

Ariston

I stood at the crest of a small hill, gazing out over the charnel grounds that had once been a simple pasture. Hundreds of Epinerious raiders lay either dead or dying, the angry hydraka still moving amongst them, stomping them flat or taking the odd bite. Our own forces had retreated to a safe distance, leaving the beast to sate its hatred for the barbarians.

As I observed the monster, I couldn't help but feel a little bad for our foes. We had smashed them so efficiently that it didn't even seem fair. For a moment, I felt something akin to pity stir in my chest, but I quashed it with a thought.

All they had to do was stay home. I reminded myself.

Turning away from the gruesome killing grounds, I walked over to where the rest of the command staff stood. The small group looked busy, but in reality, we were all just waiting for our lady to return after she finished hunting down the survivors.

"What were our casualties?" I inquired.

The man from Laconice, whose name I knew to be Megastides, stepped forward. The only one of us to keep their helmet on now that the fighting was done, most would be intimidated by the towering mountain of metal. I was unbothered, however, for I had gotten to know the exile quite well and could tell from his posterior that he was elated by the results of the battle.

"None, my warsmith. Only minor injuries were reported, most of which were from the penitents," Megastides answered. "A sure sign that the gods favor our expedition."

"Don't let our lady hear you say that," another man remarked.

"Well, that's good, but warsmith?" I muttered in confusion. "Last I checked, my title was simply 'second'."

"It is a term from my homeland, and it applies to any who serve directly beneath a general who has taken to the field," Megastides replied. "I believe it is especially fitting here, given that we serve such a genius craftsperson and warrior."

"That isn't a bad title, given our lady's penchant for using the word iron in everything," I remarked idly. "Are there any other terms like it?"

"There were a few who bore the title of warpsmith, though they were magicians, or crafters of enchanted weapons and not warriors or true smiths," Megastides murmured, his gaze growing distant as he thought back on his people's history. "Though powerful, they say that madness plagued each of the title's bearers, and it's seen as a potentially ill omen for a new one to be named."

"Magic, really? I thought the men of Laconice didn't believe in such a thing," I shot back.

"The historiographers of my homeland do not lie, even when they speak of sorcerers," Megastides stated simply. "Can you say the same, man of Lochos?"

If he had been a regular soldier who had made such a jab, I would have had him punished for it. The inner circle of our lady's commanders was exempt from such things. And if I were being honest, I rather enjoyed the man's blunt manner of speaking. I preferred it over the duplicitous double talk that so many of my former commanders engaged in.

"Regardless, we should attend to the wounded, recover any other prisoners, and quickly see to the dead," I ordered. "Our lady will return soon, and I have little doubt she will want us ready to move immediately."

"Aye, warsmith," Megastides replied, ducking away to see to my commands.

The others followed suit, each one knowing perfectly well what their jobs were without me having to tell them. It was nice to see that they needed no 'micromanagement' to borrow a term from my lady, and it allowed me to return once more to the hill. There, I could observe the two-headed creature from a safe distance.

By then, it had grown bored with the slaughter and had started to wander off, now with a visible limp. Having eaten its fill, it didn't seem at all interested in us, regarding the army camped less than four hundred metres away as little more than ants. That was not the case with the Lady of Iron, however. The towering woman emerged from a copse of trees, an unconscious raider slung over one shoulder. Upon getting near to it, the beast gave her a wide, respectful berth, one of its heads watching as the lady of iron passed, fear evident in its animalistic features.

My lady didn't seem to notice, or more than likely, didn't care, and simply strode across the battlefield, her head held high. Perhaps the monster was intimidated due to my lady's armor being drenched in so much blood that she left crimson footsteps in her wake. Regardless of why, the hydraka made no move to stop its ponderous, limping lope towards the distant hills.

Turning my attention to the attendants I had assigned to my lady, I noticed that the normal humans were trailing a good distance behind their freakishly strong leader. The Lady of Iron didn't need bodyguards, but a few extra pairs of hands were always useful, no matter how strong you were. And they proved that statement true by dragging or carrying a half dozen prisoners in various states of injury.

