

Storm King 271

Chapter 271: Strength of the Paladins

Two short blasts followed by one long blast; the horn signal for Legion reinforcements. Seven thousand Legion cavalymen barreled down the Gold Road toward the Bull's Horns. In the lead were four men: August, Roland, and the Bronze and Brimstone Paladins.

"Get to the gate!" August shouted at the other three as he peeled off toward the Southern Horn. He wasn't much of a fighter, but that was what the three Paladins were for.

"Yes, Your Highness!" Roland shouted.

"Understood," Brimstone replied.

Bronze simply smiled and nodded in acknowledgment.

The three kept moving, and the seven thousand knights and men-at-arms behind them followed. As they approached the main gates, they were met by the ecstatic cheers of the soldiers on the walls, and as news of their arrival spread, the cheers were echoed up and down the fortress complex.

"It's damn good to see you all here!" shouted Minerva, who had come down from the top of the western wall's gatehouse to greet them in person.

"We're here to fight for our King and Kingdom!" Roland shouted back. They had to shout in order for their voices to be heard over the sounds of battle just a few hundred feet to the east.

"Then I hope you don't mind if I put you to work right away!" Minerva replied. "Open the gates!"

The signal was repeated, and the portcullises began to slowly open. As the Paladins and their retinues waited for a clear path to charge out onto the battlefield, the Horns' cavalry appeared; the Paladins and their followers would not charge beyond the walls alone.

Once the portcullises were open, twelve thousand of the finest cavalymen that the Bull Kingdom could field sallied out through the open gates and slammed into the surprised, dismayed, and terrified Talfar forces.

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The already gloomy mood of the Talfar officers around Arthwyn plummeted further as the gates of the Horns opened. There were only two possibilities for such an action: either the Legion was surrendering, or they were sallying out to launch a counter-attack.

Given that they had just heard the signal for Legion reinforcements, Arthwyn and the Warrior-Chiefs knew exactly which option it was. And they were not wrong.

A few intrepid Talfar warriors tried to charge into the walls once the portcullises were opened, but they were immediately cut down as the Legion cavalry thundered through the open gates. More than a hundred thousand Talfar warriors and peasant levies had gathered on the east side of the walls, but with bright flashes of steel and intense bursts of magic, the Talfar units were the ones to reel from the sudden attack.

“My Lord! Your orders?!” a Warrior-Chief requested of Arthwyn.

The Marshal stared in disbelief, anger, frustration, and a hundred other similar emotions. He was stunned that he couldn’t even speak.

After waiting a few seconds for their paralyzed Marshal to act, the Warrior-Chiefs began looking at each other, wondering which of them would be bold enough to do what they all knew that they must.

Finally, after a few minutes and the deaths of several thousand more Talfar warriors, one of Arthwyn’s closest and most trusted Chiefs shouted, “SOUND THE RETREAT! FALL BACK TO THE CAMP!”

This jerked Arthwyn back to reality. “Belay that order!” he bellowed. “Send in our cavalry! Show them the true strength of our horsemanship! Run them down with lance and sword, trample them under the hooves of our cataphracts! Break them upon the armor of our chariots!”

The Marshal was furious and impassioned, but his words didn’t move his Warrior-Chiefs in the slightest. Even the Warrior-Captains ignored him and stared at him in quiet defiance.

“Sound the retreat!” Arthwyn’s trusted Warrior-Chief repeated.

“Those who retreat will be guilty of insubordination, treason, and desertion!” Arthwyn wildly screamed. Any thought of maintaining his composure and dignity as a Marshal was long gone; his eyes were wild, and he slammed his fist down on the frame of his chariot with such force that it nearly collapsed underneath him.

And yet, none of the Warrior-Chiefs batted an eye.

“My Lord, if your order is to continue this assault, then you may consider this a mutiny,” the Warrior-Chief who ordered the retreat calmly stated. “Is it Your Lordship’s intent to proceed with this failed assault?”

“You traitor!” Arthwyn roared, having completely lost any semblance of control he had left. He leaped out of his chariot and drew a sword from his soul realm, intending to cut down the Warrior-Chief who was so insubordinate, but before he could take more than a few steps, he found himself surrounded by half a dozen of his other Warrior-Chiefs. He barely had time to react before they tackled him to the ground and disarmed him.

“You traitors!” he shouted, “I’ll see you all hang for this!”

He could see the revenge he’d waited eighty years for disappearing before his eyes, and his furious shouting descended into incoherent shouts and grunts, which only ceased when one of the Warrior-Chiefs gagged him. As Arthwyn was enduring this indignity with all the grace of a pig in a mud pit, his Warrior-Chiefs wasted no time in giving the signal to retreat.

There was no thought to trying to counter the Legion cavalry, as their own infantry and levies were in the way, which would blunt their charge and break up their formations, limiting the cavalry’s effectiveness. What was more, the line of rock spikes conjured by the wall’s defenders was still mostly in the way, it had only been penetrated in a few places, so that, too, was an obstacle that blocked the cavalry’s way.

None of the Warrior-Chiefs wanted this fight after weeks of limited success and heavy losses. The Talfar army began a disorganized retreat.

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As soon as the signal to retreat was given, the levies began a mass-exodus from the vale as fast as each person was capable of moving. Hundreds were trampled in the disorganized mass, and no shortage of those under the levies' feet were the Talfar officers that attempted to give the horde some order in their retreat.

The Talfar infantry were a little more organized, but for every inch they stepped back, the Legion cavalry pushed them a foot. Lances struck the lightly armored Talfar infantry, impaling them and hurling their corpses back into their comrades. Legion swords ripped the Talfar warriors apart, splattering their comrades with their blood. Holes were ripped in their formations by beams of light and fiery explosions, while great cracks opened at their feet, swallowing entire squads whole before sealing up and burying them alive.

Most of these magics were coming from Roland, whose golden light sliced through the Talfar armor like a hot knife through half-melted butter, from the Brimstone Paladin, who was accompanied by fires so hot that he left piles of charred corpses in his wake, and from the Bronze Paladin, who seemed to shake the earth with every step he took.

Under the combined strength of these three Paladins, the Talfar infantry broke less than ten minutes after the signal to retreat had been given. Their formations collapsed and they began to run en masse, with little differentiating them from the levies that they pushed, hit, and even attacked to bypass.

"Look at them run!" Brimstone bellowed as he and the knights at his back slowed down to gain some distance between themselves and the Talfar front line. As soon as they gained about fifty feet, they charged again and crashed into the Talfar lines. They did this repeatedly, like a hammer striking a nail, and crushed thousands of Talfar warriors under the weight of their horses.

"For the Prince! For the King! For the Kingdom!" Roland shouted between swings of his sword as his knights hewed their way into the Talfar line, locking down several battalions of warriors between themselves and the rock spikes. The warriors had nowhere to go, and could only try to fight back, though they did little, if any, damage to Roland or his knights.

The Bronze Paladin, meanwhile, remained silent, but in his radiant bronze armor that was covered in glowing runes and his massive bronze ax, he cut a distinctive figure. He hadn't brought any knights from his own modest retinue, but all five thousand knights and men-at-arms from the Horns followed him, making his group the largest and most furious. With every swing of Bronze's ax, more fissures would erupt beneath the trapped Talfar infantry as they bottlenecked at one of the few openings through the rock spikes, burying dozens at a time.

All in all, the Paladins and their followers were cutting right through the Talfar infantry, and there was nothing any of the latter could do to stop them even if they hadn't broken and tried to run.

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"What a mess," Trajan muttered as he watched the one-sided slaughter from the command tower in the keep. Twelve thousand Legion cavalymen were practically walking right over the Talfar infantry, and the soldiers on the wall were cleaning up the remaining towers and showering the Talfar horde with thousands of arrows.

Leon sighed in response, eliciting a smile of victory from Trajan.

"If you hadn't pulled that stunt, you'd be out there with them, I daresay," Trajan said. With Leon back safe and Talfar on the run, his anger had cooled enough that he slipped back into the relatively informal attitude he and Leon had with each other. But he wasn't going to forget Leon leaving his post to launch his own solo mission.

Fortunately, Leon hadn't argued with him in the slightest about his punishment.

"Probably," Leon agreed with a slight smile. Even though he was in the command tower, he'd still dressed in full armor, save for his helmet, just in case.

"Your Highness!" an adjutant suddenly called out from near the door. "Prince August has arrived at the keep!"

"Show him here," Trajan ordered, and the adjutant bowed and ran off.

Several minutes later, he returned, accompanied by a slight man of modest stature, dirty-blond hair, and dark brown eyes. His features were somewhat pale and gaunt but lacked the chiseled handsome quality that Trajan had, giving him relatively average looks. And yet, he carried himself with all the dignity of a Prince, which combined with his dark green gold-trimmed clothing, gave him a commanding presence and an aura of cool calm.

"Uncle!" August loudly exclaimed as he walked forward with his arms outstretched.

"Nephew!" Trajan responded as he pulled the much shorter man into a hug so tight that Leon could hear a few popping sounds coming from August's body.

When Trajan finally released him, August was forced to take a few deep breaths and stretch a bit.

"You're early!" Trajan said with a joyful smile on his face.

"I pushed hard to get here as quickly as I could," August said once he caught his breath after Trajan's hug forced all the air out of him. "I left behind the Legions that accompanied me in order to get here as soon as I could."

"How far out are they?" Trajan inquired.

"Two days, I think," August replied. "My two Legions met up with one of yours that was coming down as well, so there should be three Legions incoming."

"Wonderful," Trajan said as his smile turned vicious. That would bring him up to six Legions, or one hundred and twenty thousand soldiers, not including his personal knights or the Paladins and their retainers. That was more than enough soldiers in his mind to force the Talfar army off its hill and to burn its camp to the ground, though not enough to launch a counter-invasion as King Julius had done eighty years ago.

With the catastrophic casualties that the Talfar infantry were taking now, it would only be easier to kick the rest of the army out of Florentia and throw them back into their Kingdom.

"Who else have you brought? Anyone you haven't told me about?" Trajan then asked.

"The Paladins Roland and Saturnius, which I told you about, and Praecilius, who I managed to convince to join me," August said with obvious pride.

However, what he said made Leon, who was listening with rapt attention, freeze up in anxiety. He had fought alongside Roland in the Northern Vales, and he didn't want the Paladin to know that he was now in the south. He still didn't trust the man, even if he didn't honestly think Roland had a hand in his father's death.

Unfortunately for Leon, though, for all his general gruffness and seriousness, Trajan wanted to be polite with his nephew, and he turned to the side to let August get a better look at Leon.

"August, let me introduce you to someone..."

Chapter 272: An Interesting Name

"August, let me introduce you to someone..." Trajan said as he gestured to Leon to step forward.

Leon, for his part, wanted nothing less than to be introduced to Prince August after the latter's reveal of his acquaintance with Roland. But Trajan called him out, and there was no helping it; Leon took a few hesitant steps forward and genuflected for Prince August.

"... This is Sir Leon Ursus," Trajan said as Leon and August made eye contact.

August was almost struck speechless at the sight of Leon's golden eyes, his youth, and his robust fifth-tier aura, but it was Leon's name that surprised August the most.

"That's... an *interesting* name," August said.

"Sir Ursus came to us from the Northern Vales," Trajan explained, though the name itself gave that fact away, "and despite some *difficulty* adapting to the way we do things, has proven himself to be one of the finest young knights our Legions have to offer. I've taken the liberty of mentoring him myself."

Leon couldn't help but cringe both at Trajan's complements, and at the reminder of his stupid decision during the first assault, and he didn't notice that August's eyes hadn't left his face since attention was first drawn to him.

"That's wonderful to hear," August said with an odd smile, "this Kingdom's Legions can always use promising new blood, regardless of where they were born... Sir Ursus, you are most welcome in this land..."

Trajan's smile faltered a little, as there was something in August's tone that put him off a bit, but just as he was about to question his nephew about it, an adjutant said, "Your Highness! Our cavalry!"

When Trajan looked back out the window to see what the adjutant was on about, he saw that, for the most part, the Talfar infantry that hadn't made it to the east side of the rock spikes had been killed, and the Legion cavalry was clearly preparing to go out and chase down those who had managed to flee.

“Send the order to hold their ground! They are not to venture past those spikes!” Trajan immediately ordered, and the adjutant scrambled to get the order sent in time.

“Why shouldn’t we pursue a fleeing enemy?” August asked. “They’ve broken, shouldn’t we kill as many as we can?”

“Normally, yes, we should,” Trajan admitted, “but the Talfar cataphracts and chariots weren’t committed to the fight, their strength is still near its peak. They may have broken and started retreating back to their camp, but we shouldn’t risk our weaker cavalry by sending them out into a vulnerable position where we can’t support them with arrow fire and defensive enchantments.”

August frowned, but he nodded, deferring to Trajan’s wisdom.

“Nephew,” Trajan began, instantly catching August’s attention with a tone of extreme seriousness, “we have much to discuss, but for now all that can wait until after the battle is over. For now, I must see to my Legions and fortress, and ensure that everything is still in order.”

“I understand,” August said with a jovial smile.

The elder Prince departed the command tower to make his inspections and meet with his Legates in the field, and Leon, Alix, and Anzu were right behind him. As they left, though, Leon could feel August’s eyes burning a hole in his back.

‘He knows who I am,’ Leon thought in panic.

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In the time it took the Legion cavalry to mop up the remaining Talfar infantry that hadn’t managed to retreat, the signal to fall back was given. Rather than pursuing their broken opponent, Roland, Brimstone, and Bronze led their units back to the Horns.

At the main gates, August met the Paladins that accompanied him east.

“Your Highness!” Roland enthusiastically called out as soon as he was through the gates. His silver and red Paladin armor was barely scratched, though its luster had faded from the dust and dirt of the battle, and the man himself looked hardly worse for wear. “I bring word of victory! The enemy has been pushed back!”

“I saw, my friend,” August said, smiling in amusement at Roland’s insistence on such formality when in public.

Together, the two began to lead the way back to the stables in the Southern Horn, with the other two Paladins keeping order among the twelve thousand knights and men-at-arms behind them.

