

Storm King 281

Chapter 281: Calabria

The city of Calabria was much like Florentia, to Leon's eyes. Most of the residential buildings were on the eastern side of the Naga River, while the commercial buildings were on the western side, and a number of tall bridges connected both halves without interfering with the ships traveling up and down the river.

Their destination was in the eastern districts; specifically, it was the palace built on the tallest hill in the vicinity. Like most palatial buildings in the Bull Kingdom, it was made of white stone and marble, decorated with murals, tile mosaics, and carved reliefs, and heavy on blind arcades along the outside walls.

The entire nine thousand strong riding column couldn't stop at the palace, though; its stables simply weren't big enough. So, while most of the knights and men-at-arms rode toward the headquarters of the local Legion garrison, Trajan, August, Leon, the Paladins, and about a hundred other high-ranking knights made their way toward the Exarch's Palace. Lapis went with, and it attracted the attention of just about everyone it passed on the road, and more than a few people screamed and ran away in terror.

Leon's heart raced as he rode silently not too far behind Trajan. Trajan had warned him whose palace this was and had given him the option of accompanying the rest of the knights to the Legion garrison, but Leon had refused to do so. It was a rash and impulsive action, and one that he was starting to regret as the gates of the walls surrounding the palace closed behind the group.

Once he got off his horse, he intended to find wherever it was that he was going to stay for the next couple of days and leave as quickly as possible. He would become as invisible as he could with his ring broken, he wanted to attract as little attention as possible.

Trajan understood this and didn't require Leon to perform any of the duties that were expected of him at the Horns—namely, morning training and accompanying him to official meetings.

For her part, Alix was looking more than a little nervous. Her eyes darted everywhere, her head spun around so much that Leon was almost concerned that she was going to get dizzy and fall off her horse, and her hands visibly shook. Leon hadn't kept it a secret who the resident of this palace was, and since she knew who he was, Alix was in almost as much danger as Leon, and she wasn't able to hide her anxiety as well as Leon was able to.

Anzu, on the other hand, seemed ecstatic to be somewhere new. During most of the ride from the Horns, he happily bounded along keeping pace with Leon and also running around in the tall grass and light forests they passed through. Now that he was in the palace, he leaped into a flower bush, furred his wings, and crouched down like he was stalking prey, but he stuck his shiny white head out of the bush and watched everyone going in and out of the stables.

When Leon finished putting his horse in its cell and came back outside, Anzu burst out of the bush and rubbed himself against Leon like a housecat. However, Anzu had grown big enough that his head was now higher than Leon's elbow, and he almost knocked his human over with his expression of joy.

Leon spent a few minutes giving Anzu some head pats, eliciting a few chirp-like purrs from the griffin, and waited for Alix and Trajan.

Alix wasn't too far behind him, and once Trajan came out, the Prince quickly approached Leon and said, "Make yourself scarce for a few hours. Head down into the city and come back at sundown. We'll have our sleeping arrangements made by then."

"Yes, Your Highness," Leon said, and he, Alix, and Anzu quickly made for the gate. For its part, Lapis stayed within the palace, waiting for Leon's return. Over the past year, it had learned to keep a respectful distance from the object of its protection, but it endeavored to remain where Leon could easily find it if he needed Lapis' aid.

'Now, into the lion's den,' Trajan thought once he saw the three vanish past the distant gates.

August and the Paladins sauntered outside not long after Trajan did, and the two Princes and three Paladins made their way inside the palace proper.

The entrance hall was as ornate as expected, all polished marble, thick comfortable carpets, and expensive mahogany furniture. The alcoves along the wall were filled with the requisite marble statues of long-dead Kings and famous knights, and the air was perfectly temperature controlled by complex wind, fire, and ice enchantments.

But these luxurious surroundings were barely noticed by the princely entourage, as waiting for them at the foot of a grand staircase was a man with glittering silver hair, eyes like radiant sapphires, and a slight frame that nonetheless exuded a feeling of power and authority. His face tended more toward pretty than rugged but was still exceptionally handsome with its square jaw, straight nose, and omnipresent jovial smile.

"Your Highnesses, such a pleasure to have you staying in my humble manor!" he loudly proclaimed.

"Welcome to Calabria, please avail yourselves of my hospitality!"

August returned the man's smile and said, "We are grateful for the warm welcome, Lord Isynos, and I, for one, look forward to your hospitality."

Prince August and Lord Justin Isynos continued in this vein for several more sentences, but Trajan remained silent. He fought the urge to frown in displeasure at the man's servile tone, as he'd found that the more obsequious the tone, the less competent or loyal the person often turned out to be. What put him even more on edge was the man's complete lack of aura, indicating either extreme weakness, or extreme strength, and Trajan guessed it was the latter—stronger mages could hide their auras completely from lower-tiered mages, but the instant they started using magic, then the lower-tiered mages would be able to perceive it, even if they wouldn't be able to discern any meaningful details.

'Well, at least it now makes a bit more sense why Julius would give this man a city to govern...' Trajan thought to himself. If Lord Isynos was stronger than even him, then it was perfectly understandable why the King would want to keep him around, despite only arriving in the Kingdom about fifteen or so years ago, which Trajan did note wasn't even a year after the death of Kyros Raime.

Once the expectedly over-long greetings were finally done with, Justin said, "Please, join me for a late lunch, I'm sure Your Highnesses could use the rest after your journey."

Escorted by what almost seemed to be a Legion of servants and attendants, Justin led the group to a relatively ostentatious dining hall where a small but sumptuous feast had been prepared. Justin and August chatted the entire way through the halls, discussing the various administrative details of Calabria, while Trajan and the Paladins remained silent.

For his part, Trajan watched Justin as subtly as he could and listened to every word the Exarch said. He had no illusion about whether or not the man would let something slip about any grudge he had against Leon or House Raime, but the Prince wanted to take stock of the man. So far, though, Justin had shown nothing but pleasant hospitality and deference to royalty.

"... and she will graduate from the Knight Academy in a few months' time," Justin said as he sat down just to the left of the head of the table. August, being the man with the highest rank present, sat in that seat, while Trajan sat to his right.

"Does she intend to continue guarding my father's consorts?" August asked with an interested smile.

"I believe so, my daughter has indicated to me that she enjoys her work, even if there isn't much that's expected of her. Or maybe *because* there isn't much expected of her," Justin responded with a slight chuckle.

"Well, I'll be sure to keep an eye out for her," August said. "I don't expect any harm to come to her, of course, but you never know."

"That would be appreciated, Your Highness," Justin replied.

As the Exarch said this, Trajan noted that his hands twitched slightly and for a moment, he had a curious look in his eye. The Prince read this to mean that, despite his jovial tone, he didn't appreciate August 'looking out' for his daughter. An understandable notion, in Trajan's mind, given how strong he claimed his daughter to be, but at the very least it indicated some measure of repressed hostility, though the elder Prince was unable to pick up on any killing intent.

"So, Lord Justin," August continued, "I have been made aware that you have conducted yourself admirably during your time as Exarch."

"I have merely carried out my duties to the best of my ability," Justin humbly stated.

"All the better," August said with a smile. "I have a proposition for you, if you're interested. I would like you to come with me back to the capital and serve as one of my stewards. As Prince-Regent, I have a powerful need for competent administrators, and I'd say you more than qualify."

"Your Highness... I... I am honored for the consideration..." Justin said with surprise evident on his face. And yet, again, Trajan saw his hands twitch in what the Prince presumed was hostility.

Seeing Justin's face fall slightly and sensing that he wasn't going to immediately give him an answer, August spared both himself and Justin the embarrassment of a public refusal by saying, "The offer isn't going anywhere, please take some time to consider it. Those in my employ are *well* compensated, I assure you, far more than an Exarch, so don't let that be an issue."

"I will endeavor to give Your Highness my reply before it comes time to depart this city," Justin said. "I apologize for not answering immediately, but I must discuss things with my family first. This would be quite the change for them..."

"I understand," August reassured the Exarch.

As they finished speaking, they began to eat lunch in earnest. All further talk was relegated to nearly meaningless pleasantries and random gossip about other nobles in Calabria and the capital, neither of which Trajan participated in.

'This is painful to sit through,' Trajan complained in his head. He had never been comfortable with such formality as Justin was showing, and he was greatly looking forward to when the meal was over.