I made myself presentable while I waited for her arrival, though I need not linger for long.

"There were no casualties, and only minimal injuries," I informed my lady as she approached the hill. "We've also gathered the prisoners, as ordered."

“Good,” the Lady of Iron declared. She dumped the man she was carrying at my feet. “Add these wretches to the group. I will address them all in a minute. First, I need to wash off this blood.”

“Before you do,” I interrupted, stepping into her path. “I was hoping to inquire about the hydraka.”

“You needn't worry about them,” the Lady of Iron insisted. “It's a solitary creature, and now freed, it will return to its native hunting grounds.”

“And if it doesn't?” I inquired. “Sure, it appears to have left, but it could return at any moment.”

“If it does, I'll kill it myself,” the Lady of Iron dismissed. “But if it doesn't, it's not our problem.”

I nodded and stepped aside, watching as my lady departed, her assistants, most of whom were women, deposited their own prisoners into the pile before following their mistress. The small group headed off in the direction of the only tent currently set up, the women vanishing into the cavernous depths and leaving the men to guard the entrance.

“Toss these in with the others,” I barked, pointing to a trio of soldiers lingering nearby. “And if they have any life-threatening injuries, treat them. You know the rules.”

“Aye, warsmith!” They shouted.

I sighed.

I really should have rebuffed that title a little firmer when it had first been brought up. Because I hadn't, it would likely stick to me like a tick, though if I was being honest with myself, it wasn't like it was the worst thing I'd ever been called.

I observed the men as they dragged the prisoners, both unconscious or otherwise, away. Only when the last was hefted off did I follow them to the animal pen we had found nearby.

There, nearly fifty men stood, lay, or sat, most of their injuries treated, and their wounds cleaned. Not far, a group of penitent dug a pit while more of their number dragged the corpses of their foes into the open grave. It was grim work, but I could tell the condemned were just happy to have not have ended up in the pit themselves.

“No issues with the prisoners?” I asked, glancing at the young woman I had placed in charge of the operation.

“No, sir,” she replied immediately. “Though I've had to order a few to stop picking at their bandages.”

“Likely unnerved by the strange medicines of our lady’s creation,” I muttered. “The smell is foul, and traditional logic dictates that such an aroma carries the chance of infection and death.”

“They’ll learn or they’ll die,” she exclaimed, shrugging her shoulders and making it clear she didn’t care what happened to them.

It was a little unnerving to hear someone say such a thing about their former countrymen, but it wasn’t a surprise if I was being honest. Over the course of our training, we had all ended up a little more like our lady, and a little less like ourselves. Even I wasn’t immune to the odd effect our commander had on her band. I found myself looking forward to the possibility of combat, while also feeling less unsettled by the sight of corpses or blood.

I pushed such dark musings from my mind when I heard the heavy thump of approaching footsteps.

“My lady,” I greeted without turning around. “Should I select a few to be questioned?”

“Drag that one to the forefront. I’ll question him before his fellows,” answered my lady.

I nodded and pointed to the older male, whom I recognized as the enemy commander and the one the Lady of Iron had been carrying on her shoulder. Once he had shaken the lingering confusion of being so roughly reawoken, the man stumbled to the forefront of his group. The leader of the Iron Band stepped forward to meet him, her armor replaced by a simple grey chiton that went down to her ankles.

Appearing before your defeated foes in such casual garb would normally be a sign of foolishness, or arrogance. When one was as powerful as my lady however, it was a simple statement. One that proclaimed that the prisoners were of absolutely no threat to her.

For a moment, she just stood there, without a weapon, and her arms crossed over her chest. A hush had fallen over the prisoners, and all eyes were drawn to the leader of our warband. I didn’t know who was more eager for her to speak, me or them, as I was excited to find out what they knew. Troop movements, the planning of more raids, the wealth of information we could gather from them were immense, and I was certain that the Lady of Iron could get those answers with little prompting.