Along the way, Roland described the battle, but August wasn’t a particularly military-minded man, and the descriptions felt same-y to him. Roland’s magic was strong, and his unit crashed into the Talfar lines again and again until they broke. That was all he needed to know, as far as August was concerned.

As Roland was finishing up his fervent descriptions, August suddenly interrupted, asking the Paladin, “About a year or so ago, you came to me to request leave in order to find out more about a young squire, but you found out he’d died in the Northern Territories...”

The Prince was light on the details, despite remembering everything Roland told him back then, but he and Roland were in public and he didn't know who could be listening in.

"I remember, Your Highness," Roland said, his smile dropping slightly as he wondered why August was bringing this up now.

"Describe this boy to me," August commanded, and it was a command, despite his airy tone and bright smile.

"Uhh," Roland mumbled as he recalled his mission to the Northern Territories more than two years ago. "Dark hair, black or very dark brown..." he said as he tried to picture Leon in his mind. In truth, he'd never paid that much attention to the boy, focusing more on Artorias during his time in the north.

"Take your time," August said, noticing his friend's discomfort and slight panic.

As Roland got his thoughts in order, he said, "The boy was tall, maybe about six feet or so, rather thin..."

August frowned in dissatisfaction. The Leon he'd just met was about as tall as Roland mentioned, but he was much more heavily built than the Paladin was describing, but just as August was going to interrupt with a more direct question, something occurred to Roland.

"There was something else... his eyes were yellow, I think? Maybe gold? Seemed a bit unusual to me, but I have to admit that I never really looked at the kid."

"I understand," August said as a smile bloomed on his face. "That was all I needed to know, thank you."

"May I ask Your Highness about your sudden interest?" Roland asked.

"There's a young knight—not even twenty, I'd say—in my uncle's service named Leon Ursus. He's tall, fifth-tier, and as built as a mage of that strength *should* be..." Here, August paused. He was also a fifth-tier mage, but his physique was rather lacking, though he knew perfectly well why that was the case. "He has golden eyes," the Prince finished. He glanced meaningfully over at Roland and saw the Paladin staring back at him slack-jawed.

"I... I thought he was dead! I was *told* he was dead!" Roland rambled.

"There must have been some miscommunication or mistake, or maybe this isn't the same person," August said. "The name and physical description could just be a coincidence, but regardless, I'm going to speak with my uncle soon, and I'd like you to join me. I have a sense that this 'Leon Ursus' will be joining us, and I would like to know if you recognize him."

"Yes! Yes, Your Highness!" Roland instantly agreed.

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The clean-up after a battle like what the Legion soldiers had just endured was always long and tedious. Thousands of bodies had to be collected and tallied, but there also had to be a sizeable number of soldiers keeping watch just in case the Talfar army tried to launch raids against those dealing with the dead. No one seriously thought that the Talfar army was in good enough shape to do this, but Trajan always insisted on the precaution.

There would be a meeting once night fell for Trajan to get a full idea of casualties sustained and damage inflicted on the enemy, but until that happened, he didn't have much to do after making his quick inspections. Consequently, he was now waiting for Prince August in one of his sitting rooms with Leon.

"I understand," Trajan whispered.

Leon had just told Trajan about his experience with Roland in the Northern Vales, and about the Paladin's connection with Adrianos Isynos, one of the men-at-arms under one of Roland's knights, and also one of the men who attacked Leon's home and killed Artorias.

It had taken Leon a little while to get through the story, as he kept hesitating and questioning if telling Trajan all of this was the right call, but in the end, he decided to trust the Prince. Trajan already knew that Artorias was dead, of course, but hearing the full story from Leon was another thing entirely.

Trajan had been good friends with Kyros Raime, though admittedly not as close with the Archduke as King Julius had been. Still, Leon's story of the death of Kyros' last living son left Trajan quietly furious. He stood staring out of a window with his back to the rest of the small sitting room, but he was emitting so much killing intent that Leon felt a little sick.

"I will look into this Paladin," Trajan stated as he turned around. The sitting room was dim, and his face was cast in shadow as his back turned to the light of the setting sun. "If Sir Roland had any hand in the fall of your House, then he will pay dearly for it."

"Thank you, Trajan," Leon said.

"Is there anything else you can tell me about these events? Any information about those assassins?" the Prince inquired.

For a moment, Leon contemplated telling Trajan what he had learned from Valeria, about her family's connection with Adrianos, but his voice caught in his throat. "N-No," he stuttered. Trajan caught the stutter, but he trusted Leon enough to let it go for the time being.

"I know the man who looked into the events surrounding the attack on Artorias Raime's villa eighteen years ago, and I have a couple other contacts I trust to look into these matters discreetly, I'll send them a few letters."

"Thank you," Leon repeated.

"For now, though, you can rest assured that you have nothing to fear from Roland. Unlike the other Paladins, Roland is not a seventh-tier mage. He'll have to go through me to get to you."

Leon smiled and laughed in embarrassment. The only other man to ever express so much concern over his well-being was Artorias; most other guys he'd met were either too intimidated by his and Artorias' lifestyle or were kept at enough of a distance where that concern wouldn't be warranted. In other words, he wasn't used to this treatment, and was happy, embarrassed, and surprised all at once.

A knock at the door prevented any more talk of that nature, though, and a messenger informed Trajan that just about everyone had arrived for the post-battle meeting.

"Let's get to it," Trajan said once the messenger left. "Make sure to control yourself, don't fly off the handle at the first sight of Sir Magnus."

Leon sheepishly agreed, knowing that as soon as he saw Roland, his first instinct would undoubtedly be to attack and remove him as a threat.

All of the Legates, high-ranking Tribunes, diplomats, and other important knights had gathered in Trajan's meeting room. They rose when the Prince entered, and only took their seats again once Trajan sat down on his dais. The only people missing now were August and the three Paladins that accompanied him.

They didn't have long to wait, though. Not even a minute after Trajan's arrival, August walked in through the door, causing the rest of the knights to rise once again.

Leon paid extra attention to Roland, and he saw the Paladin's eyes scan the crowd of a couple hundred knights. He felt like he knew what the Paladin was looking for, or rather, *who* the Paladin was looking for. And it seemed like his suspicion was confirmed once Roland's gaze finally drifted toward the front of the room, where Leon stood behind Trajan.

As soon as Leon's figure entered Roland's vision, the Paladin's eyes widened in surprise and recognition. He was a little taller, with shorter hair and a much more filled out body, but now that he was looking for him, Roland instantly recognized the young man he met in the Northern Vales.

Chapter 273: August and Trajan

Leon fought against the instinct to charge at Roland with all the power he had available and attack the Paladin. Roland was vulnerable, surprised and unprepared, Leon knew that with his speed, he could get in one or two good hits before Roland could react.

But he resisted this temptation. His sword hand twitched and his power momentarily spiked as he automatically began to summon his sword from his soul realm, but he calmed himself before he could make any mistakes. After a moment or two, Leon's opportunity passed, and Roland composed himself as much as he could. He still stared at Leon a little more than the latter would've liked, though—the Paladin was more than a little shocked at Leon's startling rise in power, from a second-tier mage to a fifth-tier mage in not even three years.

As his group walked right down the middle of the meeting room, between the two rows of columns and chairs and before the eyes of all the rest of the gathered knights, August's face broke out into a wide smile, but just as he was about to greet his uncle, the Bronze Paladin practically shoved his way past.

"Trajan!" Bronze shouted, his voice almost shaking the entirety of the keep.

"Titus!" Trajan replied as he almost jumped up from the dais to clasp the Paladin's outstretched, bronze-clad hand. The Bronze Paladin was the only man in the room who was still fully armored, being covered head-to-toe in his signature bronze armor—Leon was the only other man in the room wearing armor, but he wasn't wearing his helmet.

"My friend! It's been too long!" Bronze exclaimed as he vigorously shook Trajan's hand. His friendly demeanor towards the Prince surprised some of the watching knights, but he was still a Paladin, and nobody there had the rank or qualifications to reprimand him for his lax manners in the presence of royalty. Besides, Trajan clearly didn't care about Bronze's lack of decorum.

"Indeed, what's it been, twenty years?" Trajan asked, completely ignoring the other Prince and both other Paladins. August looked a bit surprised and self-conscious at being so ignored, but he brushed it off and waited for the two old friends to get their greetings over with.

Trajan's and Bronze's greeting carried on for a little while longer. They were like two peas in a pod, both gigantic human beings, powerful earth mages, and highly experienced warriors. They'd fought alongside one another too many times not to be good friends, and with the obviously long time spent apart, they now had to take a few minutes to express that friendship.

Once they separated, August and Trajan greeted each other, polite pleasantries were exchanged between Trajan and the Brimstone Paladin, but when he got to Roland, Trajan shook his hand with threatening force. He glared at the Paladin so violently that, despite offering him some kind words of greeting, it was made clear to Roland that he didn't have a friend in Trajan.

Once all that was over, August and Trajan took a seat on the raised dais, while Roland and Brimstone sat down in prepared seats close to the dais. Bronze, meanwhile, stood in the back, right next to Leon.

"Give me your reports," Trajan ordered, wasting no time. He had other business to conduct with Roland, and he was sure August had business with him, so he wanted this post-battle reporting done with as soon as possible.

"Total casualties were light," Minerva reported, "not even a thousand dead, barely three thousand injured."

"And we're estimating thirty thousand Talfar casualties," Constantine added. "About half of which were inflicted by the cavalry charge."

"Prisoners?" Trajan asked.

"A couple thousand, not any more than those captured in the last battle," a Legate said. "The jails aren't even overcrowded; it seems that the Talfar army still had the wherewithal to take most of their injured with them as they retreated. Most of those left behind were the dead."

"Hmm," Trajan said.

For his part, August was quite interested in these proceedings. He had little practical experience with the Royal Legions, so this was all new. Still, despite his burning curiosity, he maintained his royal dignity and kept his mouth shut and didn't interrupt the meeting with basic questions.

Leon, too, was interested in what was happening, and he was doing his best to pay attention, but the Bronze Paladin was making that more than a little difficult. The Paladin blatantly stared at Leon and refused to look away, despite Leon occasionally shooting him dirty looks. Leon couldn't tell him to stop without disturbing the meeting, so he had little choice other than to endure this in silence.

"... with Marshal Gwen?" Aquillius asked. "We can keep her for longer if need be, but I feel that she wasn't lying when she said that the Talfar government is looking to make peace."

Trajan was about to answer, but he caught himself. Since August was now present, he wasn't the highest authority in the room anymore. Both were technically of equal rank, being Princes, but August

was serving as one of the two Regents, giving him higher authority than Trajan, who was only a Consul and an Exarch.

He looked at August, but the younger Prince simply said, "You're more familiar with this matter than I am, Uncle, I defer to you on this matter."

Trajan raised an eyebrow in both confusion and interest, and he asked, "Are you sure about that?"

"This is not an official war," August replied. "No declarations of war have been made by either side and as a result, there is no need for such an official response or a deferment to a higher authority. To that end, I will leave the matter to your judgment."

"Very well," Trajan said. He thought for a moment, then said, "I want to trust Marshal Gwen and bring this conflict to a close, but I also can't risk the safety of this fortress after an assault was launched while a peace delegation was in this very chamber. Marshal Gwen may remain our guest for a few days longer, and once the incoming Legions arrive, we will shatter the army on our doorstep. Once we are no longer threatened, we will revisit this issue."

"So, we will not be counter-invading the Talfar Kingdom?" Fonteius asked. "My contacts in Pretani have been getting rather nervous, given how far we pushed eighty years ago."

"They can rest assured that we will not be putting their backs against the wall," Trajan replied with a smile of satisfaction. He took a great deal of pride in instilling fear in his Kingdom's enemies. "Besides, we wouldn't have the numbers to make it work for any respectable stretch of time, and all of us here might be brought up on charges of treason and corruption if we were to launch an invasion without the approval of the reigning King or the Assembly in his absence."

"I understand, I shall pass on our intent not to invade to my counterparts in Pretani," Fonteius said.

And with that, the meeting was over. Trajan dismissed the Legates, Tribunes, and diplomats, but as they were leaving, he turned to August and asked, "Let's speak privately, Nephew, we have some business to go over."

"Yes, I have a matter or two I would like to bring up with you as well, Uncle," August replied. "Do you mind if the Paladins join us?"

Trajan frowned, but he knew and trusted Bronze with his life, he had heard good things about Brimstone, and he knew for a fact that he was stronger than Roland, so he hesitantly agreed.

Several minutes later, three Paladins, two Princes, and one awkward Leon were back in Trajan's sitting room.

As soon as the door was closed, Bronze pre-empted everyone and directly asked Leon, "You're a member of House Raime, aren't you?"

Everyone froze and jaws almost hit the floor. Leon's heart rate spiked, and he almost called upon his magic, but the overwhelming pressure he felt coming from Bronze helped him not do anything too foolish. Still, he didn't answer the Paladin.

"Well, I guess that's one way to bring the issue up, isn't it?" Trajan said with a dry tone.

Brimstone, the only man there who was actually surprised at the statement, said in confusion, "Wait, what?! House Raime is extinct, though!"

"Not quite," Roland said, following those two words up with a sigh. "Artorias Raime survived the attack on his villa and escaped to the Northern Territories with his son. It's good to see you again, Leon, you look well."

Leon glared back at Roland, but before he could say anything, Trajan asked Bronze with a tone of mild amusement, "I'm guessing you knew who he was as soon as you saw him, didn't you?"

"I did," Bronze replied. "He looks *exactly* like Kyros did, back in the day."

"I *did* think the similarities were striking, but I didn't know Kyros when he was that young..." Trajan muttered.

"You... knew my grandfather?" Leon hesitantly asked. There wasn't much point in denying his identity after Trajan admitting it, though he was more than a little frustrated at how casually it was revealed. First with Emilie and now with Trajan, he was growing increasingly concerned with how many people were so willing to confirm or outright expose his identity, even if only to a few select people.

"I did," Bronze replied. "I grew up in Teira, my father was a knight sworn to Matthaios Raime, your great-grandfather. I was raised alongside the old Archduke, only a few years his senior."