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"I noticed nothing too strange about the man," Trajan said to Leon.

The younger knight returned to the palace of Calabria at sunset, along with Alix and Anzu. Immediately after greeting Lapis, who had waited patiently at the gate, Leon went looking for Trajan. Fortunately, the Prince had an attendant waiting for Leon in the palace's entrance hall, so he didn't have to take the risk of wandering around a potentially hostile palace looking for Trajan.

"Mm," Leon grunted in acknowledgment. They were now in Trajan's lavishly appointed private guest room in the palace, and they still had to be careful about exactly what they might say. Leon and Alix's room wasn't nearly as luxurious, being bereft of the same fine furniture and works of art that filled Trajan and August's rooms, but it was at least close to Trajan's, so if they were to be attacked, Trajan could be there in seconds.

"If I notice anything, you can rest assured that I won't let it go," Trajan promised. "That being said, I doubt I'll find anything of substance. For now, make sure to enjoy the city for as long as we're here."

"I will," Leon replied, knowing that was an instruction to stay out of the palace as much as possible.

Trajan didn't want Leon anywhere even close to Justin Isynos, and he was going to keep them separated as much as was feasible. He had even contemplated having Leon stay in the Legion barracks or in a Calabrian inn, but in the end, he decided that it would draw too much attention from the others who knew who Leon was if he wasn't in the palace with the rest of Trajan's high-ranking knights.

"We'll be here all day tomorrow, and then we're leaving the next day," Trajan reminded Leon. "Be careful, boy. Keep a keen eye out for anything suspicious."

Leon smiled and said, "There's plenty for me and Alix to do outside the palace. It'll probably be far more of a vacation for us than it will be for you."

"True enough, I have to stay here and listen to boring nobles and merchants talk about shit I couldn't care less about," Trajan complained as he sat back in one of the couches. After lunch, many of Calabria's upper class desired meetings with the Princes, and while they could deny most of them, Trajan and August were still expected to mingle a little bit. Making matters worse, Justin had even organized a small feast for the following night and invited more than a few of the local nobles to attend.

Leon couldn't help but be somewhat amused at Trajan's predicament, knowing the Prince's distaste for such things, and he was more than happy to get away from it.

Neither Trajan nor Leon had much else to say, so the latter left the former's room and returned to his own, ready to get some rest. He, Alix, and Anzu had to get out of the palace before breakfast the next day.

Chapter 282: August's Offer

"Ughh," Justin Isynos sighed in displeasure as he sank into his armchair. He closed his sapphire-blue eyes in fatigue and his body stretched out until he almost slid off the chair.

"Well, don't you just look chipper," said one of the other three mages in the room, a youthful-seeming man with a stout frame and a shaved head.

"I *hate* dealing with these fucking people," Justin replied with uncharacteristic venom in his voice.

The Princes had been at his palace for more than a day, and the feast he had prepared the day before was in full swing. More than a hundred of the most important nobles in Calabria had been invited, and all but about half a dozen had attended, despite how little notice there had been. All of them wanted to share a room with two Princes and three Paladins—especially Trajan and the Bronze Paladin.

"At least most of Trajan's knights aren't here," said another of the mages in the room, a woman with strawberry blonde hair and sharp features. Her piercing green eyes were closed just as Justin's were, as she was as tired with the company as her Lord was.

Leon, Alix, and all but a small handful of Trajan's knights had been given the night off. Many were a little disappointed about not being able to attend the feast, but the Prince had wanted to camouflage Leon's nonattendance by not having most of his other knights attend, as well. As a result, Leon, Alix, and Anzu spent most of their day down by the riverbank training and wandering around the market district trying to kill time, with no one of consequence there to take notice of them.

"These Princes are truly aggravating, or at least, August is," the last mage said, a tall, lithe man with a thin, oval-shaped face and pitch-black hair.

"Trajan doesn't talk much, thank the Great Lord," Justin replied. "It's times like these that I wish I just stayed in the shadows of this damned Kingdom. Presenting myself to the King was one of the worst decisions of my life."

"It brought you power enough to build the spy network, though," the blonde woman replied.

"It hardly seems worth it at this point," Justin replied. "In our years of searching, we've only gotten one possible tip, and it led to the deaths of five of my best men at the edge of this cursed mausoleum. No sightings of our quarry since. I'm correct in that assessment, no?" Justin looked to the tall man for confirmation; an extended search he ordered of the Northern Vales for Timotheos' team and their targets had recently been completed, and the tall man had been going over the results and preparing a report for his Lord.

"It's... not promising," the tall man replied, though Justin could've guessed that by the simple fact that the man had waited this long to tell him the results. "There were some rumors about a father-son pair

living in one of the more remote regions that *might* be who we're looking for, but my scouts have been finding it increasingly difficult to get more concrete details on them. Those Valemens truly do *not* like outsiders."

"I can hardly blame them," Justin said with a long sigh. "Keep digging. Someone will talk, even if we have to grease a few palms. Make sure our agent has plenty of silver for the job."

"He's got more than enough, the damn barbarians simply won't take it," the tall man complained.

"These fucking people, always making things more complicated than they have to be..." Justin muttered in exasperation. "Try everything you can think of, if they still don't talk, then... I suppose we'll have to take more extreme measures."

"Surely you don't mean massacring them?" the stout man asked with an expression of strong distaste.

"I'd rather not, but Lord Kamran sent us here to do a job, and he'll not be pleased if we fail," Justin said in a low, fearful tone. "We'll make every effort to do this right, but if we have to get messy, then we can't shy away. We *can't* shy away..."

"Still doesn't feel right," the stout man murmured as he crossed his arms and stared at the floor in concern.

Justin sighed once more.

'If they survived Timotheos' attack, then there's little chance they're even still there...' he thought to himself. *'We need more people for this investigation, we need more spies...'*

"I've made a decision," Justin said out loud, drawing the undivided attention of the other three. "I will accept Prince August's offer to go to the capital with him. We need more followers for this, our current network is clearly not cutting it. To aid in that endeavor, I will need greater political clout than I currently possess and entering the service of one of the Princes will get me that influence. It increases the risks to us, but the network we have right now is clearly not cutting it."

"Perhaps the Young Lady can intercede-" the blonde woman began, but she instantly fell silent when Justin turned a wrathful gaze upon her.

"I will *not* involve my daughter in these matters," he growled as his killing intent erupted from his body, dropping the temperature of the room well past freezing. "It's bad enough that *I'm* doing that soulless bastard's dirty work, I will *not* allow her to stain her hands with this!"

"I-I understand," the blonde woman replied as she began to uncontrollably shake from the pressure Justin's rage put her under.

"... Good," Justin responded as he restrained his killing intent and leaned back in his chair; he'd made his point and he wasn't the sort to deliberately terrify his subordinates. He much preferred the carrot to the stick, but when his business in the shadows began to get too close to his family, he'd lose his cool remarkably quickly.

"So, we'll be accompanying you to this Kingdom's capital?" the stout man asked, seeking confirmation.

“Of course,” Justin said. “I’ll need your skills if we’re to recruit more people to our cause. Besides, I’m probably going to be busier there than I was here, that little self-centered Prince is probably going to want me to do a lot of work in the palace, leaving me with little free time to devote to our goal.”

“Any idea of how much we need to expand?” the tall man asked.

“None at all, so let’s take this slow,” Justin said. “Only recruit those who can be trusted and be extremely conservative with what you tell them. Basically, just do what we’ve been doing, but on a slightly larger scale.”

“Got it,” the tall man replied.

The four continued to plan and strategize for about fifteen more minutes when Justin decided that he’d been away from the feast for too long and had to return. He took a few deep breaths to steel himself and regain the attitude of a humble servant of royalty before leaving the study.

The other three, however, stayed to continue discussing details of exactly how, and more importantly, *where* to expand.

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It was late, an hour or so past sundown, but with the feast not wrapped up yet, Leon and Alix were still out in Calabria trying to kill time. They had trained in the morning in a public park by the Naga river, a sight that wasn’t too uncommon in most parks on Aeterna, regardless of the Kingdom, and had explored the city in the afternoon.