“I have questions for all of you, but more specifically, your leader,” the Lady of Iron began, adopting the Epinerious dialogue and even using the regional variant where most of the prisoners came from. “Answer them all truthfully, and I will let you go with enough food and water to return to your homes.”

That was a bit of a surprise, but with how well our rations have been holding up, it wasn’t a great concern.

“Now then. First question,” the Lady of Iron stated, pointing to their leader. “How many of your villages are fully self-sufficient when it comes to food production?”

Okay, I did not see that one coming, but I’m sure our lady will get to the important questions soon enough.

“I don’t know the exact number,” the raid leader muttered, scratching his head. “Though it cannot be very high. I know for certain that the villages that I recruited from were not.”

“Raise your hand if you would say that your village was able to produce all the food your people needed,” the Lady of Iron continued, glancing out over the gathered raiders.

Four hands went up, only for one to fall after a moment of thought. My lady observed them for a few seconds longer before nodding slowly.

“Raise your hands if you were a farmer or worked in agriculture in some capacity. Agriculture is the practice of making food, so raising animals for slaughter would count.”

The majority of the raiders present put up their hands, though the best-equipped and most battle-hardened of the lot did not. Those who kept their hands at their sides numbered less than a dozen, with the majority of their fellows having died in the battle.

“You may put your hands down.”

They obliged, and my lady stepped forward until she was only a few feet from their leader.

“Tell me, in your own words and with as much detail as you can muster, about your domestic food production capabilities,” my lady declared, gesturing to their leader.

“It’s not much really,” he murmured, clearly confused by this line of questioning. “The clan leaders and those above them have small fields dedicated to feeding their families, though that is about it. Gardens are plentiful, but they are small and used primarily to grow pipe weed or medicinal plants.”

“And the rest of the fields have gone fallow then?” My lady pressed on.

Still a little put off by the type of inquiry, the man didn’t put any effort into hiding the truth. Nor did he waste any time coming up with a lie.

“Yes. I’m afraid many of our fields are now foul. The warrior kings demand many fighters, and if I were to fail in finding enough, it would be my sons and daughters who would be forced to fight,” he replied.

"Plowshares to swords," I heard my lady mutter under her breath. She paused and stood a little straighter. "Do you do any trading with the lands to the south or north?"

"We occasionally trade slaves for good iron or food, though it is at a steep cost as there are not many who are willing to speak to us," he professed somewhat guiltily.

I wonder why. It's almost like you raid their lands every year like clockwork. I thought to myself.

"Tell me of your warrior kings," my lady prompted, no doubt in an effort to diffuse the tension that now hung heavy in the air. "I have heard precious little about the great kings who united your peoples and ushered in such an age of unity and glory."

The raider stood a little taller, a rigid, well-managed expression crossing his face.

"I have heard tell that despite the differences in age and size, young Alexandros of the Episians was able to best Korragos, the fiercest warrior king my people have ever produced. After the stunning defeat, the pair entered into an alliance and together marched on the valley kingdom of Mysious using some form of magic to cross the killing grounds that surround that place. After only two short days, they were able to gain the allegiance of Mysious as well," he told, his wavering tone making it clear he wasn't as thrilled about his people's recent history as most seemed to be. "Though they are both grey with age, the kings lead our united peoples with wisdom and honor."

Emptier words have never been spoken. I thought to myself.

For a while, my lady just stood there, deep in thought as she gazed out over the crowd of people. I was tempted to pipe up and inquire further, but knew that she would have likely already thought of any questions I may ask.

"No further questions," the Lady of Iron declared. "You four, distribute food and water amongst the prisoners and then once their dead have been given their last rites, escort the living away."

She then turned and walked away, leaving the now former raiders to just stand there in stunned silence. I too, was caught up in the surprise, and was only startled out of it when the Lady of Iron strode past me. I made haste to join her, willing my lead filled boots to move, lest she leave me in the dust.