Leon couldn't see Bronze's face through his helmet, but the Paladin's tone was warm and welcoming. And yet, when Bronze took a few steps toward Leon, the younger knight took a few steps back. The Paladin could say all he wanted, he could describe everything about Leon's family in excruciating detail if he wanted to, but it wouldn't make Leon trust him.

Fortunately for him, now that Leon's identity was confirmed, August was keen on moving the conversation along.

"It's a wonderful thing, learning that House Raime isn't quite as extinct as it appeared," the Prince said, "but that is not the only piece of business we must discuss."

Trajan, Leon, and the Paladins shifted their attention to August, but before he could continue, Bronze said, "You sound like you're about to discuss politics. I'll have no part of this." He then walked out of the room without another word, much to August's consternation.

"A shame," August whispered. "I would've liked to have a man of his caliber on my side, but he's free to do as he pleases."

"On your side', hmm?" Trajan asked. The atmosphere instantly turned cold and business-like, and Roland and Brimstone took a seat on either side of August.

"Yes, Uncle," August said. "I understand how it sounds, but I have little choice. The next King will be either myself or Octavius, and if my elder brother claims the throne, my mother and I will likely be killed."

"What are you basing this suspicion of yours on?" Trajan asked.

Leon was quiet and paying as much attention as he could. When entering the sitting room, he had no idea that the conversation would take such a serious turn.

"The Queen is openly disdainful of my mother," August explained. "Were it only Octavius I had to contend with, I would probably simply give up my claim to the throne and go into exile, but the Queen has a great deal of hatred for my mother for being my father's favorite. She's made it clear that if my father doesn't wake, then when he dies, my mother will soon follow. Compounding her hatred, since I was made co-Regent with Octavius, I'm considered a threat to her son's ability to ascend to Kingship."

"And this is why you seek the crown yourself? To survive?" Trajan flatly inquired. His heart wasn't moved at all by August's claims.

"It is," August admitted. "Your assistance would be invaluable to me, Uncle. I have been a Regent for eight years now, but when I started, I was only fifteen. I haven't been able to drum up support as well as my brother. Making matters worse, his shared blood with the Queen all-but guaranteed him the support of his grandfather, the Duke of Valentia, and through him, just about all of the Western Territories."

The Western Territories was the region where more than half of the food in the Bull Kingdom was grown, as well as where most of its luxury goods were produced. It was the richest and most populous of the five Territories, and it didn't take Trajan any leap of logic to understand why Octavius' control of the region was such a huge problem for August.

"My brother has also made serious inroads in the Southern and Central Territories," August explained. "I've done my best, but all I've been able to do is get a few of the lords in the Eastern and Northern Territories to join my side, and even then, those that have pledged to me aren't particularly powerful in their own right."

"I understand," Trajan said, interrupting August's explanation of his situation. "Now, I have a question for you, Nephew."

"Speak it," August said, leaning in to better listen to Trajan. He needed his uncle's assistance, and as such, he treated anything that Trajan had to say with deadly seriousness.

"What are you planning to *do* as King?" Trajan asked, surprising August in how quickly he asked. The latter Prince had thought that Trajan would be more interested in the current situation rather than what he'd do later—August thought that Trajan would ask this question, just not so soon.

"I would remove the current Queen from power," August said. "The Serpentine Isles haven't been providing their tribute, I'd need to deploy the fleets to ensure that they don't return to piracy. I would solidify our northern and eastern borders, as they've been concerningly unstable in recent years."

"That's all well and good, but what would be your *strategy*?" Trajan clarified. "My brother, my father, my grandfather all worked to lessen the power of the landed class. To have such wealth combined with the guaranteed inheritance of political positions engenders a great deal of corruption among the nobility. It's been the goal of House Taurus for generations to lessen this impact by weakening the nobility."

August's eyes went wide as he understood Trajan's meaning. "I would continue this process," he eagerly said. "I've been stymied in my attempts to keep the peace and to punish those who flaunt the laws of

the land by the nobility at almost every turn! I would make sure to continue our family's goal of removing this cancer from our Kingdom!"

Trajan frowned. "That's not the point, boy," he growled, sending a shiver of fear running down August's spine. "We *protect* the people, and more often than not, it's their own *lords* that the citizens of this Kingdom need protecting *from*. We have a responsibility to our people, to protect them and to do what we can to ensure their lives remain stable. That is why we must break the power of the nobility! Not to protect our own power!"

Trajan's voice was like thunder in August's ears, and even the Paladins looked a bit shaken. Leon, however, as someone who had been in conflict with no shortage of nobles in his brief time in the Bull Kingdom, greatly resonated with what Trajan was saying.

"The nobles who *ought* to be leading and protecting them do the opposite!" Trajan shouted. "More often than not, the people of this land are used and abused, exploited for the gain of the nobility! The idea that the common folk are lesser than the nobility is what we must abolish! The only way to guarantee that our people live safe and happy lives is to do away with the nobility!"

"That... doesn't seem feasible," Brimstone hesitantly said.

"It probably isn't," Trajan admitted as he calmed himself down. "And yet, the point stands. It is my opinion, and Julius shared it, that the greatest threat to our Kingdom and its citizens are the nobility, who seek to subvert the Kingdom's functions to maintain their power, wealth, and influence."

Trajan paused here and took a few deep breaths. He was ranting, and he didn't want to alienate August with his rhetoric. Once he regained his composure, he looked August in the eye with such seriousness that August couldn't help but start to sweat in anxiety.

"If all you want is to maintain your power and to not be killed by Octavius, then I will not support you, Nephew," Trajan said. "If you want my support, then you must show me that you are willing to do your duty to the Kingdom, to fulfill your responsibility to your people. Until I see that, then you will find no support from me."

"I... I..." August sputtered, but after taking a moment to think, he simply said, "I understand, Uncle."

"Good," Trajan replied. "And now, for the time being, let's turn our attention back to the most immediate problem, the Talfar army."

—

Two days later, the three Legions that were rushing to Ariminum arrived. Trajan was expecting one more, but he wasn't going to wait around, not with the Talfar camp in disarray and his scouts bringing reports of Talfar levies and warriors deserting almost by the second.

What was more, he hadn't received any more requests for peace since Marshal Gwen arrived right before the second assault, leaving him with little other choice.

The six Legions, three Paladins and their followers, and Trajan's own knights deployed outside the camp. It was time to end their undeclared war.

Chapter 274: Surrender

For two days, Owain had lain in a field hospital unconscious. After Arthwyn's disastrous second assault, the Talfar army was in such disarray that it took that long for a healer to actually examine the Prince's injuries and determine that he no longer needed to be sedated—and, in fact, never needed to be in the first place.

As the Talfar Prince slowly regained consciousness, a quarter of the two dozen remaining Warrior-Chiefs were huddled around his bed, waiting on the only leader they had left to come back to himself. For a few moments after opening his eyes, Owain had no idea what was going on. His memory of the past few weeks had faded away, but as the seconds passed, more and more of the haze that filled his mind cleared, and more and more of what had transpired returned to him.

By the time he recalled Gwen relaying Andraste's orders to stand down and Arthwyn subsequently attacking him, Owain was sitting up and staring at the surrounding Warrior-Chiefs.

"What's... going on?" he asked in a hoarse voice. The healers had already finished their work and left him alone with the Warrior-Chiefs in a private section of the field hospital.

The Warrior-Chiefs all looked at each other, unsure of how to respond. They were all of equal rank and each was roughly on par with the others in terms of magical ability—in other words, there was no clear leader among them who could take charge. This also meant that there was no single person whose responsibility it was to answer the Prince's question, and none of the Chiefs even wanted to in the first place.

The seconds dragged on in silence, and Owain quickly lost his patience. He glared at the nearest Warrior-Chief and repeated, "What is our current situation?!"

The Chief looked dismayed to be called out like this, but he reluctantly began to explain everything that had happened while Owain was unconscious.

"... and after the Marshal was subdued, the army retreated, but not before suffering horrendous casualties," the Chief finished.

"And where's Arthwyn now?" Owain asked, having gotten the full picture of what Arthwyn had done and how he had justified it.

"We've confined him to his tent until Your Highness could figure how to handle the situation," the Warrior-Chief replied. He was clearly nervous as to what Owain would do, especially since he and the other Warrior-Chiefs had technically committed a mutiny against their commander.

Or at least, that's how he understood what had gone down.

"Arthwyn is no longer a Marshal, he was stripped of that rank by my older sister," Owain said in a tone that clearly conveyed his exhaustion and resignation. He's suffered too many blows to fight for the throne now, and the least he could do was to act with as much dignity as he could muster. "Ensure that he's securely imprisoned, I'll decide what to do with him later..."

"Yes, Your Highness," the Chief replied.

“And have the rest of the Chiefs assemble for a meeting at once. We have things to go over,” Owain added as relief washed over the faces of the other Warrior-Chiefs when it became clear that they hadn’t actually committed treason.

Owain struggled out of bed; he was stiff from having been immobile for a couple days, but his fifth-tier strength made it not overly difficult for him to rise to his feet. Two of the Warrior-Chiefs left to fetch the others, while the remaining Chiefs accompanied Owain to the command tent.

On the way, the Prince observed the status of the warriors in the camp. Most were listless and without purpose, and few so much as glanced at the small procession of leaders as they passed. To say that the army was in dire straights would be to put it mildly, and with every step he took, Owain could feel any conviction he once had to seize the throne diminish further. This army was the last thing he had left, his final option to try and claim the crown, and it was thoroughly defeated; it would fight no more battles, and the Prince got the impression from the expressions of utter dejection of many of the warriors’ faces, if he tried to lead the ragged remnants into one last battle, he’d face mass desertion from the professional warriors.

Once they reached the command tent, Owain took a seat at the front of the meeting area and didn’t say another word until everyone else arrived half an hour later. No one else dared to break the silence he unintentionally imposed, either.

When Owain was ready to speak, he glanced at the two dozen Warrior-Chiefs that remained. A third of the sixth-tier mages in the army had been killed in battle, and a few more had been killed by Bran, leaving him with barely more than half of the commanders he’d had a month prior.

“Arthwyn?” Owain exhaustedly asked.

“Bound and imprisoned in his tent, as ordered,” one of the Chiefs replied.

“Good,” Owain murmured. With his dream of Kingship gone, he couldn’t even muster the energy to order the former-Marshal’s execution. “Status of the army?”

“Broken,” another Chief succinctly responded. “We left almost thirty thousand dead in the last battle, and the peasants have been deserting faster than we can stop. At this point, we have less than fifteen thousand levies remaining.”

“And the warriors?” Owain asked.

“Thirty thousand infantry, forty-five thousand cavalry,” the Chief informed.

“Then we’re likely outnumbered by now, assuming that the Bull’s reinforcements were more than just those knights...”

“Those knights were led by powerful mages, probably some of their Paladins,” a third Chief stated. “If they have seventh-tier mages, then we can’t even stay hunkered down in the camp and try to rely on our fortifications to survive.”

“You’re saying we ought to retreat?” Owain asked.

“I am, Your Highness,” the Chief shamelessly answered. “There can be no victory here, especially without the reinforcements we were hoping to receive from Marshal Gwen.”

“Speaking of, where is she?” Owain asked.

“We don’t know, Your Highness. She left for Ariminium shortly after her arrival and she hasn’t been seen since.”

“Hmm,” Owain hummed in thought. “She told me she was going to try and secure a temporary truce so that we could retreat in safety, while our two Kingdoms worked on a more lasting peace, but then Arthwyn ordered the assault. I would hazard a guess that it looked like she was trying to distract the Bull’s Legions from the assault and was likely taken prisoner.”

Suddenly, a Warrior-Captain entered the tent. “Your Highness,” he said to Owain with a quick bow, “the Bull’s Legions are assembling outside of their fortress!”

—

To their west, three Legions were arrayed in their iconic checkerboard formation.

To their south, another Legion had reoccupied Florentia, evicting the garrison left behind during the last assault—the garrison was light, barely more than a token force to prevent landings to the south while the assault was carried out. In the confusion and dejection following the assault, none of the Warrior-Chiefs reinforced the small garrison, leaving them vulnerable to the Legion counter-attack.

Finally, two more Legions were rapidly marching east from Florentia; it was clear that their aim was to swing around to the north and surround the camp on three sides, with the Border Mountains preventing escape to the north.

“Shit...” one of the Warrior-Chiefs whispered.

“We need to deploy the cavalry! Hit those marching Legions in the south-east and prevent ourselves from being cut off!” another Warrior-Chief shouted. “If we can delay them long enough, then we can still retreat back to Briga!”

“No,” Owain gently whispered, taking everyone around him completely by surprise. “No, don’t challenge the Bull in open battle, but be prepared to defend this camp with everything you have.”

“... Yes... Your Highness,” the bellicose Warrior-Chief hesitantly responded.

As he watched the Legions slowly encircle them, something had occurred to Owain. If he were to return to the Talfar Kingdom, he would more likely than not be put to death. Several of his other brothers had rebelled against Andraste, and she had shown them no mercy after defeating them in battle, remorselessly sending them to the headsman to be made a head shorter.

Owain suspected he would suffer a similar fate if he were to return home. He couldn’t even trust these Warrior-Chiefs’ loyalties; all it would take would be a message from Andraste promising them amnesty in exchange for handing him over and throwing down their weapons.

But in the Bull Kingdom, even if he were imprisoned, Owain suspected he wouldn’t be put to death.

“Ready my chariot, I will go out to parley with Prince Trajan,” Owain ordered.

“Your Highness! You can’t!” a Warrior-Chief shouted. “We can’t give in to them, even if we’ve lost so much!”

Unfortunately for this Chief, he found no support from his colleagues when he looked around at the other Warrior-Chiefs. They just wanted this whole thing to be over and to go home, no matter how it happened. They honestly didn’t care if the Prince surrendered himself to buy their freedom.

And so, not even ten minutes later, while the Legions were still getting into position, Owain drove out of the camp in his chariot with only a handful of bodyguards in three other chariots. He stopped about halfway to the Legions to the west—that was where the most Legions were concentrated, and he was certain that that’s where Trajan would be.

He wasn’t disappointed, as several minutes later, about twenty or twenty-five riders rode out from behind the Legions and toward Owain.