Calabria, however, wasn’t much of a tourist city. There weren’t many great places to visit unless one enjoyed the view of hundreds upon hundreds of warehouses. Consequently, after dinner, Leon and Alix returned to the park to continue training—though neither were particularly unhappy about the situation, they both had an intense desire to continue growing stronger.

They had chosen a secluded grove to practice within, with Leon sitting on the ground with his back to a tree and Anzu curled up in a ball right next to him. Alix slowly practiced her sword skills while she flooded her body with magic power. She was close to the third-tier, she could feel it, and wanted nothing more than to ascend.

Leon, too, felt like he was nearing the threshold for ascension, but based on his past experience, he thought he wasn’t nearly so close to his as Alix was to hers. Still, he diligently trained as fast as he could without abandoning safety, slowly building up his magic body with every passing moment. He estimated that everything above his hips was fine, he just had his lower body left to magically copy over to his magic body.

He’d made great strides in the past month. Ever since the Thunderbird helped him dispel Bran’s nightmare, he’d been training almost constantly, though not usually at the intensity that he did during dedicated training sessions. Still, he couldn’t honestly say that he’d stopped training during his conscious hours after recent events had instilled an immense determination within him to speak with the Thunderbird.

Suddenly, Leon's eyes snapped open; he sensed a drastic change in Alix's aura, and in concern, he shifted his attention away from his own training and over to her. What he saw was the distinctive aura of one whose bone marrow was now producing mana instead of blood.

Alix had frozen in mid-swing of her training sword. She stared ahead in bewilderment, her eyes wide and unfocused with the shock of what she now felt. Leon rose to his feet, and the soft noise he made jerked Alix back to reality. She looked to her knight with a face of half disbelief and half ecstasy.

"I..." she mumbled, so overwhelmed with her accomplishment that she was finding it difficult to form words.

"... You've ascended," Leon said with a tone of soft pride. "You're now a third-tier mage."

There was a long moment of silence as Leon's confirmation of her status sank in. And then, when she finally realized that her accomplishment wasn't a figment of her imagination, she shouted at the top of her lungs, "YEEEESSS!!! FINALLY!!!"

Alix's face split in half with a smile of sheer unadulterated joy and she raised her arms to the sky and jumped in celebration. Energy coursed through her body, and all her fatigue from training most of the day vanished in her exultation.

Leon felt a modicum of embarrassment in seeing just how unapologetically gleeful Alix was. Fortunately for him, the two had chosen their training area wisely, and no one else was around for them to disturb, save for the sleeping Anzu who was jerked awake with Alix's triumphal shouting.

"It's about damned time!" Alix exclaimed as she clenched a fist and felt the magic that was slowly being produced in her body. It was a fairly slow trickle, but she knew that it would take a few more days or weeks of training to finally solidify her gains and to make sure all of her bones had completely adapted to the presence of magic power. During that time, her bones would begin to produce more and more mana and less and less blood, until mana was all that was being produced. And as she progressed through the tiers of magic, the quality of mana being produced would greatly increase, meaning her bones would be producing mana that held a much greater amount of magic power for every tier she ascended.

"Only a couple weeks late, eh?" Leon said as he playfully punched his squire in the shoulder. She was behind Leon's other friends, but she had ascended much faster than they had, even if they had managed to do so weeks before her.

"Better late than never," Alix replied, "and from the way my training has been going recently, I was starting to get worried that I wasn't *ever* going to ascend!"

"You shouldn't doubt yourself; it was only a matter of time with how diligently you train," Leon reassured his squire. "Now, I'd say it's about time to get you knighted."

Alix's eyes almost sparkled at that statement. It had always been her dream to be a knight, and now that dream was close to being fulfilled.

"Think that party's over by now?" Leon asked. It had grown dark outside and the moon had risen quite high, but it wasn't even close to midnight yet.

"Not sure..." Alix said as she suppressed her excitement.

"This might need to wait until later, but rest assured, we'll get that knighting ceremony taken care of," Leon said with a wide smile. He had to admit, he really wasn't that great of a mentor to Alix, and that fact had weighed on him quite heavily since he'd taken her away from Fort 127. Now that she was about to become a knight, much of that responsibility was going away, and he could feel himself unconsciously relaxing.

"I don't mind waiting," Alix replied, though it was clear to anyone with the power of sight that she was practically bursting with energy due to her own excitement.

Leon chuckled, then said, "Let's spar a bit, then head back in a couple hours. Best to err on the side of caution and not show up too early..."

"Yes, Sir!" Alix responded with a bright smile.

Chapter 283: Under Triumph

Creating a knight in the Bull Kingdom was surprisingly regulated; to knight someone was a privilege reserved for those of a certain level of importance. When he was a Tribune, Leon was high-ranking enough to hold that honor, but now that Trajan had stripped him of that rank in punishment for his recklessness, it was an honor he'd lost.

Consequently, knighting Alix wasn't something he could just do on the spot, he had to wait until Trajan gave him Royal permission.

And so, when they were certain that the feast was over, Leon and Alix's training session came to an end and they hurried back to the palace in Calabria. By the time they returned, however, almost everyone had gone to sleep, including Trajan, forcing them to wait until morning.

This was a problem because that morning was when they had to get back on the road and continue towards the capital. Fortunately, Justin Isynos wasn't accompanying them, he told them he had to stay in Calabria for a month or two and make his preparations to move out of the palace and hand over power to whoever took over the Exarchate when he was gone.

So, despite some disappointment from Alix, the knighting ceremony was put off for a little while. On the plus side, though, she was now going to be knighted in the Royal Palace itself, an honor that completely made up for the delay, in her opinion.

About a week and a half later, the column finally began to approach the outskirts of the capital. On the way, August and Trajan's group met back up with the two Legions from the Central Territories that they had gone east with. The stop in Calabria hadn't been long, but it had been enough for the Legions to gain enough distance that the two groups merged back into one for the final leg of the journey.

The pace had been blistering by mortal standards, more than fifty miles per day, but for mages, that wasn't such a big deal—though, to be fair, many of the first-tier mages were smoked and barely on their feet, but as the capital appeared in the distance, they picked themselves up and kept walking with as much pride and dignity as they could. They were a victorious army marching home, even if most of the actual fighting had been done by the Legions of the Bull's Horns.

Before they were able to enter the city, however, a rider approached the column and made straight for Prince August.

"Your Highness!" the messenger greeted with a bow. "I bring a message from the palace!" He was a young man, appearing to be barely twenty years old, and possessed with second-tier strength. It was clear from his greeting alone that he didn't recognize Trajan, not that the elder Prince cared all that much. However, August cared a great deal that his Uncle wasn't being shown the proper respect.

"Greetings, what message have you brought to me and my uncle?" August asked, making a point to call attention to Trajan and his status.

The messenger instantly paled and hurriedly bowed to the elder Prince, but Trajan simply growled, "Get on with it."

"Yes, Your Highnesses!" the messenger replied as he pulled a letter out of the breast pocket of his green Legion uniform.

"Who sent this message?" August asked as he held his hand out for the letter.

The messenger gingerly handed it over and replied, "Sir Tacitus, Your Highness!"

August nodded in acknowledgment as he opened the letter. Tacitus was the King's appointed Chancellor, the chief legislative official within the Bull Kingdom. It was the job of the Chancellor and the veritable legion of lawyers that worked under him to ensure that the King's will was made into law and to resolve any conflicts that that will may have with existing laws. The Chancellor also served as the head of the King's advisory council, in effect serving as the monarch's right-hand man.

Over the past few years, August had leaned heavily on the elderly Tacitus, a man who had been serving King Julius throughout his entire reign and Julius' father for decades before that. All in all, Tacitus had more than a century's worth of experience working in the Royal Palace, and August considered him a wise and indispensable member of the Royal government.

August opened the letter and quickly read through the contents. His face dropped with every line, from first the stoicism that all members of the Royal Family were expected to present when in public, to annoyance, and then to anger.

"Thank you," August said to the messenger in clear dismissal. The messenger, understanding that there wasn't going to be anything for him to take back with him, bowed once more to both August and Trajan, then rode off, though not before looking back over his shoulder one last time at Trajan, who cut an imposing figure dressed as he was in full, gleaming, glittering steel plate armor that emphasized his already gigantic arms and shoulders.

"Explain," Trajan quietly demanded, seeing the look on his nephew's face.

