides, I refuse to abandon my people.”

“What's left of them.” came the grim words of the rat, which made the lion's face turn into a hate filled snarl directed at the rodent. “Now, don't get me wrong. Dying is all noble and stuff, but it won't get you anything. If you want to save what is left of your people and land you must live, and to live you must leave. And before you ask, I got into this castle, and I can get you out as well.”

“I refuse.” spoke the Lion. “I will not leave this castle and its defenders. I have already failed in protecting so many, I would live in shame if I ran away like a rat.”

“You wound me.” said the rat, sarcastically. “But now is not the time for being all virtuous and holy. There is a tunnel, leading from your dungeon to an exit in a nearby forest. We can leave the castle unnoticed and head back to the lands of the rat clan. From there we can offer some meaningful resistance.”

“And why would the rat clan aid me?”

“Well, I figure a living ally is better than a dead one, and against Nubine we need every self-righteous knucklehead we can find.”

This time Leon seemed to ignore the insult, scratching his mane, thinking.

“This is what we will do.” the Lion began to speak. “We will use the tunnel to escape, but not just us, everybody in the castle.”

The rat looked at the lion, a bit perplexed.

“What? But... Hold on now.”

“No, you listen. I will not leave anybody behind, if I can help it. We will attempt our escape during the night, that way nobody will notice the lack of guards on the walls. After we reach safety we will decide what to do from there.” and with a stern gaze he looked to the rat, making it clear that no negotiation is possible.

The rat only shrugged at response.

“Right. I am to keep you alive, not safe. How much time do you need?”

“We will leave tonight. I will inform everybody and we will wait in the dungeons. From there, to freedom.”

The dungeon of Leon's castle was, for once, full of people. The rat was moving away some stones that were so masterfully fit into the wall that they did not appear to be dislodged at all. Behind the fake wall was a relatively tall and wide tunnel, at least for most. To the massive lion it proved a bit of a challenge to fit through. Yet, one by one, all the hopeful survivors followed Leon, his rat guide and Ferdinand.

The tunnel was dark, and the few torches that were brought for the march only provided a bit of light.

They walked in silence, only the sounds of their steps, the occasional cough from the dust and dirt in the tunnel, and grunting of the lion, as he could not stand upright, accompanied them.

Everything was going according to plan, thus far.

“How long is the tunnel?” Leon finally asked.

“Well, we are passing the whole length of the town and castle, out of a guard's eye-sight, so it will be a while.”

“Was it used... often?”

“As often as it had to. Not like you had anything interesting to sneak out.”

Suddenly the rat stopped, his ears perking up. He looked from one side of the tunnel to the other and slowly drew his blade. There was a sudden air of unease.

“Moon's bite... I forgot... they can hear us... We must hurry!”

But, it was too late. From the walls of the small tunnel came the ambushers. The moles, snarled and growled as they leapt at whoever was closest, screaming vile insults and curses while they tried to stab or bite their victims.

Panic spread through the tunnel, the people tried to protect each other as best they could, but with so many defenceless their bodies soon clogged the tunnels, and those who could fight could not run past the lion. Leon knew that and he grabbed the rat in front of him, and Ferdinand who was right behind him. With both of them in his arms he charged forth like a bull, trying to clear an escape for those behind him.

How long did the lion run? He could not tell, and the rat was too shocked and surprised to truly react.

At the exit from the tunnel the Lion burst through, wooden splinters flying left and right as the trapdoor was destroyed by Leon's charge.

Dazed, but still very well aware of what was happening the lion dropped his two companions and looked back to the tunnel hopefully.

The rat recovering from what just happened motioned to the lion.

“Wait here, you won't be able to help much anyway.” and he went back into the tunnel. Long, painful moments passed, the sounds of distant unfair battle echoed through the tunnel. His mane was grey from the dirt, his clothes ripped, bruises and wounds along his fur. Ferdinand was only slightly better off, but his wig, miraculously remained on his head.

As the noise died down the first of the group left the tunnel. Mainly guardsmen and a handful of knights, with dark, solemn expressions, their tabards and weapons covered in blood, and an even smaller group of other survivors soon followed.

The rat, himself left last and he looked to the Lion with an equally glum expression.

“This is everybody. We must go, they know we escaped.”

The sun began to rise slowly over the horizon. What remained of the survivors of the previous night followed the once-proud lion. Only the rat seemed to be somewhat better off, but it might had been due to the bottle of wine he drank along the way. It did not seem to slow him down, but he did not become any more talkative either.

Finally after hours of a slow march Ferdinand asked.

“Where do we go now?”

The lion spoke, his voice broken by sadness and defeat.

“To Oakenfall. We must warn them of what is to come.”

Nubine walked through Leon's little castle garden, looking over the the carefully tended plants, and the still empty marble slabs that never had the opportunity to become decorated.

She looked upon all of this with indifference, her whole visit to the town, the castle left her with a feeling of disdain and apathy. How could she had once thought so greatly of the lion, who turned tail and ran like a rat?

As she contemplated over this she could hear somebody approaching, and she turned to look to a pale wolf, one of his eyes covered by an eye patch. He bowed his head in respect and spoke briefly.

“We lost the trail, the lion escaped.”

Nubine was somewhat angered by these news. She hoped for a quick victory, and that was granted to her. Total victory escaped her grasp. This matter would not be put to rest until the lion was dead, and he joined his people in the ruins of this castle.

Yet, at the same time, the war had to continue, she could not afford too many delays.

“Send out search parties. Start with villages closest to the castle. The moment they find the lion I am to be informed.”

The pale wolf bowed again, and then asked.

“And the castle?”

Nubine waved her hand.

“This? Burn it to the ground. Let no stone remain upright, may this place become a black mark upon the earth.”

The wolf bowed and walked off, starting to bark out orders to a group of soldiers nearby.

The mirror told her, yes it did, that if she is to be truly victorious the lion had to fall. Not a single golden or black mane could remain in Armello if her reign was truly to begin.

She gathered the greatest force this land has ever seen, and she found many allies who would further aid her in her ambitions. New orders had to be sent, the plans had to move forward. There was no time to waste.

There was so little time.

As she turned around to walk toward the castle's gate and beyond the town walls, to discuss with her commanders what was to happen next her soldiers ran past, holding torches and oil.

Soon the town and the lion's great castle was in flames. His garden turning to ash. All the wooden walls and stone structures collapsing. The fire would last for days, until all that was left was a lifeless husk, much like the lion's will, completely extinguished of life.