As the Legion riders closed the distance between them, Owain noticed his bodyguards getting restless. “Stay calm!” he ordered, and while they gave him strange looks, none of his guards drew their weapons.

Owain recognized a few of the riders—Trajan was hard to miss, as was the black-armored knight at his side, but there was also a sixth-tier mage with dark brown hair dressed in silver and red, a giant of a man in full bronze plate armor, and a thin man younger than Owain with dark blonde hair and tired brown eyes. Trajan and the latter rode side-by-side, and judging by his green and gold clothing that had the charging bull sigil of the Bull Kingdom’s Royal Family on the chest, Owain guessed that this was another Bull Prince.

“Prince Owain!” Trajan called out as he neared. “It’s surprising to see you out here, I would’ve thought that you’d fight to the end, given how your last assault went!”

Owain took a deep breath and, swallowing what little pride he had left, responded, “That attack was ordered by Marsh-... *former* Marshal Arthwyn. He led a mutiny against me and ordered the army to attack your walls, despite my order to stand down.”

“Is that so?” Trajan rhetorically asked with a confident smile.

“It is,” Owain responded, though he knew he wasn’t being quite honest. Still, he no longer wished to fight. “Before we speak any further, might you tell me what became of Marshal Gwen? I believe she was sent to negotiate a truce between us while a formal peace treaty was arranged.”

“She’s our... *guest* until we deal with your army,” the other Prince said. “Ah, allow me to introduce myself, Prince Owain, I am Orestes August Taurus, Prince and Regent of the Bull Kingdom.”

“A pleasure,” Owain replied, however his tone indicated that it was anything but.

“Where is the *former* Marshal now?” Trajan asked.

“He’s been imprisoned,” Owain responded. “As a matter of fact, I wish to broker terms of surrender.”

That threw everyone for a loop, and even both Trajan and August stared at him in disbelief. They hadn’t thought that it would be so easy.

“What...?” Trajan asked, not quite sure how to respond.

"I would allow myself to be imprisoned by you in exchange for allowing the rest of this army to return to Briga," Owain explained. "It's that simple. My army gets to go home while you end the war right now by capturing me."

Trajan and August silently thought about it for a short period of time.

"I want Arthwyn as well," Trajan said.

"Done," Owain replied.

Again, August and Trajan glanced at each other. It was a good deal and would see every single one of the Legion soldiers deployed return to Ariminum safely, so Trajan was inclined to accept, but he was trying to figure out why Owain would so quickly propose this and so readily hand over Arthwyn.

"What are you getting at?" Trajan demanded.

"I don't want to die," Owain simply replied. "If I'm captured by you, then I have a reasonable expectation that I won't be executed. The same cannot be said if I return to Briga."

"We'll be asking for more than just you for our official peace treaty," August warned Owain.

"And that's Andraste's problem, not mine," Owain said.

August and Trajan thought about it for a few more minutes, but in the end, they agreed. Owain was immediately taken prisoner, while his bodyguards delivered a chained and gagged Arthwyn about an hour later. Trajan upheld the deal and pulled the Legions back to Florentia and the walls of the Horns, and watched as the Talfar army abandoned the camp, leaving the walls, watchtowers, and their stables completely intact. They didn't care about taking everything down, they just wanted to go home.

By sunset, the only Talfar warriors left in the vicinity of Ariminum were the several thousand prisoners taken during the short war, and their fortified camp was occupied by a Legion.

The war was effectively over—for now, at least.

Chapter 275: Aftermath of the War

"My subordinates in Pretani have finally made contact with the Elder Council, their offer of peace was genuine. Or at least, it is now," Fonteius stated. He, and most of the others in the meeting room, had heavy doubts about whether Gwen's offer was legitimate, but in the wake of Owain's surrender and the retreat of the tattered remnants of his army, Talfar's Elder Council finally made time for Fonteius' subordinates and assured them of their peaceful intent.

"That's good to hear," Trajan said.

"Indeed, it's a joyful thing to hear of the stabilization of the eastern border," August said. "By the way, Sir Aquillius, I'm told that you were the one who masterminded the current peace with the southern stone giants, is that true?"

"To a degree, it is, Your Highness," Aquillius said with both a smile of pride and a slight bow of humility, "however, I did not do it alone." The diplomat's eyes briefly glanced at Leon, but he said nothing more. If Trajan didn't tell August about Leon's involvement, then Aquillius certainly wasn't going to.

“You should be commended, the mines of the Eastern Territories are one of this Kingdom’s greatest sources of wealth, and you have ensured their safety. In fact, everyone here has ensured the safety of the Eastern Territories, and you all deserve a reward!”

“We have only done our duty, Nephew, there is no need for a reward,” Trajan said.

“You have all endured for weeks against tremendous odds! Even if it was your duty, it was performed magnificently!” August replied.

Trajan’s mouth began to turn into a frown, and he said, “We still have other business to conduct, so perhaps we could discuss this later?”

August was taken aback, but he agreed.

“Good. Now then, on to the much dirtier part,” Trajan growled, his voice deep and furious and his aura laden with killing intent. “Bring in the prisoners!”

At his order, three people were led into the meeting room: Gwen, Owain, and Arthwyn.

Gwen and Owain, at least, stood with dignity even when being stared at by hundreds of fifth, sixth, and seventh-tier mages, but Arthwyn was still bound and gagged; whenever the gag was removed, he would rave and rant about how he would kill Trajan if given the chance, burn Ariminium to the ground, slaughter every Legion soldier who called the city home, and other unpleasant things of that nature. Eventually, the gag was simply left in.

“I have called you three here to pass judgment upon you,” Trajan said. “You have invaded my Kingdom, butchered my people, and shattered the peace that has lasted between our nations for eighty years!”

Owain didn’t particularly enjoy this short castigation, and Gwen enjoyed it even less as she wasn’t an active participant in the war, but Arthwyn stared wild-eyed at Trajan and struggled against those holding his chains. Fortunately, the former Marshal didn’t get far, the sixth-tier mages holding his leash were far too strong for him to break free.

“What, then, will you do with us?” Gwen asked as diplomatically as she was able under the circumstances.

Trajan paused for effect as he looked each of the three in eyes. “First...” he slowly began, drawing the sentencing out even further, “I condemn the former Marshal Arthwyn to death by beheading.”

Once the sentence was done, the three sixth-tier mages that were securing Arthwyn grabbed the former Marshal and held him down while a Tribune appeared from the crowd with a headman’s block and a bucket. Once Arthwyn was securely held on the block, Trajan rose from the dais and drew a large two-handed sword with a rounded tip from his soul realm.

The Prince didn’t hesitate; as soon as he drew up to Arthwyn’s side, he raised the blade and brought it down, without even giving Arthwyn the time for last words or to contemplate his failures. In an instant, the former Marshal’s head fell into the bucket and his blood pooled on the floor of the meeting room.

Trajan casually returned the executioners blade to his soul realm and walked back to the dais as if he hadn’t done anything. Arthwyn’s body was left next to Owain and Gwen, but as a statement of intent or an attempt to intimidate, neither could say.

The next person to speak wasn't Trajan, who proceeded to stare at the other two Talfar officials, but August.

"As for you two," the younger Prince said, "we're going to keep you here as our honored guests until the time comes to ransom you back to your Kingdom. A Marshal and a Prince ought to fetch a high enough price to rebuild everything you've destroyed and pay the pensions for all of our dead soldiers, I should think..."

"And what of our peace?" Gwen asked with no small amount of bitterness. "I have been charged by Her Majesty, Queen Andraste to broker peace between our Kingdoms!"

"We've no intention to invade your lands," August said in a conciliatory tone, in contrast to Gwen's more accusatory voice, "and since your Elder Council has made it clear that they never wanted Prince Owain to invade us in the first place, I doubt there will be any more invasions of our lands, either. We're in a state of de facto truce, we need no formal treaties until we reach an actual peace agreement."

"How will Your Highness inform my Queen?" Gwen inquired.

"Our Diplomatic Corps will let Pretani know, and I'm sure that Queen Andraste will learn of it shortly after," August responded.

"Hmph! Very well," Gwen shot back, realizing that she wasn't going to be let go any time soon, despite the fact that she was sent as a diplomatic envoy.

For his part, Owain was just happy that his head was still atop his shoulders; his eyes hadn't left the bucket that Arthwyn's head had fallen into, and he didn't seem to be paying any attention to what was being discussed.

Once all that was done, though, the rest of the meeting was more dry, boring, logistical talk that Leon could barely manage to pay attention to, mostly about how to get the citizens of Florentia back to their city and how to house and feed the other three Legions that had arrived, especially since there was still another on its way.

When the meeting was finally over, Trajan dismissed Leon as he had nothing else for the young knight to do, so Leon made for the door just behind the rest of the knights. He saw out of the corner of his eye Roland attempting to get closer to him, as August had dismissed the Paladins as well, but Leon had little desire to speak with Roland. Even with Trajan promising him protection, he wanted as little contact between himself and Roland as possible.

As soon as he stepped out of the meeting room, he got the perfect excuse to hurriedly ditch the keep and leave the Paladin behind.

"Sir!" Alix said in greeting as soon as she saw him.

Noticing her slightly anxious expression, Leon asked, "What's wrong?"

"I was talking to some of the other squires while we waited, and they mentioned that Henry was injured in the last battle!"

"Did they say where he's being treated?" Leon asked.

"At the hospital in the Southern Horn," Alix relayed.

Leon was concerned about his friend, but he was also immensely grateful for the excuse to hurry out of the keep, and he seized upon it, quickly leading Alix and Anzu toward the doors before Roland could catch up and initiate a conversation.

"You know," Leon said as they walked out the main doors, "I honestly didn't expect as much concern from you over Henry's well-being, I got the impression that you weren't that fond of him..."

"I wouldn't call him a friend," Alix explained, "but I do think he's all right. A bit too prone to bragging and exaggeration though..."

Leon chuckled and agreed, saying, "That he is..."

Upon arriving at the hospital, Leon was directed to Henry's hospital room by the nurses at the front desk, and much like when Trajan came to visit him a couple weeks prior, he found Henry's room easily enough simply by the people outside of it. Specifically, he saw Charles, Alain, and Ateia all by the door.

"Leon!" Charles called out as soon as he glanced up and saw his friend. However, a quick side-look from Ateia snapped him out of his informal demeanor and he added, "... Sir!"

"Relax, no need for that kind of shit," Leon said with a dismissive wave. He held a great disdain for formalities, especially when they were applied to him.

"It's good to see you again, Sir Ursus," Ateia said, ignoring his previous statement completely.

"And you, Dame Ateia," Leon responded. He then stoically nodded at Alain, who stoically nodded back, despite a dirty look from the lady knight. Alain knew Leon decently enough to know that he was serious about not liking formality, and he also knew that since he wasn't Ateia's squire, she couldn't technically punish him for anything, so he pointedly didn't correct himself.

"How's Henry?" Leon asked.

"Hmm? You're here for my squi-... Ah! That's right, you two went to the Knight Academy together, didn't you?" Ateia responded. "He's fine, he tried to take on a fourth-tier Talfar warrior when the bastard crossed the bridge from a siege tower, and he got a sword across the chest for the trouble. Fortunately, his armor held, so while he got banged up more than is healthy, he'll live."

Charles wasn't too satisfied with Ateia's rather flippant attitude and light explanation, and added, "That slash also shattered his shoulder, and the healers are busy putting it back together. And that fourth-tier warrior that injured him was killed by Dame Ateia seconds later."

"Good to hear," Leon said with a wicked smile.

"I would never let anyone hurt *my* squire and get away with it!" Ateia said with a smile to match. "Or at least, not those who *seriously* hurt him," she added with a nod and a wink sent Alix's way.

At that moment, the door to Henry's room opened and a healer and two nurses walked out into the hallway.

"Ah, Dame Ateia!" the healer exclaimed. "I *must* insist again that you not wait in the halls!"

This statement made Leon frown a little, as indeed, he and the rest of the group were the only people in the hallway; he didn't realize that it was against the rules of the hospital to wait in the halls and he was a little embarrassed. Even more, though, was his annoyance at the nurses at the front desk not telling him this to begin with.

"How's my squire doing?" Ateia asked, ignoring the healer's statement entirely.

The healer sighed in exasperation, but he still said, "I have another nurse finishing things up in there with the boy. Once he's done, your squire will be good to walk out of here." As the healer began to walk away to treat his next patient, he added, "And I would recommend a day or two of bed rest as well!"

"Noted!" Ateia responded with a happy smile.

The group then walked into Henry's room and found their brown-haired and lean-framed friend sitting up in bed with a male nurse using a healing spell on his shoulder.

"Oh, hey!" Henry almost shouted as they appeared. "And Leon! And Miss Alix!" he said with surprise.

Leon responded with a smile and said, "You're looking well, I guess that Talfar warrior should've tried a little harder."

"Yeah!" Charles said with a sarcastic tone, "If he cut just a little bit deeper, we wouldn't have to look at your ugly mug anymore!"

"Trust me, my friend, it's a far greater curse I must endure to look upon your ghastly visage than it is for you to witness *my* beauty!" Henry responded, and the two stared daggers at each for about half a second before bursting into laughter.

"Ah! Come here you little bastard!" Alain shouted as he almost ripped Henry out of bed for a hug.

Fortunately, for Henry, the nurse had just finished with the healing spell seconds before, so the tall and muscular Alain didn't hurt him *too* much with his bear hug.

The four friends began to catch up with each other, telling their own tales of their deeds done during battle, though Leon merely said that he guarded a tower during the first assault and was at Trajan's side for the second. This also drew Alix into the storytelling, and though she didn't consider Charles, Henry, or Alain particularly good friends, she did get quite enthusiastic as she told the story of her own picking off of Talfar warriors with her bow and her disgust at their usage of their levied peasants as human shields.

After a few minutes, Ateia had to interrupt to express her own thanks at Henry's recovery and to give him a couple days off, as the healer ordered. With that said, she started making her way to the door, but just as she was about to leave, she turned back and said to Leon, "And Sir Ursus, I'm still waiting for that rematch!"

"Soon," Leon promised with a smile of anticipation, and Ateia nodded, then left.