"It seems that my brother has returned to the capital during my absence," August bitterly stated.

"What's more, he's already made arrangements for the army to return to the capital under triumph."

"I see..." Trajan muttered as a similar look of annoyance flashed across his face.

To cross the city limits under triumph meant a great deal of required ceremony that Trajan would've been much happier to avoid, but given how prestigious such a thing was, it wasn't lightly canceled or

ignored—and besides, canceling it would take more time than simply accepting it, and he just wanted to get to the Royal Palace after the long journey.

“The wording, though, is quite clear,” August continued, “this is a triumphal procession for the army, meaning you, Uncle, and the rest of the soldiers. I and the Paladins that followed me are prohibited from participating...”

Trajan grunted in displeasure. For the returning army to enter under triumph was almost expected—they had defeated a strong enemy and won a great victory, after all—but for one of the Princes that led them and the Paladins and their retinues that greatly contributed to that victory to not be included was a grave insult that spoke volumes about Octavius’ attitudes toward his brother and the Paladins that followed him.

Trajan began to get a gut feeling that he made the correct choice in who to support. August was relatively self-centered, as any Prince who had been raised in the secluded Royal Harem was going to be, but Trajan hadn’t seen any sign that he would behave so rudely toward loyal and critical members of the Kingdom’s military.

As they continued to ride, August began to slow down. Trajan and the two Legions would be stopped at the city limit while the triumph was prepared, but he had no idea what he and the Paladins were ‘supposed’ to do.

‘What... should I do?’ August wondered to himself as he glared at the approaching city. He couldn’t just go around and enter the city from another road, he couldn’t afford such an embarrassment given how politically unstable his position was, and waiting for the triumph to end was similarly out of the question. However, he couldn’t enter the city during triumph preparations, leaving him with little choice as to what he could do.

But there was one more choice...

Along the Gold Road, even the outlying buildings were made of beautiful white stone and polished marble, with the slums and lower class districts concentrated around the northern side of the city. The point that truly marked where the capital began, however, was a massive triumphal arch, with three immense arched gateways with decorative columns to each side and an intricate frieze above them all showing scenes from the first Bull King’s unification wars that created the Bull Kingdom.

The army stopped just before this triumphal arch. There was a company of honor guard waiting for them, dressed in green and gold dress armor that was far too ostentatious to be anything other than ceremonial, and was led by a Legate rather than a Centurion.

“Your Highness!” the Legate called out, bowing toward Trajan as the column advanced. He glanced at August, but he gave the younger Prince nothing more than a thin, derisive smile before turning back to Trajan.

Once his eyes locked with Trajan’s, however, he felt the full weight of the two and half centuries that Trajan had spent building his killing intent crash upon him. Despite being a sixth-tier mage just like Trajan, the Legate almost collapsed from the fear and overwhelming pressure.

"You know, I really don't care when people forego the usual ceremonies when it comes to me, but don't get carried away, the dignity of the Royal Family is not for you to dismiss," Trajan growled, the warning he packed into his statement going unsaid, but being perfectly understood, regardless.

"I... apologize, Your Highness!" the Legate said first to Trajan, and then again to August. The Legate bowed to the latter Prince, and he had to go much further than the standard bend at the waist or genuflection before Trajan relieved the pressure his aura had upon the hapless Legate.

The Legate struggled to his feet looking more than a little embarrassed and humiliated after being so handled in front of his soldiers, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Your Highness... is *aware* of the regulations regarding entering the city under triumph, I'm sure," the Legate said as he struggled to quell his rage, "however, as the Master of Ceremonies here, I must insist on repeating them."

Trajan glared at the man, but he nodded to signal him to continue.

"None in the triumphal procession may enter armed or armored," the Legate stated. "Neither may anyone within the procession enter mounted upon a horse, war beast, or any other animal; they must walk in upon their own two legs."

"Mhmm," Trajan grunted impatiently.

"You must walk from here to the Monolith of Victory, give the proper thanks and veneration to the Ancestors, and then from there to the Royal Palace, where the Prince-Regent shall greet Your Highness and grant the appropriate rewards for victory."

Trajan nodded, then growled, "If that's all, get lost."

"I... It is, Your Highness," the Legate said, almost instinctively calling out Trajan's rudeness, but fortunately, he thought better of it before the words left his mouth. He then turned around, but just before he joined his waiting company, he added, "The triumph will begin in about an hour and a half!"

"Noted," Trajan responded with barely another look at the Legate. This whole thing rubbed him the wrong way; he wasn't even technically in the capital yet and here he was already infuriated at the politicking.

Trajan turned around and rode back to Minerva. He quickly relayed what was happening, and the lady knight instantly took charge, getting the knights off their horses and having everyone put away their weapons and armor. Fortunately, at every major entrance to the capital there was a large Legion post house, and the one they were near had stables large enough for all of their horses and enough storage space for the soldiers who were weaker than the fifth-tier to securely leave their weapons and armor.

Once everything was in motion, Trajan was joined back at the front by Minerva, Leon, and several other of his high-ranked knights.

"Your Highness," Leon quietly asked, "is it really necessary for the removal of armaments?"

"Yes," Trajan replied with a bitter expression. "Or at least, it's required by the regulations of a triumph."

“They could’ve given us more warning, though,” Minerva grumbled silently enough that no one apart from their small group could hear.

“If this were about our victory, they would’ve informed us long before we arrived, proper triumphs take months to organize,” Trajan said, almost spitting out the words.

The group fell into silence as everyone began to pull their weapons and armor back into their soul realms. The sixth-tier knights were done in seconds, but it took almost an hour for those like Leon who were quite heavily armored to finish up.

While waiting for his subordinates to get ready, Trajan approached August, who had just gotten back to the triumphal arch after storing his horse in the post house.

“I take it you’ve reached a decision as to what you’re going to do?” Trajan asked the younger Prince.

“I have,” August replied. “My brother seeks to humiliate me by using this triumph to block my entering the city.”

“I would guess the same,” Trajan agreed. One clue that the triumph was only being used for political purposes was that none of the eastern Legions were present, this was a parade being thrown for the two Legions who were returning home, neither of which actually saw any combat during the short war. Of those who were normally stationed in the capital, it was only the Paladins and their subordinate knights who fought, and yet they were being singled out and excluded from this celebration.

“I don’t care what my brother has ordered, though,” August said, eliciting a look of interest from Trajan. “I and the Paladins will enter this city, even if we’re not a part of this triumph.”

Trajan smiled and said, “Good. This victory is as much yours as it is anyone else’s.”

Several minutes later, the Legate approached Trajan and said, “Your Highness, it’s time, let the triumph begin.”

Trajan glanced past the triumphal arch and saw that the Legion band had been prepared, musicians specifically trained for official Legion ceremonies such as triumphs or other such celebrations.

The Prince sighed in resignation—he *really* didn’t want to bother with this pageantry—and ordered the Legions to begin the march into the capital under triumph.

Chapter 284: Triumph

Triumphs were rare in the Bull Kingdom, the last happening after the Penitent Paladin returned from his expedition to the Serpentine Isles to bring an end to their raiding more than fifty years ago. They were long affairs, starting with a parade by the victorious soldiers, followed by lavish spending by the Crown on food for the public and games in the arena, the knighting of those who had earned it, rewards of silver and other prizes for the Legion commanders, and ending with a great feast in the Royal Palace.

Most of the mortals in the capital hadn’t seen a triumph during their lives, as they were reserved for truly great victories over a foreign adversary. The attempted raid by Hakon Fire-Beard didn’t qualify for a triumph, as it was far too short of a conflict and too easily dealt with to warrant such celebration; in fact, it was so inconsequential for most of the people in the Bull Kingdom that the few that heard of it in

the first place largely forgot about it within a week or two. The recent war with the Talfar Kingdom, however, was certainly large enough to qualify for a triumph.

Trajan, though, didn't think that this triumph would be equal to those grand celebrations of the past. It was far too short-notice for everything to go off without a hitch and too subverted by politics. He doubted whether there would even be enough food for the citizens of the capital, let alone the spectacular chariot races and gladiator fights expected of such an event. Triumphs needed months of preparation, and it was beyond insulting for the army being so honored to have found out about their triumph only as they reached the southern triumphal arch of the city.

