

Chapter 4

The trek took days, much longer than expected. But with the survivors tired, some of them wounded, and their spirits all but gone, they moved at a pace that their bodies allowed.

Reaching the outskirts of the village of Oakenfall they first saw the fields of grain before them. Still growing strong, not yet harvested, the survivors used the roads leading to the village, and that is when the first hounds of Oakenfall spotted them. They ceased their work to observe their lord, at the head of a battered group slowly make their way to the village centre.

Young pups alerted everybody of the incoming guests and all left their houses to watch the once proud lion lumber on to meet with the village elder.

They found him in front of his hut, with two armed guards by his side. While the guards seemed concerned the older dog did not. This Retriever was an old friend of Leon's father, a dog who fought by his side till his age called for retirement from active service. The knight was known as Sir Edward of the Oak. He was given the lands surrounding Oakenfall as a gift, and since then he performed his new duties to the letter.

But now, this ancient hound, looked to Leon and knew the rest was over.

“My Lord. What has happened?” asked the knight. Though age took away some of his energy his voice was as strong as when he was a pup. Perhaps working the fields kept him in good shape.

The lion approached the dog, who bowed respectfully to the black mane, but Leon's voice lacked the same power it once had.

“We were attacked. The castle is lost, and this is all that remains.”

The hound looked to the dishevelled group and then back to the Lion.

“My Lord, we will get food, water and blankets for your men. Tomorrow I will send scouts to see the state of your castle and-

“There is no need. It is lost, all is lost.” spoke the Lion. Even as the two discussed the villagers of Oakenfall brought out what they could for the poor souls. All but the rat, who seemed content.

The Lion explained what happened. Of Nubine's attack, of the massive host that took first the town, and then assaulted them in the tunnel. All the while Leon's voice was cracking. Even he, such a majestic and powerful creature, could not hold back the despair any longer.

That came to a sudden end when the hound, despite being smaller, slapped his liege across the face.

“Get ahold of yourself! What would your father think.” growled the old knight. “You are a black mane and you will act like one, or by the moon and sun I will whip you back into shape.”

Edward turned to one of the guards, leaving the lion dumbfounded “Get whatever these people need. Rally every man from the village who can hold a blade. We shall host a meeting at sun down.

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And you.” he turned to look at Leon, who did not see a sterner face since his cub years, when his father scolded him for scratching up his bed cushions. “We will talk once you get some rest.”

With that Edward went back into his hut.

There was work to be done.

Ferdinand sat in one of the huts, eating a loaf of bread, dipping it in some broth. The stress of the past few days has finally began to ease off and his appetite returned. Only now he realised how starved he was, but at the same time he was still deeply shaken. The loss of his home, and so many of his friends occupied his thoughts. Would he ever be able to return? He hoped so, but first they would have to take back what was lost.

The swine jumped up in shock when he heard a loud grunt coming from under his table, and after a bit of an effort the rat spy appeared, holding an empty bottle in one hand, and rubbing his head with the other.

“Is this... still Oakenfall? Or did the wine take me off somewhere nicer?”

“We are where we were, Scuttle.” answered the steward.

That did not please the rat, who sat down next to Ferdinand, the stench of alcohol hard to ignore. He let out a deep sigh and looked down at the table.

“This is a mess, a big royal mess.”

Ferdinand chose not to engage Scuttle, who clearly needed to ramble his heart out.

“One day you are in a cosy den, tending to things like always, and suddenly you have to run for your life, fight bloody moles, and now babysit a dumb lion. I just want to go home... and sleep all of this through.”

The swine still chose to say nothing, and thankfully he did not have to, as into the hut came the lion. He looked down to the drunk rat and began to speak.

“We are staying.”

The rat at first mumbled something, then his head raised up and he asked, “What?”

“We are staying, here in Oakenfall.”

“You mean, like, figuratively, for like a day or two more.”

“No, we are staying here.”

The rat threw the bottle he held, but as there were two or three lions standing before him he hit only the wall as he began to shout.

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“I did not come through all this just to see you get killed by your own idiocy, you stupid overgrown cat. We are going back to the rat clan, and there you will sit in a corner and wait till you are asked to help!”

In his rampage of obscenities that followed Ferdinand's own eyebrows arched, as Scuttle insulted everything that was, once was or would had been of some association to the lion. Most sailors would had long ago fainted.

After a while the barrage ceased, and Scuttle, heaving and gasping for air glared at the lion.

“We stay, you go.” said Leon, and he produced a folded parchment, setting it in front of Scuttle.

The rat looked with bewilderment first at the letter, then the lion.

“What is this?”