And with that, the group was left alone to relax in the wake of a short but hard fought war.

Chapter 276: Trajan's Price

Ariminium and both Horns were lit up in celebration of a swift and relatively decisive victory over the Talfar invaders. The city's citizens partied in the streets and many of the off-duty soldiers joined them. Even those Legion soldiers who were on duty were brought food and allowed to grow a bit lax in their discipline.

But one place where the cries of revelry did not reach was Trajan's dimly lit office. He was completely alone; not even Minerva was there with him. Despite the end to the war, he had a great many things to think about and plan for, from the potential fallout from Talfar about the capture of their Prince and routing of their army, to the situation in the Bull Kingdom itself and the issues August had brought to mind the last time they spoke in private.

Octavius was seeking the support of the nobility for his claim to the throne, indicating to Trajan that he didn't think King Julius would ever wake up. Julius was still fairly young by the standards of seventh-tier mages, and were he still awake and healthy, he could look forward to at least a century or so of continued existence. Since Trajan was almost that much older than his brother, he had never once contemplated the thought of outliving him.

But Trajan couldn't let himself worry too much about Julius himself, as the real problem was what would come after his death. August was looking for supporters, too, and it was clear to Trajan that the Kingdom would plunge into violence if Julius were to die within the next few years.

The Prince sighed; he hated politics with a passion. He much preferred to be the unquestioned authority in the Eastern Territories, and even then, he delegated a great deal to his Legates and the local nobility. Ariminium was his focus, the local Legions had his attention, the border with stone giant territory was his concern. These things were enough for him, even with the stone giants in the south now largely pacified.

And yet, his nephew had come asking for his support. Trajan hated politics so much that he'd joined the Legions and given up his claim to the throne, allowing Julius to take it uncontested, but if there was one thing that could cause Trajan to dip his toes back into the cesspit that he considered the political world to be, it was his family.

Who his family was didn't just end with blood, of course, in the past year and a half, he'd come to view Leon as a son, and he loved Minerva, Constantine, and Aquillius like siblings.

'I have a duty to my people and to my Kingdom, to bring them peace and safety, to keep the blood of their countrymen out of the streets,' Trajan thought to himself. *'I am their Prince, if I allow this civil war to break out, then I am complicit in every death that results from it.'*

He hated himself for the decision, but he knew he had to go back to the capital if he wanted to maintain the peace, regardless of any agreements he made with August.

On that note, he had to admit that he could still sleep well at night if he were to support August. He hadn't known the younger Prince for very long, as Trajan had only gone back to the capital a handful of times during August's life, but he had a good impression of him. In Trajan's eyes, August was a good man, even if he lacked perspective and was fairly self-centered as a result.

Octavius, on the other hand, Trajan wasn't fond of. *'That boy takes after his mother far too much,'* Trajan thought to himself with an expression of disgust as he momentarily thought about the Queen and her brother, the Earthshaker Paladin.

Trajan thought Octavius was elitist, insecure, far more self-centered than August, and would likely roll back many of the meritocratic policies that had been implemented by Julius and other recent Kings.

Again, Trajan sighed. Herculani Britannicus, King Julius' firstborn son, was an extremely competent man and one that Trajan would've been quite pleased to see inherit the throne, but he had given up his claim to join the Blood Priests of Lineage Hall. Princess Stefania, Julius' first daughter, was also quite capable, far more so than Trajan thought Octavius or August to be, but she had already publicly announced that she wouldn't compete for the throne—though rather pointedly *not* formally renouncing her claim, as Trajan and Herculani had done.

The two most qualified, talented, and adept children of Julius were either busy honoring the ancestors and maintaining the Kingdom's genealogical records or engaged in other apolitical pursuits.

Trajan's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a knock at the door of his office.

"Come in!" the Prince loudly said.

The door opened, and one of Trajan's assistants respectfully held it open for Prince August, who Trajan had summoned earlier.

"Uncle," August said in greeting and a wide smile on his gaunt face.

"Nephew," Trajan responded. The elder Prince nodded to his assistant, who bowed and shut the door, allowing the enchantment that prevented noise from escaping the office to activate. Trajan and August could now speak in total privacy.

The Princes each took a seat, but they sat in silence for several long minutes. Trajan had asked August to join him, so the younger Prince was waiting for his uncle to speak first, but Trajan wasn't entirely sure where to start.

Eventually, though, Trajan finally broke the awkward silence by saying, "I've been thinking, nephew, about the current situation in our Kingdom."

Trajan paused, and August gently prodded him to continue with a quiet, "... Yes...?"

"I'm not comfortable supporting either of my brother's children," Trajan explained, causing August's smile to falter a little before immediately setting itself right. Trajan had to admit that he admired his nephew's composure. "I hate politics. Nobles, ambitious knights, commoners with chips on their shoulder being given knighthoods, I find the behavior of those who cozy up to powerful people distasteful."

"They *can* be trying," August agreed. As one of the Prince-Regents, and the only one that stayed in the capital, he was more than familiar with both the bootlicking and the arrogance that filled the Kingdom's capital.

"However," Trajan continued, causing August to fall silent, "I will do what I must to preserve the peace. If that means I must return to the capital, then I will, and if that means I must add my voice to that of one of my nephews, then I shall."

"Then... you will support me?" August asked in a tone so hopeful that Trajan almost felt his heart give out as he prepared to ask his next question.

"Your plans as King," Trajan said, "If you want my support, I need something more concrete than a simple desire to survive and a few vague notions about weakening the landed nobility. What are you going to do?"

August thought for a moment, and to buy himself some time, he asked, "What is it you're looking for, Uncle?"

"I'm looking for you to tell me what you're going to do," Trajan replied with deadly seriousness, which sent a chill down August's spine. "I will not support someone whose only real goal could be accomplished by going into exile and sparing the Kingdom a civil war."

"I understand," August replied as he began to seriously think.

It was true that he had intentions to weaken the nobility, but that was borne out of frustration that the nobles were more favorable to Octavius than they were to him, and he hadn't any ideas as to how to go about it. And so, he began to think out loud.

"I suppose I would go after their biggest assets," August said, "The landed class gets the lion's share of their wealth and power because of the land they rule. Confiscating or buying that land would go a long way towards breaking up their power base."

"True," Trajan agreed, but he didn't give voice to any specific thoughts he had about this strategy. He wanted August to finish, first.

"Their inherited titles are their second biggest assets," August continued. "Without land and without the authority their titles give, they're nothing more than just wealthy commoners."

"So you would target these things?" Trajan asked as he kept his face completely impassive. "A difficult thing to do, given that most of them own at least one castle."

"I suppose that might be a bit too ambitious," August admitted. "Perhaps something a bit smaller to start off and keep those as longer-term goals. The nobles wouldn't appreciate such extensions of Royal authority and would more likely than not fight back against them."

"They would, and *do*, indeed, often fight back when they see their power so rapidly diminish, and those aforementioned castles can make them extremely difficult to bring to heel," Trajan said. "For the past few centuries, our family has been doing just what you've brought up, by confiscating the land and titles of as many nobles as possible. This has led to a large growth in the royal demesne, and we needed governors appointed by the King for limited terms to take care of all that extra land."

"And that's where the Exarchs came in," August said with a smile.

“Yes, and the landed nobility, for the most part, despises them. I can’t tell you how many letters of complaint Julius received from lords on the Great Plateau demanding that they be named the new Archdukes and getting rid of the Exarch of Teira.”

“Those letters haven’t stopped just because my Royal Father is indisposed...” August bitterly mentioned. “I’ve also gotten reports from the Exarch of Teira that the city is still overrun with nobles hoping to seize what power they can grab without the Raime Archdukes around anymore.”

“Of course they are...” Trajan whispered. “Nephew, I’m not averse to giving you my support, but as I said before, it doesn’t make me comfortable to be so overtly political. However, in exchange for that support, I would require some things from you in turn.”

“Name them and they’re yours,” August immediately said with an excited look.

However, Trajan just sat there staring at him in disbelief, making the younger Prince feel more than a little awkward.

“‘Name them and they’re yours...?’” Trajan repeated. “The first thing I would require of you is to never *ever* give such blanket, open-ended permission to *anyone* again!”

As August realized his mistake, he paled and sank down into his seat in shame, but with a reproachful look from Trajan, August straightened himself back up.

“I understand, Uncle,” August said. “Then let me rephrase... Speak your concerns and your requirements, and I will give them all due consideration.”

“Hmm. Better,” Trajan said. “What I would need is for you to swear upon your Mana Glyph that you will continue the work of our family to bring increased freedoms to our commoners and, more importantly, to the peasants living under the thumb of the landed nobility. Even if they have a kind Lord, that may not always last, and they need the right to choose their path in life, not have it dictated by the inevitable greedy Lord that they will find themselves stuck under. Do your best to make this Kingdom more meritocratic than it is now and to bring peace and stability to our people every way you can. Swear this to me, swear to continue the work of our family, and I will support your claim to the throne over Octavius’.”

August sat back in his seat again to think. To swear anything upon his Mana Glyph wasn’t something to do lightly; he’d need to think hard about it if he swore to continue breathing upon his Mana Glyph, let alone work to enact drastic societal reform. But then, he thought about his mother, and his little sister, Cristina. They were relying on him, and their lives wouldn’t be pleasant or particularly long if he lost this power struggle.

For all his consideration of the consequences, of how damaged his soul realm would become if he didn’t fulfill such a binding oath, of how likely it was that he wouldn’t survive the backlash if he broke this oath, his decision had been long made already when he refused to go into exile instead of challenging Octavius’ claim to the throne.

August pulled out a piece of paper and pressed his hand against it. He pushed his surprisingly weak magic power out of himself and into the paper, and upon the paper appeared his Mana Glyph, a large, angry, golden bull preparing to charge.

Taking the paper in his hand, August said, "I swear upon my Mana Glyph," and the image on the paper began to glow a bright gold, "I swear that I will devote my life to breaking the power of the nobility, to granting personal freedoms, peace, and safety to my people to the best of my ability, to ensure that they do not suffer under the hands of lawless tyrants again."

As the Prince finished his short oath-swearing, the paper dimmed, and he collapsed into his seat. For a fifth-tier mage, he had a distressingly low amount of magic power, and the oath had left him drained.

Trajan was quiet for a long time as he stared at August in genuine surprise that the younger Prince had so readily made this oath. Finally, he said, "We're going to have some work to do, then, not the least of which is increasing your stamina."

August tried to laugh, but he barely managed to eke out a few weak chuckles.

"That's enough, Nephew, that's enough," Trajan said quietly.

"Once everything's sorted out here, I'm going to have to return to the capital. I would appreciate it if you would come with me, Uncle."

Trajan sighed, as he had done so many times in the past few hours, and muttered, "I suppose I'd have to, wouldn't I?"

Returning to the capital was not a prospect he enjoyed, but he knew it was necessary to keep the peace. He'd have to select a temporary Consul of the East while he was away, and he'd have to take most of his retinue with him, which significantly narrowed down his choices.

Regardless, it was time to leave the Bull's Horns and Ariminium, at least for a little while. He'd have to take Leon with him, as well...

As Trajan was going through everything that he'd have to organize before leaving, there came a sudden knock on the door. Trajan glared at it, but after a few moments, shouted, "Come in!"

A breathless Centurion pushed open the door and immediately said, "Your Highnesses! We've just received a report that Queen Andraste is on her way here! She'll be here in less than a day!"

Chapter 277: The Queen of Talfar

"... and I just *felt* it, you know? I just felt *strong*, and like the warriors I was fighting against were suddenly no match," Henry narrated. "It took a few moments for me to register what was happening to me in the heat of battle, but I realized I was ascending to the third-tier!"

"And you got cocky because of it," Alain said with a half-smile.

"Well, I mean, I was feeling *good*, you know?" Henry said as he sat back on the bench in the restaurant booth. "It was just so... exhilarating!"

"And because of that feeling, you later took on someone who you didn't have a hope to defeat, and got your ass injured!" Alain continued. "Seriously, though, I get the rush, I truly do, but challenging someone whose power you can't determine is a quick way to the funeral pyre, you know!"

"I think at this point, I know that better than you do, pal," Henry said with a hint of sarcasm. "I was the one who made that mistake and paid for it!"

"I'd say the person who never made the mistake in the first place knows more about that than the person who did," Charles pitched in from across the table.

"Oh, now you're dogpiling on me?" Henry complained.

"It *was* an exceedingly stupid thing to do," Leon said, adding his voice to the chorus decrying Henry's foolish attempt to fight a fourth-tier Talfar mage. "But I suppose it was hardly unsurprising coming from you..."

"Ooh, that cuts deep," Henry said with a mocking tone of pain and hurt.

"I'm sure you'll get over it," Charles stated. "I mean, you *have* had your entire life to get used to being not that bright..."

"All right, well if you think your ascensions were particularly *bright*, then why don't you tell us your stories!" Henry retorted in a voice that sounded angry, but the effect was ruined by the huge smile on his face. They were all used to poking fun at each other, and they knew when to stop if the other party got too angry.

"Charles! You're next!" Leon said.

"I mean, it's not too different between any of us, I think," Charles said with a wide smile of pride. He'd ascended to the third-tier during the second assault, only a matter of days after Henry and Alain. "I just fought with everything I had, letting my magic flood through my system, and before the end of the battle, I had ascended."

"That's all you're going to give us?" Henry asked incredulously. "Here I was, telling you all about *my* ascension in detail, but you're getting yours done in a single sentence?"

"Brevity is the soul of wit, which is probably why you're so long-winded," Charles shot back.

The four friends chuckled amongst themselves, while Anzu quietly slept at Leon's feet. For her part, Alix had returned to her and Leon's room to train. Realizing that she was now the only second-tier mage left in their group—even Anzu was third-tier—had spurred her on to train more in order to close that distance.

And Leon honestly did think she was closing that distance, but Charles, Henry, and Alain had their training from the Knight Academy propping up their magical abilities, whereas Alix had only what he and Trajan had taught her in the past year and a half. But her diligent training was seeing that gap closed, even if the others had ascended to the third-tier ahead of her.