But this wasn't the time to get upset. If there was going to be a triumph, then Trajan was going to follow procedure as best as he could. To that end, he and the rest of the army's commanders stood to the side of the arch as the two Legions poured into the city. First and foremost was the honoring of the soldiers who had won the conflict that the triumph was celebrating, with the commanders following after.

As the soldiers marched into the city, Trajan could hear the ecstatic shouting and screaming of loved ones reuniting—family members were encouraged to come and greet their returning soldiers, with celebratory kisses between lovers and spouses being a long tradition. Given that neither of the two Legions fought and none of the soldiers had died, there were *many* happy family members lining the streets.

After several hours, all forty thousand soldiers had marched through the triumphal arch, a great number of them singing along with the drums and strings of the accompanying bands that had been rushed out to welcome them home. The songs they sang, however, were extremely rude toward most of the upper-class and the Bull Kingdom as a whole, but that, too, was tradition, and the ruder the better, to the great enjoyment of the crowds.

But then came time for the Paladins and their knights to march through the arch. At first, the honor guard looked like they were going to stop them, but the Bronze Paladin wasn't having that and almost knocked the Legate to the ground as he passed in front of the marching knights. With Bronze leading the way, no one else dared to try and stop them, and the common people certainly didn't care, especially once the family members of the knights began to rush out and celebrate with them.

Seven thousand people later, it was finally time for August, Trajan, and Trajan's retinue to join the soldiers in the city.

"All right," Trajan muttered, "let's get this waste of time over with..."

For his part, Leon couldn't agree with Trajan more; this entire triumph was an enormous waste of time, and he wanted no part in it. But there was no refusing such a thing, and as Trajan and August led the group forward, Leon fell in behind them, just behind Trajan and right next to Minerva. Bringing up the rear of the column was the eye-catching sight of Lapis, but it wasn't doing anything overtly hostile, so as soon as the shock wore off and the giant moved on, the citizens went back to their celebrations.

Leon was actually a bit surprised, but since there were so many soldiers and knights around, the citizens didn't care that a single stone giant had entered the city.

The beating of the drums hammered his eardrums, the streets, already colorful from flowers and painted buildings, were filled with banners of Royal green and gold and Legion crimson, and the air was

choked with the smells of every kind of food imaginable. All told, Leon found it all overwhelming and everything began to blur together. All he was able to focus on was following Trajan and keeping his head down. The last thing he wanted was to be thrust into the spotlight like this.

The procession continued down the road, flanked by cheering crowds the entire way. The group only grew as wives and husbands rushed forward to greet their spouses on their return, as children ran up to greet their parents when they finally saw them. It was hard to blame these people for being so happy and wanting to celebrate that their loved ones who had gone off to war were coming home safe not even two months after they had left and for the soldiers and knights to want to spend some time with their families, but both Trajan and Leon, like the curmudgeons they were, just wanted this to be over and done with.

Finally, Trajan's group arrived at the Monolith of Victory, a massive slab of polished black granite as black as the night sky that glittered with bright white flecks and streaks that resembled the stars. Carved into the lower third of this slab were records of every war that the Bull Kingdom had ever fought. To the sides of the monolith were a pair of statues carved out of rose marble in the shape of knights to 'guard' the monolith.

The monolith itself was in the center of a massive forum that had been cleared of all stalls for the duration of the triumph. All of the soldiers that had gone ahead of the commanders had gathered here along with their families; more than two hundred thousand people had congregated in the square, but there was still room for more if there had been the need. With the arrival of the two Princes, the crowd parted to make room for them and their most trusted knights to slowly make their way up to the monolith.

Trajan wasted no time walking right up to the gigantic slab of granite and placed his hand upon it, ignoring the earth mage that was standing right next to it in case Trajan hadn't wanted to do this himself. He channeled his earth magic into the slab and carved a new record upon it, commemorating the short war between the Bull and Talfar Kingdoms, and the result of the conflict. He kept it short but ensured that his 'handwriting' was perfect before he finished.

With that done, Trajan turned around and shouted, "You are all dismissed!"

Another tradition was for the victorious commander to give a speech to his soldiers, but these weren't Trajan's Legions and he wasn't one for overly long speeches, anyway. Despite this small bucking of tradition, the soldiers almost exploded with joy and they began to make their way out of the square to continue their celebrations with their families.

Trajan stepped back from the monolith as the Legions around him melted away into the city over the course of several minutes. The only people who remained in the square were his personal retinue, the Paladins and their knights, and August.

After waiting about ten minutes for the Legions to clear out, August asked Trajan, "Time to keep moving?"

Trajan sighed, then said, "Might as well."

The now much smaller group kept moving toward the center of the city. The Monolith of Victory was on the edge of the noble district, which surrounded the lake and Royal Palace in the middle of the capital,

so there were much fewer people running around taking advantage of the triumph to party. They were replaced with exceptionally well-dressed nobles, most of whom were far too dignified and had too much self-respect to engage in such common activities as partying in the streets, which came off to Trajan as them looking down at him and his. These nobles watched them in groups from the porches of nearby estates and from pavilions along the road, drinking wine and holding small feasts as the knights marched past the front gates of their estates.

"Ignore them," Bronze whispered from just behind Trajan. "It doesn't matter what they think or how they look at us, treat them as the walking decorations that they are and pass them without sparing them a single glance."

"Yeah," was all that Trajan was able to utter in response.

Unfortunately, this proved to be much more difficult than Bronze made it out to be, especially for those following directly behind the two Princes. In such a prominent place, they attracted much attention from the watching nobles. The Paladins were used to such things, but Minerva and Leon were not, and neither felt particularly comfortable under such judgmental scrutiny; Leon could feel the eyes of hundreds of nobles bore into him as the procession delved deeper into the district.

But the noble district wasn't overly populated, and there weren't many nobles to pass compared to the commoners in the rest of the city—there were at the most ten thousand nobles as opposed to several million commoners that called the capital home, and maybe ten thousand more nobles who were only visiting. Dozens of the higher-ranked knights within the procession were nobles, though, and so had their spouses and families hurry out to join them in their march toward the capital, the spouses and significant others sharing kisses with their knights as they did.

As the group neared the bridge across the lake to the island that the Royal Palace was built upon, something occurred to Leon: he hadn't seen Elise at all. They hadn't parted on the best of terms, though it wasn't like they had broken up or anything, and there was a part of him that had been quietly looking forward to seeing her on the route. However, even after passing through the noble district, he hadn't seen hide nor hair of his girlfriend at all.

This uncertainty of where she was and where their relationship stood settled into the pit of his stomach like a stone and Leon's hands began to shake in anxiety. The only place left for Elise to be was the palace. Leon knew that he was in for either embarrassment or dejection upon arrival. If Elise was there and they were still together, then she'd almost certainly want to kiss him in front of everyone, regardless of his discomfort with public displays of affection. He was an unknown, a nobody in the capital, but Elise, one of the most prominent young noble women in the entire Kingdom, making their relationship so publicly known would undoubtedly invite much more scrutiny than simply being in Trajan's retinue.

However, if Elise wasn't there, then that either meant she didn't want to see him or that she wasn't supposed to be there as a member of Heaven's Eye. The latter was infinitely preferable to the former, but Leon still wanted to see his lady, even if he had to suffer through embarrassment in the process.

The bridge had multiple gatehouses, and each one that the procession passed through brought more and more dread to Leon as the palace came closer. Inevitably, though, they had to reach the end, and at the pace that Trajan set, they reached it much sooner than Leon would've liked.

The group stepped off the bridge and continued onward through a thin, decorative forest to the palace until finally arriving at the main building where all official business took place. The front of this building was built in a U shape around a large central courtyard with a fountain in the middle and a statue of the Sacred Bull as its centerpiece. Filling the courtyard were hundreds of waiting nobles, all of whom began to politely clap as Trajan and August approached—though many of them stopped once they caught sight of August and the three Paladins and began to whisper amongst themselves at the apparent scandal.

The most important people stood on the half dozen steps before the front gate. Emilie was there, as was a tall man with a square jaw, dark brown hair streaked with gold, and a heavily muscled frame. Next to both of them was a beautiful blonde woman dressed all in blue, and a handsome man with eyes like grey ice. The latter two radiated power as only Paladins could, their auras completely unrestrained, making their identities known to everyone: The Sapphire and Earthshaker Paladins.