“A formal request for an alliance between my house and the Rat Clan. You will deliver it to your clan, while I will rally and gather my army here, at Oakenfall, and fight Nubine's army.”

“You are a fool.”

“No, no I am not.”

Edward stood over a table upon which the map of Leon's realm was drawn. He studied it and placed a number of wooden pegs all over it. The hound was now dressed in his old armour There was no need for that, as no battle was about to begin, but if others saw you prepared they would follow your example.

Based on what he learned from the survivors Nubine's army was indeed large, and they could had easily overwhelmed an unprepared castle, but after that initial strike it seemed unlikely they could follow this up.

The larger the army the more supplies it needs, and if the town was indeed razed, or some of it at least, then Nubine had no true way of resupplying her force. Not only that but even the most charismatic leader would have to take into account that internal divisions, that could lead to his or her own force fighting itself.

It was a matter of time until starvation or frustration would lead to a collapse. However, if Nubine was indeed smart she would split her army, so that each splinter could feed itself, from raiding and looting. They would be weaker when divided, but still formidable, and with a chance of reforming themselves into one massive blob.

There was only two ways of winning this war quickly, getting rid of Nubine or forcing her army to collapse on itself. Both seemed unlikely right now, and even if Nubine was killed there would still be a lot of rowdy folks out and about, and they would continue to be a threat.

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Edward produced a single blue wooden peg and placed it where Oakenfall was on the map, sighing to himself.

“It's a start.”

A faint knock came from the entrance to Edward's planning room, though before that it was simply a study. Filled with books, trophies and maps they all reminded him of his old life. An old life that came screaming back.

Through the doorway came the lion, for the first time in days his armour was removed, to reveal the dirty and ripped tunic that was underneath, what remained of his once formal attire. At a glance he appeared to be better off, his mane was clean, he had the time to rest and feed. The hound could still sense his liege's sadness, and the intent was to change that.

“My Lord,” began Edward, “I have gathered as many able men as possible. Aside from a few trained militia the majority are as yet untrained, but given a bit of time we will be ready to fight Nubine.”

The lion lumbered over to the map. It was rather dauntingly filled with a lot of black pegs, and only a single blue one decorated it. Edward could hear Leon's deep sigh, but not letting off the attack the hound continued.

“We are working on turning as many tools into weapons as we can. The Scythes will be used like spears, we are making shields out of spare wood, and every knife and axe will be used as well. We are a bit short on armour but we will make do with what we can.”

There was a barely audible rumble of acknowledgement coming from the lion.

“My best guess is that even if the enemy comes it will not be their whole force. Figure what we will face here will be smaller than what you faced before. We have a fighting chance.”

But this time, the lion did not respond, he only stood over the table and stared at the single blue peg. The old hound looked up to Leon.

“You faced your first defeat, but do not let it destroy you.”

“But everything is destroyed, ruined, gone.” spoke the lion.

“No, it is not. You live, and when we deal with Nubine we will rebuild.”

“Rebuild what?”

The hound felt a bit frustrated at his liege's defeatism, so he caught the lion's arms, lead him to a chair and sat him down, and Leon did not offer any resistance.

“Listen to me, and listen well. When I still served under your father we faced many foes and dangers that I wish I had not. Talon led his barbarian horde, rampaging throughout Armello. Bandits and raiders from beyond, looking for those too weak to defend themselves. Even rogues and rebels

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were not too uncommon. But when we lost a battle we rallied and struck back. We fought until the war was won. You are losing your perspective, Leon. You cannot treat this one failure as your whole world. When somebody punches you in the gut, you don't keel over and cry on the floor, you punch them back.”

Despite his encouragements Leon did not seem that much livelier, so a change of tactic was in order.

Edward walked to his desk, producing a stack of parchments, and grabbing a quill with a small ink pot. He then stood before Leon and tried to press them into his hand.

“What are these for?” the lion eventually asked.

“You will do your damned duty, Leon, and petition the other rulers for aid. Tell them what Nubine has done to you and your lands, and warn them that she will do the same to them. Tell them that unless we all stand united this pox will ruin Armello. Convince them that even though you were defeated you are ready to fight on. Like your father did, and just as his ancestors did. This land belongs to you Leon, and you should pray to the Sun, Moon and Wyld that none are foolish enough to try and take it away from you.”

Once the lion held the fine writing appliances the hound stood back and began walking out of the room.

“They are to be ready by sundown, tomorrow morning I am sending the rat, and my men, to deliver those letters. Think of every potential ally and write to him. We will not let Armello be taken like this, not on your watch, Leon.”