"... and that's when I ascended," Alain explained. "I managed to kill the man trying to kill me and kept on fighting. So, not too different from you two."

"Still, it's a remarkable accomplishment," Leon said, "There's a reason squireships from the Knight Academy last for five years on average. Hell, most last even longer than that, but the squireships for the stronger mages bring that average down some. It's quite the feat to reach the third-tier, especially for as young as everyone is."

"... All this coming from a *fifth-tierknight*," Henry observed. "You sure you're not just giving yourself a round-about compliment?"

"Uh... I mean... No!" Leon nervously said. It was true, he was just trying to compliment his friends, and he didn't realize what he was saying might come off as a bit condescending coming from him.

"Relax, man, I'm just messing with you!" Henry immediately said after seeing the look of genuine panic on Leon's face.

"Anyway," Leon said after a moment of regaining his composure, "what I wanted to say was congratulations. So, congratulations. You're all going to be made knights in a few months once you've finished the two-year minimum squireship that the Knight Academy requires."

Charles smiled and his cheeks reddened at Leon's words, while Henry looked ready to begin boasting again. However, it was Alain who spoke first. He reached over and lightly punched Leon's shoulder and said, "And don't think any of us are ungrateful for your help in these past couple of years. It's entirely possible that we'd all be dead if we hadn't trained with you back then, and we'd certainly not be on the verge of being knighted."

At that moment, a long horn was sounded from the keep and was heard all over the Southern Horn. This was a signal for the highest levels of leadership to assemble that was only used when runners would be too slow.

"Well, I guess I have to go," Leon said with a frown. "But I guess it's a good thing, I was getting a bit sappy there..."

"Yeah, might want to dry your tears before you get to see the Prince!" Henry jabbed.

"Better be quiet, or I'll give *you* something to cry about," Leon responded while flexing an arm.

As much as he wanted to spend more time with his friends, though, Leon couldn't linger. He rose from the table, waking Anzu as he did so, and he and the sleepy griffin made their way out of the restaurant.

Alix was waiting for them at the keep, and Leon could tell that she'd been training hard; her face was red from exertion, her long brown hair was pulled back in a hasty ponytail, and she was still adjusting the clothes that she'd changed into after ditching her training gear.

"Sir," she nodded in greeting.

"Any idea what's going on?" Leon asked.

"None, Sir," she replied, her face showing a bit of disappointment that Leon didn't know, either.

When the two arrived at the meeting room, Alix and Anzu waited outside with the other squires while Leon entered and saw that most of the other command staff were already there.

Trajan jerked his head in a 'come over here' motion, and Leon hurried over to his place behind Trajan near the back wall.

After a few more stragglers showed up, Trajan looked at his Legates and Tribunes, as well as the visiting Prince and his Paladins, and said, "We've got a new situation to deal with..."

—

Early the next morning, the entire fortress of the Bull's Horns was on extremely high alert. The walls were fully manned, the magical gems powering the defensive wards and enchantments were swapped out for fully charged gems, and Leon, Trajan, August, and a host of other knights were waiting just behind the main gate on the western side of the walls.

The air was almost as tense as it was when the Legion could see Owain's army bearing down on them, and in a way, they half expected something similar to happen.

Queen Andraste was on her way and was scheduled to arrive in a matter of minutes. However, there was no sign of a Royal entourage on the main road, and the soldiers on the wall could see for miles. Normally, a Queen visiting a foreign fortress would be accompanied by hundreds of powerful mages and hundreds more servants and attendants, creating a retinue that was impossible to miss. But the soldiers on watch couldn't see anything of the sort coming from Talfar.

But Andraste had no intention of being late, not when one of her Marshals—and Owain—was being held by a foreign power. It took a soldier on the wall casually glancing at the sky to finally notice her approach and let off the signal, and by the time she was noticed, she was practically on top of the walls.

Fifty grey, brown, and black griffins swooped down in front of the walls, giving every Legion soldier a look as they sped past, and came to a running stop in front of the main gates. Each griffin was larger than even the largest of warhorses and looked far fiercer. Likewise, each of the riders of the griffins was extraordinarily powerful, being mostly either of the fifth or sixth-tier, and they were dressed in pitch-black armor. There were even a pair of seventh-tier mages accompanying the group, but one of them—the elder of the two, if his appearance was any indication—was dressed in bright green and completely lacked armor.

The other seventh-tier mage was a relatively young woman, and she stood out even amongst all the other magnificently equipped riders as she was dressed in resplendent silver plate armor complete with a long blue cloak that billowed out behind her gorgeous brown griffin. She wore no helmet, giving every soldier in the gatehouse a good look at her sparkling blue hair, her astonishingly beautiful face, and her equally astonishingly harsh glare; her radiant green eyes glittered in the morning light, but she was a hard woman who had come to power almost a decade ago and had been fighting almost non-stop since, and her expression was terrible to behold.

The soldiers in the gatehouse scrambled to open the portcullis and allow what was obviously Queen Andraste and her retinue inside. The Queen and her followers rode the griffins past the gates, and the soldiers on the walls watched them like hawks.

As the royal procession appeared on the western side, the Paladins prepared themselves for the possibility of violence, while Anzu glared at the approaching griffins, made aggressive chirps, and spread his wings to make himself look bigger—though he was still much smaller than the Talfar griffins.

“Stop that,” Leon growled, silencing the albino griffin, but Anzu and the other griffins stared daggers at each other, and Leon suspected that if Anzu wasn't as obedient as he was and if the other griffins weren't as well-trained as they were, then they'd already be fighting.

Riding slightly ahead of the group came a young fifth-tier mage, who shouted loudly enough for everyone to hear, “Her Majesty, Queen Andraste of the Talfar Kingdom, presents herself before the Bull’s Horns and requests an audience with His Highness, Prince Trajan!”

Both Trajan and August found this announcement rather intriguing as, despite the Queen’s haughty demeanor, she was being quite diplomatic; she’d formally requested entry and didn’t ride her griffins directly over the walls and their defensive wards.

“Her Majesty may consider herself welcome within the Bull’s Horns and the city of Ariminium for the duration of her visit,” Trajan responded, and several Tribunes rode forward to lead the Queen’s retinue to the stables in the Southern Horn.

“Our Diplomatic Corps has prepared suitable quarters for Her Majesty and her retinue. There, you all may rest and recover from your journey. We will be ready to begin negotiations at your *earliest* convenience,” August said. His tone was quiet and diplomatic but carried a steely undercurrent that implied he would much rather start negotiations sooner than later.

Andraste’s messenger rode back to his Queen, who whispered a few words into his ear. When she was done, the messenger rode forward again and said, “Her Majesty accepts your offer of hospitality, and indicated her own preference for starting the negotiations as soon as possible.”

Trajan and August both nodded, and the Queen and her retinue began the last short leg of their journey as the Legion guides took them to the stables, though the retinue was under heavy guard from the Paladins and about a thousand Legion horsemen the entire time.

Once they were out of earshot, August glanced at Trajan and said, “Well, that went well, I think. She didn’t seem overly hostile.”

“Not yet,” Trajan replied. “I don’t expect her to be, but it’s always better to assume that negotiations will fail, and to prepare accordingly.”

“I understand, Uncle, but we also can’t be too pessimistic about these proceedings. We’ll never succeed if we don’t sincerely believe that diplomacy will work.”

Trajan cynically grunted, but he didn’t argue with his nephew. He was a military man through and through, and he had little faith in the power of diplomacy after repulsing an invasion. But, of course, that’s what Aquillius and the Diplomatic Corps were for, to make up for his own shortcomings in that department.

Chapter 278: Negotiation

Andraste followed through with her statement to begin negotiations as soon as possible. She only took an hour to settle into the chambers at the top of the Diplomatic building before arranging for the negotiations to begin.

The room selected for these proceedings was a simple conference room in the Diplomatic building rather than the keep, for the sake of convenience and presentation; the negotiations would get off to a rocky start if the Queen felt like she was being insulted if she was made to walk all the way to the keep and go before Trajan and August, two men who were technically below her in rank. Trajan and August

were already beginning the negotiations from a position of strength, so this small concession was easy enough to make.

Present at the meeting on the Bull Kingdom's side was Trajan, August, the three Paladins, Leon, Minerva, Aquillius, and about a dozen other diplomats that Leon recognized from his brief stint in the Diplomatic Corps, including Lucilius, Anna, Eleanor, and Juliana. On Andraste's side, there was the seventh-tier Queen herself, half a dozen sixth-tier mages, and about a dozen more fifth-tier mages. There was also one more seventh-tier mage that accompanied the Queen who looked so old that Leon half expected him to die on the spot.

To start things off, August, as the highest-ranking member on the Bull's side, said, "Welcome to the Bull's Horns, Your Majesty! I am Orestes August Taurus, Prince-Regent of the Bull Kingdom. This is Trajan Anastasius Taurus, Prince of the Bull Kingdom and Consul of the Eastern Territories..."

August continued with the introductions of the more important people on his side, including Aquillius, Fonteius, and the three Paladins. He did not introduce Leon, as Leon was too weak and politically insignificant to draw attention to, a point which Trajan explicitly made to his nephew before negotiations began. Trajan may have allowed August and the Paladins to know Leon's true identity, but he made it clear that he would not tolerate any of them spreading that knowledge around.

When August was halfway through the introductions, however, Andraste interrupted, exasperatedly saying, "Let's just get this on with, boy."

August was completely taken aback and fell into an awkward silence.

Aquillius then took over, giving the young Prince a moderately graceful out. "I suppose knowing exactly who everyone is isn't terribly necessary, but there *are* better ways of getting that across."

Andraste shot Aquillius a death glare and said through clenched teeth, "You have my Marshal captive! I sent her as a messenger, and you took her prisoner like barbarians! And you have my brother!"

Aquillius cocked an eyebrow at her adding Owain like an afterthought.

"Let's just make peace and be done with it!" Andraste continued. "Just keep in mind that this invasion was unsanctioned, it was not conducted with the consent of my Kingdom's government. Owain acted only with a few other bad actors."

"You call two other Marshals 'a few bad actors'?" Trajan asked incredulously. "Seems an awfully flippant way of referring to the highest echelons of your Kingdom's military."

"They were traitors, and if you hadn't killed them, they would've faced execution back in Pretani," Andraste growled in anger. "The warriors who followed them were patriots and cannot be blamed for the actions of their superiors. Once the traitors were dealt with, they returned home."

"Is that what happened? I seem to recall them only deserting once it became clear that they weren't going to win without destroying most of their army," Trajan shot back with a proud and provocative smile.

"They did not choose to come here," Andraste said, her strong seventh-tier aura growing thick with killing intent and her gaze lowering until it was a menacing glare fixated directly on Trajan.

The Bull Prince, however, didn't so much as bat an eye, and his own aura grew until it matched the Talfar Queen's as best as it could, and it didn't lose out that much, indicating how recently the Queen had ascended.

"How about... we tone things down a bit?" Aquillius said with a hint of nervousness in his voice. "We have come together to discuss our common desire for peace, no need to throw that away with a few hasty words..."

"Yes, let's get back to the matter at hand," August loudly proclaimed, not letting Trajan or Andraste get a word in to stop him from moving on. "Here's the situation, *Your Majesty*," he said, emphasizing his use of the honorific to try and remind her of her manners to get her to do the same, "we have Marshal Gwen and Prince Owain in captivity, and we have repelled one of your armies. Your western provinces are doubtlessly too deprived of resources to stop us if we were to march east, and I don't think you'd be able to abandon your war with the Han Kingdom to stop us, either."

Andraste shifted her glare to August, but she restrained her aura and got it back under control. "What do you want?" she bluntly asked.

"I want peace, and a binding one at that," August said. "It took a shameful amount of time for both Your Majesty and your Elder Council to disavow Prince Owain and the Marshals Arthwyn and Bran, given that this was an *unsanctioned* invasion. From now on, all future invasions of our territory that are not immediately disavowed will be considered as acting with the full consent of your government and will lead to all-out war. The only reason we have not launched a counter-invasion while you're busy in the east is due to basic civility and our own natural desire for peace."

Andraste's sharp features turned downward into a slight frown, but her eyes kept staring death at August, forcing the young fifth-tier Prince to start getting anxious. But he didn't back down, he knew that his Kingdom was the one with the stronger hand, and for all her posturing if Andraste had another way to deal with this situation rather than negotiation, she would've used it.

"Let's talk specifics..." the old seventh-tier man accompanying Andraste said, drawing a brief glare from his Queen. "I and the rest of the Elder Council desire peace as much as you do, and we would like to bring these negotiations to a swift end. We do have our problems to deal with, and this incident with our errant Prince is something we look upon with great shame."

"Hmm, 'great shame', huh?" Trajan scoffed. This statement elicited a look of anger from the Elder Councilman, but fortunately, a pleading look from Aquillius prevented Trajan from saying anything more.

"Let's make this easy, then," Andraste said through clenched teeth, "we re-instate the peace deal we agreed upon eighty years ago, and I pay you eighty gold talents for my Marshal and my brother."

"Eighty *each*?" Aquillius asked, knowing full well that Andraste meant forty for each. "That seems a low number for both..."

Andraste's face twisted in anger—she clearly had the same level of patience for diplomacy as Trajan did—but before she could retort, the Elder Councilman asked, "What, then, would you consider a fair amount?"

“For a Marshal?” Aquillius wondered out loud. “One hundred and twenty talents for her. For a *Prince*, though, let’s say two hundred talents.” Each talent was worth six million silver pieces, so needless to say, this was a staggering sum, even for a Prince.

The Queen glared at Aquillius and said in a low voice, “You have a questionable sense of value.”

“You can’t put a price on family, or on strong and experienced commanders,” Aquillius responded with a light tone. He knew that amount he demanded was far too high, but he was going to offer some concessions anyway.

“Fifty talents for Marshal Gwen, and eighty for the Prince,” the Elder Councilman countered, causing some of the Legion knights to almost groan out loud, causing Trajan to give them all a dirty enough look that they shut themselves up instantly.