"Are you sure that is wise? We could have learned more from them," I half asked, half stated.

"We don't need any more information," my lady dismissed. "With so many losses, they would likely only be able to mount one, maybe two small raids later in the season. Both of which the border guards should be able to repulse without issue."

"So we aren't even going to consider building the forts?" I inquired.

"I'll give it a look, but that plan isn't a viable one, I'm afraid. We are too small a force, and there is too much land. Furthermore, we would have to abandon many small farms and villages at Lochos' edge, which is unacceptable," the Lady of Iron retorted without venom.

"Then I..." I shook my head and cleared my thoughts. "Why did you ask what you did? What is this obsession with their food stocks?"

That came out a bit sharper than intended, but it needed to be said, and I did not regret it. To my surprise, the Lady of Iron didn't seem perturbed by my remark, and even flashed me a small, sidelong smirk.

"Do you think the Mysious were brought in willingly, through diplomacy?" She asked me.

"No," I replied without hesitation. "The way he used the phrase 'marched on' tells me all I need to know."

"And is it fair to say that they rely almost completely on Mysious for their food?" She inquired further.

"I... no, you can't be thinking of doing what I think you're thinking of doing," I muttered, so shocked my feet nearly got tangled up as we walked.

"We would be freeing the people of Mysious from foreign tyranny, Ariston. Don't act like we are doing something heinous," she retorted. "Did Heraklon the great not earn his status as a hero by freeing Knossos from the blood lord Bilayous?"

"I mean, yes but-"

"Think about it, Ariston," my lady declared, stopping outside the entrance to her tent and turning to me. "All we need do is take but a single valley and we can strangle the life out of the entirety of Epinerious. Ending their raids forever, and in a single foul swoop, doubling the size of Lochos."

"That sounds... horrifying," I admitted. "Won't thousands die from starvation?"

"That is likely," she admitted.

I opened my mouth to speak, but was cut off once more.

"Given how bullheaded warrior kings tend to be, I expect it will take the complete liquidation of their bloodlines to bring the Epision and Nercide people to the bargaining table. But hey, they might sue for peace quickly and avoid any loss of life," she answered, her tone soft and

dismissive. "Though we will need more information before we can fully commit to this course of action. I expect the black squires will have what knowledge we need."

She paused, and I noticed that the fading light of the evening sun carved deep shadows in her usually beautiful face.

"And yes, I suppose I could inspect the border and draw up a contingency plan, though I doubt it will be needed," my lady concluded, turning back to her tent. "Have the prisoners sent off thinking we are merely guarding the border. Oh, and ensure the rest of the men are well-rested. We move at first light."

I watched as she stepped into her tent and disappeared, leaving me too stunned to speak. On instinct, I turned back around, intent on fulfilling her orders, only to stop myself after a few steps.

We are either going to be known as the greatest heroes in Lochosian history, or Epinerious will remember us as the most foul villains to ever come to their lands. I thought grimly before dismissing that train of thought and putting one foot in front of the other. Regardless of how history will remember us, I had a job to do.

The Lady of Iron

I had expected to be met with resistance after we crossed the border into Epinerious lands. Though thinking about it, I guess it made sense as borders weren't quite as harshly guarded here on Olympia as they were on the other earths I had known. The ability to monitor and actively defend such a large stretch of land required considerable maintenance, and Epinerious didn't seem interested in anything but raiding.

In their defence, they hadn't needed any defences until now, with no army having even bothered to attack the triumviral kingdom. They had few natural resources, almost no gold to speak of, and most important of all, their land was essentially worthless. The cost-benefit analysis was simple. Epinerious had nothing worth taking, and to truly stop the raids for good, they'd need to take the entire kingdom. Something no empire or major city had been capable of, until we had snuck across their borders.

Though perhaps snuck was not the right word, as I had little doubt that our passage was observed.