Begrudgingly Scuttle left Oakenfall, letter in hand, and together with him a number of other hounds also set out to deliver their own messages. Time was of the essence, as there was no telling how soon the enemy would reach Oakenfall.

Leon over the days felt a lot more inspired. The retrievers of Oakenfall showed such resoluteness and dedication that he was truly surprised. Just two days before he was ready to give up, but Edward made sure that did not happen.

The old hound was now training the peasants as best he could, together with anybody else who had a remote idea of how to swing a blade or thrust with a spear. Plans for further fortifications around the village were prepared, walls and even a watchtower.

Oakenfall, a quiet farming village, was slowly turning into a fortress, or at least a shoddily put together fort.

With enough time to make himself presentable again the Lion would aid in all of these efforts, and the hounds seeing their liege hard at work were inspired to work even harder. Even Ferdinand found plenty of work for himself, reorganizing the pantries, sorting through all the weapons and armour the village had. From a Steward the swine turned into a Quartermaster, though the two jobs seemed very alike in every way.

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And while Oakenfall prepared for this uneven war the messengers did their best to deliver their missives.

War truly has begun.

Greymane was drilling the pups further. While they could hardly be called warriors yet at least they were far better off than before. Thane, who became the “leader” of the pack was made responsible for the success and failure of all group exercises. Though the punishments for failure were at times severe the young pup's resolve did not falter one bit. This both surprised and pleased Greymane, and at least this one pup would grow up to be a proud wolf.

At the same time winter seemed to approach sooner than expected. Cold rain was pouring down in the training field, turning it into a bog. Since no practise was possible Greymane organized mock duels between different pups.

While many of the pups used the opportunity to rest from the overwhelming drill to Greymane it was a chance to observe how much each pup has learned. The runts of the pack would be given a chance to improve, or they would have more demanding tasks to see if there is some hidden potential in them after all.

The mock duels were held in a larger hut, that was part of the training fields. Here, surrounded by lit torches and a fire in the centre of the room to keep warm, the whole group now remained.

Greymane stood near where the duels were happening, to announce the winner and choose new pups to fight. All of them seemed enthusiastic about it.

But as the fights went on another, older wolf entered the hut. This mountain of a wolf, with fur completely grey from age, was known as “Gnash”, though his full title was “He Who Gnashes on Stones”.

“What's the occasion Gnash?” asked Greymane. And sure enough Gnash, living up to his namesake, rumbled a low rumble, that sounded like an avalanche of boulders.

“Not good. Pale one was seen.” Greymane's eyes went wide.

“The Pale-One? Where?”

Gnash, taking his time looked over the duelling pups. He sounded, was the size of and at times was slow like a rock.

“Lion's lands. Mrrf. Leading army.”

“An Army?”

Gnash did not feel the need to elaborate, but Greymane knew what this meant. Surely enough trouble would come to the wolf lands, unless they acted first.

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“When do we depart?” asked Greymane.

The Pale-One was not a mere nuisance. He was a true danger to the stability of the wolf clan. This was not about the honour or glory of war, this was about stopping a grave danger.

“We wait.” answered Gnash. This seemed to frustrate Greymane.

“Wait?! Of course the elders want to wait. Talk with the clans, discuss. This is no time for talks. This is the time for action! This is the time for-” and Gnash rested his massive hand on Greymane's shoulder, shaking his head.

“You are right...” But after a while Gnash spoke again.

“Meeting, with Lion. He ask for help.”

“Against the Pale-One?”

A low rumble came from Gnash. Either he did not know, or he did not want to tell.

Gnash only motioned to the fighting pups and looked to Greymane, an actual look of concern in his eyes.

“Teach them quick, time is short. It is not their time to meet their ancestors.”

“Pfeh, as if I would bring this lot anywhere near battle. Worry not Gnash, they will be perfectly safe here.”

Ellen looked to the letter her mother sent. It was brief and to the point, and she was already on her way to the meeting. Escorted by her guards, with a massive umbrella held over her head as rain was pouring down around her. She read the letter again as she was reaching a massive tent, setup in the centre of the field.

It was surrounded by many knights and warriors, but mainly by those of the wolf and rat clan. Three banners were flying over the camp, and Ellen did note the Bears chose not to arrive at all. Not unheard of.

“My Dear Ellen,

Forgive me for not giving you the time to prepare for this but our presence is required. Leon Black-Mane informed us of his dire circumstance and called for our aid. As I found out all the other great clans received similar missives but I do not know their stance on the issue.

Find out what you can, but remember that we are not to be involved, no matter how brutish or sly the wolf and rat will be. This is not our conflict, and the lives of our people should matter more than winning a war that is not our own.