Aquillius made another counter-offer, and after several minutes, he and the Councilman had brought the number down to ninety-five talents for Gwen, and one hundred and fifty for Owain. Both sides would’ve agreed privately that in a strictly pragmatic world, neither Owain nor Gwen would’ve been worth that much coin, but Andraste and the rest of the Talfar government wasn’t going to allow one of their highest ranked commanders and a Prince of their Royal Family languish in a prison in the Bull Kingdom, even if that prison was extraordinarily comfortable and that Prince could easily be called a traitor.

But the ransom was only a single part of the new peace deal that August and Trajan wanted. They also demanded four hundred gold talents for war reparations, a formal apology, and a commitment to peace in that any commander that attacks the Bull’s Horns was to be declared a traitor and stripped of their rank within the Talfar Kingdom.

They were eventually negotiated down to two hundred talents paid over twenty years, and the commitment to peace. The formal apology demand was dropped entirely. Other than that, the border was reaffirmed, and the Talfar Kingdom promised not to take their desire for vengeance out on the people of Florentia, or any other Bull Kingdom citizens living within its borders.

All-in-all, the negotiations lasted a mere two and a half hours, making it one of the quickest agreed-upon peace deals in Aeterna’s history—though, to be fair, it was easy enough to agree as most of the legwork for peace had been done eighty years ago during the negotiations for the previous peace deal, not to mention their two Kingdoms were never formally at war.

Perhaps most surprising, though, was that when Aquillius and the Elder Councilman finally hammered out this peace deal and Trajan and Andraste were no longer enemies, their overly hostile demeanors dropped.

“Now that all that is over and done with, I would like to see Gwen and my brother,” Andraste said as she sat back in her chair and softened her gaze.

“I’ll have them brought up,” Trajan said as he did likewise.

Both of their auras calmed significantly and the killing intent they emitted vanished almost instantly once the peace deal was agreed upon, much to the relief of nearly everyone else in the room save for the seventh-tier mages, who were barely affected by their killing intent.

Several minutes later, Legion soldiers escorted Gwen and Owain into the conference room. They took seats on the Talfar side of the table, and Andraste closely watched for any sign of pain or abuse.

"How are you doing?" she asked Gwen, a tiny amount of concern finding its way into her voice.

"I am doing well, Your Majesty, I haven't been mistreated during my 'stay'," Gwen answered with a smile and slight bowing of the head.

"And you?" Andraste asked, her voice taking on a dangerous tone as she glared at Owain.

The Talfar Prince almost jumped out of his skin under his sister's withering gaze, and he managed to squeak a terrified, "I'm fine."

Andraste glared at him so intensely that Leon thought she might've been happier if Owain had been afforded the same fate as Arthwyn, but that ship had sailed, and he was now her problem again. With a wave of her hand, two hundred and forty-five golden ingots appeared on the table, causing the wood to creak under the strain of so much weight.

"I... suppose that's one way to make a payment," Aquillius muttered as he stared at the bewitching sight of so much shiny, glittering gold. He was expecting something much more formal than the Queen herself just dropping the agreed upon ransom on the table, but he had to admit that it was an incredible power move and the effect it produced was obvious; everyone's eyes were drawn to the gold, and there were audible gasps from some of the less disciplined soldiers and warriors in the room.

For his part, Leon wasn't too distracted. He still had ninety-nine nearly identical gold ingots in his vault in Teira, along with boxes of silver coins. He was still duly impressed, but he didn't drop his professional demeanor the same way that some of his fellow knights did.

"Our business is done, we'll now take our leave," Andraste said as she rose to her feet. The rest of her entourage did the same, and Aquillius was so taken aback at the suddenness of their announcement that Andraste was halfway to the door before he managed to respond.

"Your Majesty, please consider yourself welcome to stay here for at least a night, it's surely been a long ride..." If the diplomat were to be honest, he was very much relieved that the Queen was leaving, but hospitality and politeness still had to be shown to such an esteemed guest.

"The offer is appreciated," Andraste said with a surprising sense of warmth that she hadn't displayed since she arrived, "but I must return to my Kingdom. I, unfortunately, do not have the luxury of spending too much time enjoying the hospitality of my neighbors."

"I understand," Aquillius said. "In any event, it was a pleasure to have you here, and to bring peace back to our Kingdoms."

With that, Andraste and the rest of her retinue—including Owain and Gwen—departed the room without another word, and in less than an hour, had left the Bull's Horns for their own Kingdom.

Chapter 279: Preparing to Leave the Horns

"Well, that was certainly one of the more... *interesting* negotiations I've been a part of," Aquillius said as he and Trajan watched Andraste's group fly away on their griffins.

“She was certainly something else,” Trajan said with an appreciative smile. For all of his posturing during the opening of the negotiations, he actually had a good impression of the Talfar Queen and felt like they could’ve been good friends if circumstances were different.

“So, what now?” Aquillius asked with a playful laugh. With everything that had just happened, it felt like there wasn’t much to do now.

“Now, I have preparations to make. I’m going back to the capital for a while,” Trajan replied with complete seriousness.

Aquillius stared at Trajan with a look of surprise; he knew how much Trajan despised the capital, but he, of all people, knew exactly what the political situation in the Kingdom looked like, even if he wasn’t aware of the King’s current infirmity.

“Then... you’re getting involved in politics...?” the diplomat hesitantly asked.

“To an extent, yes,” Trajan replied with an ugly grimace. It was clear to anyone with eyes that he hated making this decision, but he had a strong sense of duty, and he would do what he felt was right. “There’s going to be a civil war soon if someone doesn’t step in... and if my brother doesn’t come out of training soon,” Trajan explained.

“I... understand,” Aquillius quietly said. “I suppose I must prepare for the worst, then, and make sure our neighbors aren’t of the mind to take advantage of the situation... Not that I’d expect the Samar Kingdom to do anything, or the Talfar Kingdom after it’s mauling and current occupation with the east.”

“Still, best to do what you can and silence any hawks if they appear,” Trajan muttered.

“Indeed,” Aquillius said as he anxiously began to think about his own options for keeping the Kingdom stable. Unfortunately for him, he didn’t have much to do, since the Samar Kingdom was quite friendly with the Bull Kingdom, the Talfar Kingdom had renewed its peace deal, and the Serpentine Isles hadn’t returned to their raiding ways. There were no other political entities that he had to concern himself with, especially now that the stone giants in the southern half of the Border Mountains had been pacified. The northern giants were still a problem, but he couldn’t do anything about them, they weren’t nearly as unified as their southern siblings were.

Trajan and Aquillius stared out at the Bull’s Horns from Trajan’s observation room, quietly enjoying what seemed like their last moment together as friends for the foreseeable future.

—

The next day, Trajan called all of the command staff together and broke the news of his imminent departure. None of the assembled Legates and Tribunes were any less shocked than Aquillius was at Trajan’s announcement. The Prince had, after all, been the Consul of the East for more than a century, longer than many of these knights had been alive.

“Your Highness...” Minerva quietly said as she stared at her Prince with a strange look in her eyes, “Are you sure about this? The Eastern Territories need you...”

“I’m sure,” Trajan said. “But I will not go alone, I will be taking most of my retinue with me—after leaving someone I trust in command, of course.”

Minerva's eyes brightened up, but then immediately became defiant as Trajan's gaze drifted over to her. She'd served Trajan for long enough that she knew he was about to give her the Horns, and she shot the Prince a look of such resistance that whatever Trajan was going to say to her died in his throat.

"M... Constantine!" the Prince shouted, and every eye in the room turned to the short and stocky knight in question.

"Your Highness...?" Constantine asked. He didn't catch Minerva's look, and he fully expected her to be given the command over him.

"I trust you with my life, and given your actions during these past few weeks, I feel comfortable entrusting the lives of everyone else here to you, as well. I will make you my proxy in the Eastern Territories!"

Trajan's choice was instantly met with cheers from the surrounding knights, and a few that were sitting around Constantine even clapped him on the shoulder in support. His command of the most dangerous part of the Horns, that of the fortifications east of the wall, made his temperament and skill in battle known to all. There were few knights in the meeting room who didn't support Trajan's choice, though there were a few who were confused as to why he didn't choose Minerva, perhaps the only other knight there who was more well-respected than Constantine.

"Y-Your Highness!" Constantine said as he rose to his feet, then bowed. "I will do as you command, Your Highness, I will not let you down!"

"Please, stand!" Trajan said with a booming laugh. "You've earned this, and I know you will perform your duties admirably!"

Constantine bowed again, then returned to his seat with a stunned look on his face, as if he couldn't quite believe what had happened was real.

"Now, on to less *engaging* business," Trajan said as the smile on his face died. It was time for him to go over logistics and how to get in contact with him while he was in the capital, two topics which were hardly interesting for anyone involved.

But, once he was done with that, the meeting would be over and he'd be free to hand over the rest of his duties to Constantine and begin to truly get ready to return to the capital.

—

Several hours later, Trajan met with Leon alone in his favorite sitting room. His servants were getting some of his things packed—he didn't need everything, once he was certain that he wasn't needed in the capital any longer, he was going to leave as fast as he possibly could.

"Will I be accompanying you?" Leon quietly asked. For his part, he felt both elation and dread at the prospect of going to the capital. For one, Elise was there, and wherever she happened to be was where he wanted to go. On the other hand, the secret of his identity was now known to far too many people for it to remain secret for much longer, and the capital was the last place he wanted to be when it became widely known who he was.

"Yes," Trajan quietly murmured, and a conflicted expression appeared on Leon's face.

"I... I'm not sure I want to go..." Leon hesitantly admitted. "I have a few clues as to who my enemies are, but nothing iron-clad... I'd rather be far away from the capital when they finally learn who I am..."

"They won't," Trajan vowed.

"There are too many people who already know to make that promise," Leon warned, and Trajan cringed a little inside. On recent reflection, he deeply regretted admitting so readily who Leon was when Bronze made his guess, but he did impress upon the three Paladins and Prince August that Leon's identity was to be kept secret upon pain of death. None of them doubted his words, but that still wasn't a guarantee that someone wouldn't let something slip somewhere.

"You'll be with me, at my side, as much as possible. I will not let anything happen to you, boy," Trajan said with a fatherly smile.

"They got my grandfather and his entire retinue," Leon reminded the Prince. "How strong was the old Archduke? I appreciate what you're saying Trajan, and I have full confidence that you mean those words, but I don't think even the King could protect me if my enemies learn of my current whereabouts. Secrecy was my best weapon, and now that so many people know..."

"I get it," Trajan said. He sighed, then asked, "How many other people know?"

"Alix and a few people from Heaven's Eye. Elise, Emilie, Emilie's first husband, Ajax... I'm not sure who else, but if they're with Heaven's Eye I don't *think* they'll spread rumors or spy for anyone else... But who knows?"

'Shit, that is too many people...' Trajan thought as his heart began to race.

"I'll go with you, though," Leon said. "I want to know who has such enmity with my family that they would chase me and my father almost literally to the edge of the plane. I can't do that from here, and there are few people I trust enough to investigate on my behalf, and given how strong these people seem to be, I would actually ask none of those I trust to investigate."

"A brave decision," Trajan said appreciatively, "but I would have you stay here if you're so anxious..."

"No, I said I would go with you, and that's that," Leon firmly stated with a steely look in his golden eyes.

"Very well, then," Trajan said as his chiseled features turned upward into a wide smile. "When we arrive, we're going to have to move fast if we want to stay ahead of the rumor mill. I said long ago that I would use my influence to assist you in your investigations, and I meant it. I will put you in contact with the man my brother put in charge of his investigations into what happened to your father's villa eighteen years ago, and the destruction of Kyros' palace not long after."

Leon smiled and said, "I'm sure that would help immensely."

Trajan nodded to his young ward, then said, "So long as you're diligent in your training, I'll even allow you to focus on this; I won't burden you with other duties..."

"Thank you, Trajan," Leon said with genuine gratitude. Starting his investigation felt like a long time coming, though it hadn't even been three years. He had been prepared to wait decades until he had the political clout to look into these matters without drawing too much suspicion.

“Just... promise me one thing,” Trajan said with a slow and almost hesitant cadence, “don’t go doing something stupid again. Those stunts you pulled during the war and in the stone giants’ crater... that can’t happen again. *Restrain yourself.*”

“I will,” Leon replied. He wasn’t eager to do something stupid like that again. His infiltration of his family’s archives in Teira, the Cradle, his stupid solo venture east of the walls, every time he did something reckless, he wound up almost dead or captured. The last one even left him in sexual debt to a river nymph too powerful for him to deny, the very thought of which sent shivers of dread down his spine.

To a degree, though, everything had worked out fine, but he knew he was playing with fire. It only took one reckless decision to end his life and render everything else he had done moot, and if he continued the way he had been, he’d encounter that one mistake sooner rather than later.

“By the way, you should also speak to Lapis,” Trajan mentioned. “I don’t mind if the giant accompanies us to the capital, not that that thing would listen to me if I tried to keep it here, just getting it to stay in Ariminium while you were gone was hard enough.”

“I’ll do that,” Leon responded. If Lapis was willing to follow him to the capital, then Leon was willing to accept the giant’s presence. It had fought alongside him too many times for Leon to be able to justify leaving it behind, and since it insisted that its job was to protect him, Leon doubted that it would stay behind once he left.

“Good,” Trajan murmured. He stared out his window at the fortress he had spent more than half of his life in charge of. It was his home, far more so than the capital could ever be, and leaving the Horns was something he wasn’t comfortable with. Still, he felt like he had to go.

For his part, Leon had much less emotional attachment to the fortress, but a great many things had happened to him here, and he knew he was going to miss the place. Still, now that he had Trajan’s go-ahead to begin his investigation, the urge to leave and return to the capital was growing.

“When do we leave?” Leon asked.

“The day after tomorrow,” Trajan replied.

“I’ll be ready...” Leon whispered. Artorias’ face, both the one he remembered and the one Bran showed him twisted with hate and covered in twisted poisonous black veins, flashed through his mind.

‘I’ll find who killed you, Dad. They’ll pay in blood...’ Leon vowed in his heart. Even if he wasn’t strong enough yet to do anything with whatever he found, it was still time for him to get back to it.

And he knew exactly with whom he would start.