But all of this went completely unnoticed by Leon. He had eyes only for the gorgeous red-haired woman that waited by the entrance to the courtyard. He almost felt his heart stop when her emerald eyes found him walking not too far behind Prince Trajan, and it wasn't until her mouth turned up into a joyous smile that he felt like he could breathe again.

Leon wanted to hurry over to Elise, but he had to stay behind Trajan and the Paladins to maintain appearances, but fortunately, Elise didn't have the same reservations; she rushed forward to meet the procession and, ignoring the Princes and Paladins in her way, walked right up to Leon and threw her arms around him. Many of the knights behind Leon cheered at this sight, as they had whenever anyone else they knew reunited with their significant others, and they cheered even louder when Elise looked up and planted her lips on Leon's.

The kiss couldn't last long as the column was still on the move, so Elise quickly broke it off and whispered into his ear, "Welcome back..."

Leon took her hand in his and she fell in beside him. "It's good to be back," he responded, "I missed you."

Now that they were back together, any anxiety Leon felt instantly disappeared, and he found it easy to ignore the odd look of curiosity he received from the watching nobles with her at his side.

From the steps ahead, Emilie could see her daughter's actions, and an enormous smile uncontrollably bloomed on her face. Some nobles might have found such a public display beneath the dignity of someone as high-born as Elise was, but Emilie certainly wasn't of that mind. In fact, she had to fight to maintain her own business-like stoicism, and it took a few seconds for her to wipe the smile off her face—too long to fully conceal it from those who curiously glanced at her for her reaction.

But as interesting as Elise and Leon's relationship may have been to some of those watching nobles, it remained largely a curiosity, and when the tall and handsome man dressed in green and gold stepped forward to welcome the procession, everyone fell silent.

"Welcome, Uncle!" the man loudly said, pointedly ignoring August and the Paladins.

Trajan glanced at the man as he approached the front steps and growled, "Nephew."

The man was, of course, Prince Octavius.

“It’s always an honor to welcome returning heroes from their war in-” Octavius began in an obvious wind-up for a long speech, but he was interrupted by Trajan before he even made it through the first sentence.

“We’re tired, Nephew, and there are other duties we must attend to,” the elder Prince stated as he brushed right past Octavius and both Paladins at his back.

For a moment, it seemed like Earthshaker was about to stop him, but with a single look from Bronze, who was right behind Trajan, the Earthshaker Paladin froze in place. No one stopped Trajan as he flung open the massive front doors of the palace and led those who were following him inside.

For his part, as August passed Octavius, he only glared at his brother. Octavius maintained an aloof air and barely glanced at the younger Prince. Neither brother said so much as a word to each other, despite August wanting to castigate Octavius for ignoring him upon his arrival or Octavius’ desire to reprimand August for participating in the triumph. Octavius simply stepped aside and let the procession enter with a look of utter serenity on his face.

But deep inside, he felt nothing but rage and humiliation; August’s participation alone was enough to infuriate him, but his pride was greatly wounded when Trajan cut off his speech. It was all he could do to stand there and watch as the knights filed into the palace to bring the main event of the triumph to a close: the knighting ceremony.

Chapter 285: Knighting Ceremony

On the other side of the huge column-filled atrium from the main doors of the palace was the throne room, a magnificently appointed room, long and filled with green marble columns that supported the hundred-foot-tall vaulted ceiling, a floor of polished white marble mostly covered by thick dark green carpet, and white stone walls overlaid with murals of black, red, and gold depicting the Bull Kingdom’s most famous triumphs. Interspersed around the murals were tall, thin windows that augmented the magic lanterns with natural light—there were a pair of courtyards to either side of the throne room to allow this—and a raised gallery on either side for courtiers who weren’t important enough to stand closer to the throne.

The immense room was lit by white magic lanterns, and at the very end of the hall, where many of the lights were concentrated, was a high raised platform upon which sat more than a dozen white granite chairs. In the center of the platform was a raised dais, and the Bull King’s silver throne sat atop it. Behind the throne was the grandest of the murals, the moment when the First Bull King had finally declared an end to his conquests and the formation of the Bull Kingdom five thousand years ago.

The massive, twenty-five-foot tall image of the First Bull King was raised so that it could be seen from anywhere in the room. Surrounding the heroic figure of the First Bull King were stylized representations of the most powerful of the nobles of the time, including one that drew Leon’s attention as he entered the room, an older man with bulging muscles who was surrounded by white lightning directly to the right of the First Bull King. Leon would admit that he was biased, but he felt that this obvious depiction of his ancestor was a far more heroic sight than the First Bull King, with his golden sword raised in the air and shining with light like the rising sun.

The throne itself was an ostentatious thing, made almost entirely of silver and trimmed with gold, with the ends of the armrests shaped into bull's heads, and the backrest rising high above the seat and separating into a pair of curved horns that extended over the entire dais.

In front of the throne platform was another, lower platform that Leon knew to be the place where supplicants and others who had business with the King were to stand while their business was heard. Despite being smaller than the throne's platform, though, it was certainly large enough for twenty knights and their squires to now be stood upon it, while August, Trajan, the Paladins, and other important officials took their places upon the throne platform.

Leon and Alix stepped onto on the central platform with the other knights and squires; it was time for the knighting ceremony, the last of the obligatory triumphal ceremonies. Alix almost vibrated with excitement; she had always wanted to be a good knight, and now she was being knighted in the throne room itself! In her mind, this was the highlight of her life so far.

After this last ceremony was over, the knights would be dismissed to join the rest of the capital in celebration, so naturally, they all wanted this to proceed quickly. In fact, the entire ceremony was largely pointless, as they hadn't thought they would be receiving a triumph upon their return. As a result, nearly all of the squires that deserved to be knighted had already been. But Trajan couldn't let the ceremony proceed with only three or four squires, so he had quietly ordered many of the knights and their former squires to assemble here and bolster the numbers a bit. As a result, most of the 'squires' kneeling were already knights. Trajan stepped forward, eager as he was to get this over with, however, just before Trajan was about to begin, Octavius began to speak.

"More brave and deserving men and women there have never been," the Prince said with a jovial smile and arms outstretched in welcome, presenting what he believed to be the perfect image of the benevolent King. "I consider myself honored to know that so many young, talented people are getting the recognition they deserve! To—"

"Enough of that," Trajan said with an exasperated sigh, once more cutting off Octavius' speech. "There's a party going on outside, none of these people want to stand here and listen to a political speech, even if said speech is going to flatter the hells out of them!"

For a moment, Leon thought he saw an expression of extreme annoyance and anger cross over Octavius' face, but he blinked, and it was gone. The Prince turned and looked at his uncle, smiled, and said, "Of course, Uncle. I merely wished to express my gratitude for having so many fine young people choose to serve my family."

Trajan grunted, clearly unimpressed. He knew that Octavius was trying to play to these young knights, but he wasn't going to subject the members of his retinue and the followers of the Paladins to such politicking and blatant pandering.

"Well, let's get this thing over and done with," the elder Prince growled. His patience had long since vanished from the unexpected ceremonies that he had to perform, delaying him in getting any work done. "You begin," he said to August.

August was shocked and expressed as much with a raised eyebrow and a questioning look to his Uncle.

“Uncle, I do not believe that to be the most appropriate of decisions,” Octavius stated loud enough for his voice to echo throughout the entire throne room, which was quickly filling up with hundreds of nobles who wanted to watch the knighting ceremony. “My brother was not included in this triumph, though he has seen fit to participate anyway. It wouldn’t be wise to reward his attempted theft of the glory these knights and their squires have fought to obtain with a role in so venerable a ceremony. Besides, he *did* entice a pair of Legions to abandon their duties in the Central Territories—”

“And that’ll be quite enough,” Trajan said, cutting Octavius off for a third time, infuriating the younger Prince, though Octavius concealed it well. “When this Kingdom was under invasion, August fought to bring me much needed reinforcements. He has as much a place here as you or I.”