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Please return soon, as we must see to our own defences if Nubine is so foolish as to strike against us.

Be safe,

Augustine II
Queen of the Rabbit Dens”

The Rabbit clan for decades has strived to keep out of any political turmoil in Armello. War was never of any interest to them, as it brought nothing but misery. But, almost ironically, the craftsmen of the rabbit clan were known for their quality and ingenuity. Though they did not fight a single war they watched, and observed, creating and designing new and deadlier weapons of war. While others used them the Rabbit Clan benefited from the growing connections among lords and nobles to further their own agenda.

And that was the insatiable hunger of knowledge. To venture where none other has, and to learn things long thought forgotten or yet undiscovered.

Through peace prosperity, in war misery.

That is not to say in times of trouble people did not seek the aid of the rabbit clan. After all were they not the greatest, most powerful of all the clans? But every time they would decline. It was never their war, and they would steer clear of it.

As they would, this time.

And they always will.

With those final inspiring thoughts Ellen entered the tent. The others were already waiting for her.

Chapter 5

The tent was spacious, but with almost no furniture to sit on. Within the tent were four smaller banners, for the bear, wolf, rat and rabbit clans respectively. The wolf and rat representatives were already in a hushed discussion with each other, and as Ellen expected they ceased their talk when she entered.

“Gentlemen” spoke the rabbit princess.

“Lady Ellen.” answered the rat, though the wolf did not seem in a talkative stance, they rarely were.

The three of them gathered closer and the meeting of the clans could begin proper.

“We have come here to speak of this conflict between Leon Black-mane and Baroness Nubine?” Ellen asked, innocently enough.

“I am afraid it is not that simple, or small.” spoke the rat representative. His hands were held behind his back as he spoke, trying to keep an appearance of somebody relaxed. The wolf on the other hand did not hide the urgency in his voice.

“Nubine has gathered many of our enemies and her intent is not just Black-Mane lands, she is aiming higher.” finally spoke the wolf.

“Is that so?” Ellen continued her little game.

“We seem to have some proof of that, that is if the esteemed Rabbit Clan would ever trust our word.” now added the Rat.

Ellen smiled at that politely, “We never had the reason to doubt your words before, only the methods.”

The case was presented and Ellen was somewhat surprised at the tones of both the rat and wolf. They were genuinely concerned for this war. It is very likely that the two of them already decided to act against Nubine together, which meant they were not here to discuss the war as such, but to drag the rabbit clan into it.

And surely enough the discussion from the known facts slowly moved to the theoretical. The threat Nubine and her army posed, how it could, or should be dealt with. Ellen remained largely silent, listening to what the others said. It felt less like a political discussion and more like a war room, an environment she felt completely alien in.

As the “talks” went on she continually recalled her mother's written words, no matter how the case is presented, or how persuasive the rat or wolf will be the rabbits are not to be involved. Even if Nubine was foolish enough to strike against them she would face very stiff and strong opposition. It was likely that, if need be, Nubine's whole army could be bought and turned against their leader in an instant.

The rats always looked for an underhanded way to win, while the wolves always sought head-on

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conflict. What good would come from any of this? None.

There was however one concession that Ellen was prepared to make, and it seemed perfectly plausible. The Rabbit Clan would not trade with Nubine. If the Baroness did become as unstable as they claimed then giving her better weapons and armour could mean more losses if she did choose to attack Ellen's homeland.

Though the talks of war went on she did also note something else. The Wolf and Rat were not ready to aid the Lion as much as it would had first appeared. Sending two armies to him, just so that a fallen lord could survive a day longer seemed like a waste of men, even to Ellen. But an understanding seemed to be reached that small token forces would be sent, if only to reassure the Lion that they were ready to aid him.

But, naturally, as the Rat and Wolf turned to Ellen, asking her for help in this war she of course answered as she was instructed to.

“I am sorry, but the Rabbit Clan sees no reason to interfere in a conflict that does not involve us directly. We can offer material aid, as long as due compensation is offered, but we cannot be involved in any other way. However, as you have raised legitimate concerns we will not be offering any forms of exchange to Baroness Nubine, or those allied to her.”

“Yet.” suddenly blurted out the wolf.

“Excuse me?” asked Ellen.

“You are not involved in it, yet, but you will be.” he growled out. It did not sound like a threat, but neither could something like that be taken seriously. Nubine was not foolish enough to strike at the rabbits, nobody was.

With the meet coming to an end messengers were sent out. Men would be needed in Oakenfall. The few, the brave, the expendable. Why waste the good stock on a lost battle?