Chapter 280: Departure from the Horns

When it came time for Trajan and August to depart from Ariminium, they were accompanied by only nine thousand knights and men-at-arms—seven thousand from the Paladin’s own retinues, and two thousand from Trajan’s. The two Legions that accompanied August to Ariminium left at the same time, but the two Princes quickly outpaced them. The forty thousand Legion soldiers could travel quite

quickly, up to thirty-five miles per day, but August was eager to return to the capital and so left them behind.

The two Princes rode at the front of the column, followed by the Paladins, and then by Trajan's most trusted knights, including Leon and Minerva.

Leon was less than thrilled at his place of prominence, but he accepted it without complaint. Anzu happily trotted along beside him with his wings semi-spread and his eyes wide with the joy of going somewhere new. For his part, Leon wasn't too thrilled at the prospect of returning to the capital itself, but what he would finally be able to do there was something he was greatly looking forward to.

Just to the side of the long column of nine thousand mounted knights and men-at-arms marched Lapis. The stone giant was as happy as Leon had ever seen when it was asked to accompany him to the capital and readily agreed. Unfortunately, its sheer size and weight made it wary of walking on the paved road for fear of causing undue damage.

Or at least, that was its publicly stated reason. That it was able to walk around in the Southern Horn without difficulty was something that occurred to it, but since walking off the road allowed it to stay close to Leon, it didn't try to walk on the road at all. A bonus was staying out of the way of the knights, who Leon suspected wouldn't have been too happy riding along behind a giant that they would've considered an enemy before Aquillius and the Crater Tribe's peace agreement was reached.

"Think we'll get a nice place when we get to wherever we're going?" Alix asked Leon who, as his squire, she was allowed to ride alongside.

Leon chuckled a little. Alix had been quite pleased with their living arrangements upon their arrival at the Horns, and he perfectly understood her reluctance to leave.

"I'm sure that, as Prince Trajan's people, we'll be well taken care of," he reassured his squire. "Wherever we're assigned, though, you may be staying there alone."

"Staying with Elise, Sir?" Alix asked with a knowing look.

"That's what I intend..." Leon said with a strange look crossing his sharp features. *'Or, I hope to...'* he pessimistically thought, remembering how distant things became between him and his lady after he revealed his pact with Naiad.

Whatever happened, though, he still wanted to be with Elise, and he hoped that this situation he got himself into wouldn't be enough to destroy their relationship.

—

Several hours and about thirty miles later, August, who had been riding alongside Trajan in relative silence, turned to his uncle and asked, "Uncle, do you mind if we make a quick detour on the way back?"

"What for?" Trajan asked with a frown. They had just decided on the route to take the night before, and he was more than a little curious and slightly upset that August hadn't brought this up then.

"I would like to stop in Calabria. It's on the Naga River, so it should only be a few miles outside of our route."

Trajan thought for a moment. Their route was simple: follow the Gold Road straight to the capital. The road led west for a ways, then curved northward to follow the curve of the southern tip of the Border Mountains. The road would then continue roughly north-west, bypassing the swamps and thick forests of the Southern Territories, until it reached the Naga River, where it would turn north and head almost straight into the capital. Calabria was at the northern tip of the Southern Territories, and indeed, stopping there wouldn't be too great a burden for their group.

"Should be fine," Trajan replied. "Why do you want to stop there?"

"There's someone there I'd very much like to meet in person," August explained. "For the past fifteen years or so, the Exarch of Calabria has been a man named Justin Isynos, a foreign noble that my father entrusted with managing the central sections of the Naga River. He's done a remarkable job, and I would like to speak with him."

"Why him in particular?" Trajan asked as he carefully controlled his expression. He remembered Leon telling him about Adrianos Isynos, the man-at-arms that served one of Roland's subordinate knights and led the assassins to Artorias and Leon's home in the Northern Vales, and though Leon had refrained from telling the Prince about Valeria's confirmation of Adrianos' connection to her family, it wasn't a great leap for Trajan to connect Justin with Adrianos by the name alone.

"Lord Justin is competent, he owes his current occupation entirely to my father, the city he administers is on the way to our destination, and best of all, he's a foreigner, completely unconnected to Octavius," August explained. "If I am to beat Octavius, I need to step up my recruiting game, and the one center of power that Octavius has yet to truly begin tapping into are the Exarchs"

"... I understand..." Trajan slowly said.

'Looks like the investigation will start a little sooner than expected...' Trajan thought to himself as he barely paid any attention to August extolling Justin's virtues.

From what little he did listen to, the foreign noble was apparently a genius steward, astutely managing the flow of trade through Calabria, keeping the river system clear of blockages, maintaining the dikes, levees, and water enchantments that preventing the river from flooding, and all sorts of other great managerial feats that greatly impressed August.

Noticing Trajan's distraction from the conversation and assuming his disinterest, Bronze rode forward a little—not enough to overtake the Princes, but close enough to speak comfortably—and interrupted August.

"Trajan, I can't tell you how much it relieves my old heart to see you returning to the capital! The people there right now could use some discipline, I tell you!"

August was a little put off at the interruption, and he didn't shy away from letting Bronze know. "How rude! You truly are bold, interrupting a Prince!"

"Ha! Bold is my middle name!" the Bronze Paladin shouted out.

August semi-regretted speaking up, as he didn't want to alienate the Bronze Paladin, but fortunately, Bronze didn't take it too seriously. In fact, he was quietly pleased that August didn't just take it lying down. Still, that didn't change the fact that he spoke up to forcibly take Trajan out of a conversation that

he didn't appear to want to be a part of, and he and Trajan practically ignored August for the rest of that day's ride as they caught up with each other.

—

The least enjoyable part of being the chief Heaven's Eye representative in the Bull Kingdom, in Emilie's opinion, was receiving countless letters of complaint or supplication from the various lords and wealthy merchants around the Kingdom who she considered so unimportant that she wouldn't know their faces from a hole in the ground. Complaints about the lack of respect and hospitality shown in Heaven's Eye banks, the offers of partnerships from merchants that ranged from almost reasonable to outright thievery, and worst of all, the requests for her to attend parties and get-togethers from influential members of the upper class.

It all tried her patience. She had to be diplomatic; simply telling everyone to fuck off, which was what she desperately wanted to do, was not the way Heaven's Eye did things. Instead, she had to find a softer, much more pleasant way to tell them to fuck off, but the problem then was that it was never a strong enough response to get them to stop their letters entirely. Fortunately, many of her subordinates with more patience handled the majority of that work, but there were still some that she had to do herself.

Emilie was in her office at the top of the Heaven's Eye Tower in the capital, sifting through a pile of letters on her desk when her door was cautiously opened from the outside. Her office was lit mostly by red-orange magical fire, and the white lantern light suddenly streaming in through the open door and reflecting off the polished marble tiles irritated her. On any other workday, it would've only been a minor annoyance, but dealing with self-important people who were too rich or influential for her to brush off made her more than a little angry.

She didn't shout or scream, despite almost jumping at the opportunity to vent; instead, she glared at the young female attendant who was cautiously peeking inside. Emilie's aura was thick with killing intent, showcasing just how much she appreciated this distraction, and the attendant almost fell to her knees in terror.

"What is it?" Emilie asked with as much patience as she could muster, but her voice still came out like a hoarse growl that stood in sharp contrast to her usual light, upbeat tone.

"T-The Young Lady..." the attendant sputtered as she tried to stand amid Emilie's ferocious aura, "s-she has declined t-to attend the appointed m-meeting!"

Emilie took a deep breath and restrained her aura. As the Tower Lord, she felt some small amount of shame at letting one of her attendants see her in such a state, and she felt a little more at making the young girl so uncomfortable. Helping this process was seeing the excuse to finally get away from the letters for a little while.

"I will go and speak with my daughter, then," Emilie said in a professional, almost detached tone.

By the time Emilie found Elise, who was alone in her personal library pouring over a thick tome, her professional demeanor had dropped back to her more relaxed, light-hearted self. The former was reserved for when she was at work, not when she was dealing with her family.

Elise looked up as her mother entered the library and, noticing the last remnants of her irritated expression, asked, "Answering letters again?"

"Not so much answering as reading, then immediately throwing away," Emilie said with a laugh. It wasn't true, she had to send at least a generic noncommittal response to all of them, but since she forgot about most of them immediately after finishing her response, immediately throwing them away wasn't the most inaccurate thing to say. "At the very least, Duke Decimius has stopped sending requests for information about why he's being suppressed," Emilie continued as the smile on her lips turned vicious.

"Hmm, small mercies," Elise said with a matching smile.

It was rare for Heaven's Eye to find an excuse to throw their weight around, given their policy of not interfering with the nations they operate in, but when Euphemius and Tiberias tried to have Leon assassinated, these ladies had the perfect excuse to destroy them. Tiberias had been pestering Elise to go out with him for a while, after all, but that had also stopped not long after Heaven's Eye began to lock up House Decimius' assets.

"So," Emilie said as she leaned over and looked at what Elise was studying, "what is it about river nymphs that has you so preoccupied that you refuse to attend meetings?"

"I was curious about them," Elise casually responded, carefully controlling her expression to give away none of her anger and frustration.

Unfortunately for her, Emilie still picked up on the slight pursing of her lips and momentary balling of her fists.

"Are you sure about that?" Emilie asked her daughter.

For a brief moment, Elise contemplated telling her mother about Leon's predicament, about his sexual debt with a river nymph queen. However, to admit that her boyfriend had been taken away by a monster on the edge of human civilization was a humiliation that Elise could do without, so she held her tongue and simply nodded to her mother.

Unwilling to press her twenty-two-year-old daughter too much for the details, Emilie sadly replied with, "Well, I'll be here if you need to talk. Just don't blow off too many more meetings, all right?"

Elise was legitimately surprised. Given her past experiences with her mother, she fully expected Emilie to press and push until Elise lost patience and left the room. She wasn't expecting Emilie to just give up like that.

Emilie tenderly rubbed Elise's shoulder for a few seconds, then stood up to return to work. "Take as much time as you need, Butterfly," she whispered.

Elise sank back into her armchair as her mother walked toward the door. There were other things that had been on her mind, matters that the situation with Naiad had brought up, matters that she wanted some advice on, but to let go of her pride and ask her mother for help wasn't something Elise had ever done before.

But, as Emilie opened the door and stepped out of the room, Elise quietly asked, “Mom, could you stay for a little while?”

Emilie paused with one foot out of the door and turned back toward her daughter. Elise had slumped back into her chair and hugged her legs to her chest. Most of her face was hidden behind her knees, but her eyes were visible, and Emilie could see the conflict and uncertainty in them even from across the room.

“Sure thing,” she said as she stepped back into the room, closed the door, and sat down across from her daughter. She didn’t say another word, she just waited for Elise to speak.

She waited for several minutes as Elise worked up the courage to broach this subject. It flew in direct contrast with just about everything Emilie had expected of her, and she doubted that it would go over well with her mother, given her proclivities.

“I was...” Elise hesitantly began, pausing for a second or two before beginning again. “I was thinking... I don’t want multiple husbands... or concubines...”

Emilie raised an eyebrow in interest and slight confusion. “I... *suppose* that’s fine...” she said, though she wasn’t able to completely conceal the disappointment in her voice. Having multiple spouses and a large harem of concubines was a huge mark of prestige for those of their station, and rare was the noble, male or female, who wasn’t at least interested in building a harem of their own.

“I...” Elise hesitantly continued, knowing that it was best to speak her piece now rather than springing it on her mother later. “I... don’t think I’d mind if Leon didn’t do likewise...”

That drew a sharp glare from Emilie, but the older woman was so stunned by what her daughter had just said that she simply opened and closed her mouth like a fish, completely at a loss as to what to say.

“I’ve been thinking recently,” Elise continued, finding it much easier to talk now that the hardest thing to say had been said, “I know there are some other girls who are interested in Leon, and just because I don’t want to start a harem doesn’t mean he shouldn’t...”

“But... You...” Emilie sputtered. Her own harem counted in the hundreds, and she could barely fathom why her own daughter wouldn’t want to do the same, despite twenty-two years of Elise bitterly fighting against her attempts to introduce her to eligible boys of sufficient status.

“I’ve made my decision,” Elise firmly stated. “I’m not going to have a harem of my own.”

Hundreds of different reactions flashing through Emilie’s mind, from angrily demanding that Elise break up with Leon and not degrade herself by doing such a thing to quietly asking her daughter why. To join a harem rather than building one’s own was significantly less prestigious, after all—though not without its own kind of prestige, depending on whose harem it was. Leon, however, as a mere fifth-tier knight as far as the wider Bull Kingdom was concerned, did not qualify for that status—if Elise were to let him have the harem instead of having one for herself, she would be politically lowering herself.

In the end, Emilie was only able to ask one question, and she did so with such a confused tone that her voice trembled.

“Have... you spoken to him about this?”

"Not yet," Elise replied.

"Then don't make such a rash decision yet," Emilie quietly implored Elise. "If he says it's fine, then you can still-"

"I'm not doing it," Elise insisted. "I have seen more rich nobles than I care to count, and I have no intention of sleeping with any of them. I have seen even more rugged or pretty commoners, too, and I have found all of them wanting. I love Leon, and I don't want any other men."

Emilie took a deep breath to steady herself. She then took several more before she felt composed enough to speak again.

"What, may I ask, brought this on?" Emilie asked as calmly as she could, which wasn't that calm; her eyes were narrowed in anger and frustration, her voice was low, and her killing intent spilled out of her.

"A... *private* matter," Elise replied with a quick look of bitterness at the book on the table in front of her.

"I... see..." Emilie responded. "I need some time to process this. We will speak again later."

Elise nodded, and Emilie rose to her feet and left the private library almost in a stupor.

To a degree, Elise could understand why her mother was so shocked, but on the other hand, she could do as she wished, regardless of what Emilie wanted for her. She didn't want what Emilie had, she wanted something else, something she'd never had before. Letting Leon build a harem of his own might not be the thing she truly wanted in the end, but at the very least, she knew she wasn't going to let that Naiad have him.

Elise's eyes turned back to the book in front of her, and they narrowed in anger. Killing intent leaked out of her body, chilling the air in the library. She hadn't found anything that could help Leon, but she had only gotten started.