There was no way to move so many people in complete secrecy after all. At least, not without magic, but alas, I was still unable to enact even the most simple of incantations. Either way, stealth wasn't necessary, and haste was required, so we moved swiftly and in broad daylight, making no effort to cover our tracks.

During these past two days of marching, we had seen much of their land, and I had made many observations. The most prudent of which was that the raiders we had questioned were indeed correct. We spotted little in the way of wild game, almost no farm animals, only a couple of fields that weren't overgrown with weeds, and a complete lack of civilization.

Sure, there was the occasional village or small town that we spotted from the road, but they were primitive even for Olympia. Few of them had wells, none had aqueducts, and there wasn't a single structure taller than a single story. Even the strange goat horses popular in the region were too lean and too few to be used as livestock. More pressing, they hardly had any roads to speak of, with most being little more than gravel paths beaten down by many feet over the passage of centuries.

It would take many people and many years before these lands would be productive, but it was not an impossibility. I could tell already that this place would need only a firm hand and a bit of investment to get the ball rolling. I knew that after it was under new management, the lands of Epinerious would become the breadbasket this world so desperately needed.

"My lady. A scout returns, he claims to have spotted the formation you spoke of," Ariston exclaimed, breaking me from my reverie.

"Good. You have command while I'm gone, Ariston," I replied, glancing down at the wiry youth of barely eighteen garbed in the dark green cloth of the scout detachment. "Lead me, and make haste. I am eager to confirm the reports I've received of these 'black squires'."

He nodded before turning and sprinting away. I easily kept pace with him, though I wore my full armor, and he had only cured leather and light chain.

Together we bounded away from the main army, through a wide ditch, up a hill, and into the scrublands beyond. Rolling, shallow rises dotted with craggy trees covered the landscape, forcing the road we were on to wind through them lest we waste time climbing each one. As we headed eastwards, these hills grew in size before terminating suddenly at a wide open plain where only short, pale grass grew amongst many sharp, angular boulders.

I slowed down, allowing the scout to catch his breath. I, however, didn't need the rest, as it had only been a brief thirty-minute sprint.

"Hmm," I murmured, nose twitching.

Sniffing at the wind, I detected the presence of several strange aromas that I couldn't quite figure out. There were the obvious ones of dirt, grass, and what you might expect from a place so sparsely occupied by greenery. There was also something else, something that smelled almost like gasoline, yet not quite.

I leaned down and inhaled deeply, filling my lungs.

Then it hit me, this was indeed gas, or at least something in the same family as that mundane fuel. Only here, it had been burnt, leaving behind a residue that lingered even after what was likely centuries. My new senses gave me a lot of information, but it wasn't always easy to sift through it all and make sense of everything.

I also had the unique landscape to thank for being able to figure this much out, as it wouldn't have been possible otherwise. The salt plains had few visitors, little vegetation, and received next to no rain, allowing its ancient scars to remain detectable to me. Scars that this land had gained when several very large space faring craft landed here in ages long passed.

I couldn't quite spot where the black squires had built their homes and libraries, but that was a concern for another time. They had to be somewhere nearby, that much was certain. I need only search the area and I would find them and more importantly, the information I required to make my first mission a success.

"Come," I ordered, rising back to my full height. "We will make camp in a grove I spotted on the way here."

"I should warn you, my lady, these are jalpidae hunting grounds. Any sentries on nightwatch should be armored and should especially have helmets," the scout declared.

"Good thinking. I would hate for the first casualty of my campaign to be due to wildlife," I remarked, chuckling. "Now then, are you ready?"

"Can we... not run the entire way?" The man asked hesitantly.

"Don't worry. My curiosity is satisfied, and we can take it slow," I replied.

"Oh, thank the gods," he murmured, only to wince under the force of my glare. "Err, thank you."

"We should move," I declared. "There is little light left, and I want to make camp before nightfall."

"Yes, my lady, it shall be done."