Trajan may not have been a Regent, but his word was final. Octavius quickly found this fact out by scanning the room and seeing many of the nobles and higher-ranked Legion knights nod and whisper amongst themselves in agreement, and Octavius wisely decided to hold his tongue and let the issue slide. He had wanted to either make August look weak by forcing him to enter the city hours after the triumph or to alienate him from other Legate knights by having him participate in a triumph that he hadn’t been invited to. However, it didn’t seem to be going the way he wanted, but since it didn’t take much effort from him, he grudgingly fell silent—for the moment, at least—though his jovial smile was back on his face so quickly that few noticed it had ever left.

With another prod from Trajan, August stepped forward and said to the waiting knights and their squires, “Please kneel!”

The squires and ‘squires’ knelt, and the knights readied their swords. Alix looked ecstatic and could barely hold herself steady, and Leon wore a rare smile on his face at witnessing such unbridled joy from his friend.

“When the Talfar Kingdom invaded our land, all of you did your duty and bravely fought them back!” August continued. “The Royal Legion is honored to call you all its own! All of you have fought magnificently on behalf of your King, your Kingdom, and all the King’s Legions, and it is a personal honor to pronounce every one of you knights of the realm!”

Once the Prince was finished speaking and stepped back, the waiting knights gently lowered their swords upon each of their squire’s shoulders, finishing the ceremony. When that was done, they helped the new knights to their feet, shaking their hands and in many cases, embracing their former squires. Leon, being rather uncomfortable with the hundreds of nobles and other Legion knights watching, opted for a handshake, but Alix threw her arms around his neck anyway.

“Thank you, Sir!” she whispered into his ear.

‘I... didn’t really do much, though,’ Leon thought to himself with a bitter smile.

After several seconds, Trajan said, “This city is currently shaking with so many people outside partying. It would be an utter shame if everyone here didn’t go out and join them, wouldn’t it?”

“I agree,” the Bronze Paladin said. “To have so many of our fine young soldiers return home safely after bringing such a swift end to the war is truly a cause worth celebrating.”

“Indeed,” Trajan continued with a smile. “I now pronounce this ceremony over; you are all dismissed!”

Many of the knights had to fight the urge not to shout and jump for joy as they began to quickly make their way to the door, while the nobles quietly chatted amongst themselves as they started to file out at a much more leisurely pace.

Leon, however, was unsure of what he should be doing. He wanted to spend time with Elise, but he also didn't know if he should be following Trajan as many of the Prince's most senior knights were doing. Fortunately for him, when Leon turned to look at Trajan, the Prince smiled and waved at Leon, silently telling the younger man to get out and enjoy himself. Leon smiled back, made a short bow, and then left the palace accompanied by Elise, Alix, and Anzu, who had been forced to wait outside during the ceremony.

But Trajan didn't have such luxuries as being able to enjoy the unexpected triumph. He could see out of the corners of both eyes that August and Octavius were subtly glaring at each other, though both young Princes were at least wise enough not to be releasing any killing intent and to present something that looked a lot like unity to the crowd within the throne room.

Trajan sighed, then quietly said to the group on the throne's platform, "I'm calling a meeting of the advisory council. I want a full report of the Kingdom's current situation."

Octavius raised an eyebrow in confusion and fear; Trajan wasn't the Regent, but Octavius could tell simply by the way that the high-ranking courtiers to either side of the three Princes quickly snapped into action that Trajan was going to get what he wanted.

Only ten minutes later, August, Octavius, Trajan, and most of the King's advisory council were sitting around a large ornate table made of dark red wood in a long hall with similar décor to the throne room. The table wasn't in the exact center of the room, as there were dozens of scribes and other paper-pushers half-buried in enormous stacks of paper on the other side of the room making sure the council had all the documents they required and taking copious amounts of notes to record all that was said during the meeting.

At one end of the table sat August, with Roland and the Brimstone Paladin standing behind him. At the other end was Octavius, with Earthshaker and Sapphire at his back. Trajan sat in the center, in between the Regents, along with all the rest of the council. The Bronze Paladin had departed to return to the King's private villa as soon as the ceremony had ended with hardly more than a word to Trajan.

The advisory council was made up of more than a dozen individuals, including the Chancellor, Chief Steward, the Primarch of Lineage Hall, the Spymaster, and a number of other people who advised and aided the King in the administration of the Kingdom. Perhaps most relevant to Trajan was the Consul of the Central Territories, who was supposed to be the most senior and thus, the first among the co-equal Consuls. However, since Trajan was also a Prince, he was of senior rank to Lord Avidius, the aged Consul of the Central Territories.

As soon as the council members took their seats, Octavius immediately said, "I move to censure my brother for his inappropriate participation in the triumph, despite being formally excluded from it!"

"Indeed," Avidius agreed, "this triumph was meant to celebrate the victorious Legions and His Highness Prince Trajan for defeating those Talfar dogs and sending them packing, but Prince August selfishly

inserted himself into the proceedings without approval! Such blatant disrespect of our Legions must never go unpunished!”

Before anyone else could voice their opinions, however, Trajan slammed his fist down upon the table, sending cracks spider-webbing across its surface. The triumph and the weeks-long ride to the capital from the Horns had left him quite bereft of patience.

“There will be no censuring anyone here,” the Prince growled at Octavius. “If August is to be punished for taking part in a celebration of a victory he had a hand in delivering, then *you* shall be punished as well for leaving him out of it!”

Octavius was about to sneer, but when no one else spoke up in support of his idea—and the Consul of the Central Territories shrank back into his seat from Trajan’s anger—he simply smiled and said, “Uncle, I meant no disrespect, I simply believed that August should’ve gone through official channels if he wished to participate, rather than taking it upon himself to so blatantly flaunt the rules. But, if you wish not for him to be punished, then he shan’t be.”

“Now that that’s over and done with,” August said, sparing only a single momentary glare for Octavius, “Sir Tacitus, I believe there were some issues cropping up with the Serpentine Isles when I departed? What is the status on that front?”

Tacitus was the Chancellor and the official head of the advisory council, and as such, his duties extended beyond the legal responsibilities of his office. He knew just about everything of importance that went on within the Kingdom and a great deal of things that went on outside of it. During the past few years, if there was a problem that August had needed to deal with, he would usually learn of it through Tacitus, the Chief Steward, or the Spymaster.

“Their yearly tribute hasn’t arrived yet, Your Highness, making them three months late,” Tacitus responded.

“Who cares about a few barbarian sailors?” Octavius asked with a derisive sneer. “They pale in comparison to our navy Legions; we don’t need their inferior stock.”

“It cost a great deal to bring them to heel,” Trajan replied with a tone of subdued annoyance. “If we let them start to skimp on their tributes, then they may begin to slide back into piracy. And it’s more than just sailors they provide, Nephew, they are some of the finest shipwrights in all of Aeterna, and they provide us with many of their ships.”

“How should we respond?” the Chief Steward asked. He, Tacitus, and the Chief Diplomat shared jurisdiction over tributary states, so he was just as invested in dealing with this situation as Tacitus.

“I say we send a diplomatic expedition to the Earls and demand they provide their obligatory tribute immediately,” the Chief Diplomat exclaimed. He was an ancient man, so close to retirement that his only job was to advise the King on matters of foreign affairs and to act as his intermediary with the Diplomatic Corps in Ariminium. In this respect, Aquillius, as the senior-most diplomat in Ariminium, was far more important and influential in matters pertaining to the Bull Kingdom’s foreign relations than the Chief Diplomat. In fact, with the Diplomatic Corps’ headquarters being located in Ariminium, the Chief Diplomat was in charge in name only, with very little say in the goings-on of the Corps.

"I agree," Trajan said, pre-empting many of the other people around the table from speaking. "Have the Consul of the Ocean dispatch one of his fleets as well. Remind them of our power, of when the Penitent Paladin burned their fleets and broke their islands. We shed enough blood to turn the ocean red to end their raids on our western coast and into the Gulf of Discord, we must not allow them to relapse into their piratical ways."

"Yes, Your Highness," Tacitus, the Chief Steward, and the Chief Diplomat all responded in tandem.

Octavius, however, was finding it harder to maintain his noble air amidst his rising frustration. He had been intending on flexing his might when August returned, which would've been easy given how much support he had from the nobility, but Trajan was making that much more difficult. None of the royal advisors wanted to contradict such a venerable and respected member of the Royal Family, especially not one with ten of the most experienced Legions in the Kingdom still at his beck and call. What's more, Trajan would've been made King ahead of Julius had he not renounced his claim, and that seniority only increased the respect the old and powerful men and women of the capital had for him.

To put it bluntly, Octavius had been caught off-guard, and he was starting to flounder a bit as he tried to adapt and change his strategy for this situation.

For his part, though, August was more than willing to sit back and let Trajan assert his authority. He had asked for Trajan's support and assistance, and he wasn't going to get in the way of Trajan providing just that.

"Now, then," August began once their response to the issue was settled, "let's move on..."

As August began to outline many of the problems that the Kingdom was facing—sightings of krakens off the western coast interfering with trade, a spike in banditry in the rural territories, and the supposed murders of the investigators he'd dispatched to Aurelianorum by bandits—Trajan could only sigh and do his best to swallow his distaste to have to deal with all of these people around him. But such was his duty, and he had little choice but to deal with it.

Chapter 286: An Inevitable Talk

When Trajan gave Leon the signal for him to leave, he did so as quickly as he could. The middle of the Royal Palace surrounded by curious nobles staring at him due to his obvious intimacy with Elise was exactly the place he didn't want to be, after all. However, as he, Elise, Alix, and Anzu stepped outside of the palace and began to make their way toward the bridge back to the city proper, Leon heard a voice call out to him.

"Sir Leon! Please wait a moment!"

Leon recognized the voice of the Paladin Roland, and he unconsciously started to speed up, eliciting a quizzical look from Elise, who was holding his arm. Leon still didn't trust the Paladin, especially since he knew Leon's true name. Unfortunately for Leon, Roland wasn't shy about speeding up to catch up to him.

"Sir Leon, do you mind if I were to join you for a while?" Roland asked with an inviting smile on his wide, chiseled features as he quickly, inevitably caught up to Leon.

Leon smiled bitterly before turning around to face the Paladin and said, "I'm busy, Sir, as you can see." He glanced meaningfully at Elise and Alix, but Roland wasn't going to go away so easily.

"I would like to speak with Sir Leon for a while, I hope you ladies don't mind," Roland said as he shamelessly fell in beside Leon on the opposite side of Elise. Leon considered himself lucky that Roland at least didn't take his other arm.

"So..." Leon said through clenched teeth, "what can I do for one of His Majesty's Paladins?"

Leon's question was a simple thing, little more than a tiny, meaningless courtesy, but it still gave Roland pause; ever since August appointed him to the post of Paladin, he had grown used to nobles, knights, and most other high-ranking courtiers and people of means and importance dismissing him as not a 'real' Paladin. To hear Leon calling one of the King's Paladins brought out a smile of such pride and joy from Roland that Leon found it increasingly difficult to distrust the man, despite one of his subordinates participating in the attack on his home in the Northern Vales.

"I... I haven't had much of a chance to speak with you since meeting up with you again, and I wanted to take the opportunity to do so before something else came up," Roland explained.

Leon glanced at Elise, hoping his lady would help him out. He'd told her about the attack on his home and about Roland's tenuous connection with the men who carried out the assault, so she knew why Leon wasn't too eager to speak with the Paladin at the moment. For her part, she'd done a little bit of digging of her own, but she hadn't found anything in Roland's history that would give her pause. Still, when she responded to Roland's request to speak, her tone was chilling and far less inviting than she might've been with any other noble.

"And why do you want to speak to Leon?" Elise asked.

"Just... wanted to catch up..." Roland hesitantly responded. He was a little taken aback at Elise's cold tone, but he assumed it was simply because he was butting in on her time with her lover, so he simply smiled and bore with it.

Roland continued after taking a few breathes to compose himself, "I, uh, I actually heard you came down to the Bull Kingdom a while back. I even spent a considerable amount of time looking for you — after seeing you in action in the Northern Vales, I wanted to take you as my squire after Luke graduated from the Knight Academy."

"I see..." Leon replied in a neutral tone.

"I followed you all the way to the Northern Territories, but I was told by the Consul of the North himself that you were killed in that unpleasantness with the Valemens..." Roland said with some traces of accusation in his voice.

Leon breathed a silent 'thank you' to the Consul of the North, then said out loud, "Not surprising. A lot of people died that day, I'm sure identifying everyone was a real pain, mistakes are sadly common." He knew, of course, that the Consul knew full well that he was alive given that he was the man who knighted Leon, but it was also an easy enough 'mistake' to explain away.

"I suppose it was," Roland admitted. "Anyway, I just wanted to express my happiness at how well you're doing right now. Fifth-tier and serving under a Prince? That's a far cry from the young Valeman I saw fighting bandits two years ago. You've truly done well for yourself!"

"Thank you," Leon said with a few traces of genuine pride that he couldn't hide behind his stoic exterior.

"And listen," Roland continued, "if you ever have any trouble down here in the south, just come to me, I'll be happy to help in any way I can!"

"That's a generous offer," Leon stated with little intent to actually test the Paladin's offer.

"Well, both you and your father helped me out a great deal in my mission back then, so I'd like to repay the favor if I'm able. Speaking of which, how is your father doing?" Roland's face was the definition of innocent curiosity, but as soon as the question was out of his mouth, Leon almost froze and had to fight not to snap at the Paladin. Fortunately for him, he was a stoic person by nature, so all it took to conceal his emotions was to turn his head away from Roland for a second or two, and the Paladin was none the wiser.

"He's... fine," Leon eventually answered. Fortunately for him, Roland didn't pick up on his hesitation with his answer, and neither did Alix or Elise feel the need to speak up before him. They both knew that Artorias was dead and could understand Leon's reticence to speak with Roland.

"Sir Roland, it was lovely to see you," Elise suddenly said as the opposite end of the bridge came into view, "but Leon and I were going to spend some quality time together, which we haven't gotten much of in the past year and a half, so we're going to have to say goodbye here."

"I understand," Roland said, a little disappointed that he hadn't gotten to say much at all but unwilling to continue to interrupt their time. "Just know, Sir Leon, that you're always welcome wherever I'm at, should you feel the need for my company."

"Thank you," Leon said once Roland had walked a fair distance, this time with less pride and more muted suspicion.

And with that, Roland separated from their group and started walking toward a different part of the noble district.

"Thank you," Leon repeated, this time to Elise and with a great deal of honest gratitude. "I had no idea how I could ditch him without raising any suspicions..."

"Don't mention it," Elise said with a glowing smile. "I've gotten fairly good at dismissing people I find annoying since my mother started having me help in administering the Heaven's Eye Tower."

"Does that mean I ought to be dismissed?" Alix asked with a wry smile, feeling more than a little superfluous still being with Leon and Elise.

"Of course not!" Elise said, letting go of Leon's arm to pull Alix into a hug. "You can consider yourself welcome anytime! By the way, do you two have your accommodations arranged yet?"

"We don't," Leon admitted. "We were supposed to report to the Legion barracks if we couldn't find a place by nightfall, but I figured we could find a place by then, assuming we couldn't impose on you for a little while."

Elise grabbed one of both Leon and Alix's arms and said, "Neither of you are an imposition! I insist you stay with me as long as you want!"

Waiting for them near the bridge were dozens of carriages and litters owned by the nobles in the palace and the servants to operate them. The largest by far, though, was a silver carriage that glittered in the evening sun. It was trimmed in gold and pulled by a pair of enormous pure white stallions, each one about half again as large as the horses Leon had seen used in the Talfar army, which was known for its exceptional horses. Emblazoned on the doors of the carriage and on the caparisons of the horses was a large golden eye, the sigil of Heaven's Eye.

"Nice ride," Alix said, admiring the carriage as Elise led them over to it.

"Thanks," Elise said with a beaming smile.

Barely fifteen minutes later, the three had arrived at Elise's estate. Leon had done Alix the favor of carrying her luggage in his soul realm, so once he dropped her stuff off in her room, he and Elise made their way to Elise's bedroom. Elise hadn't been lying when she told Roland that she wanted some alone time with Leon.

Once the door was closed and they were alone, Elise threw her arms around Leon and pressed her lips against his. But she didn't do anything more, which Leon found quite unusual for her. Under normal circumstances, she'd have been running her hands over his body while encouraging him to do the same to her, but this was a deep, passionate kiss and nothing more.

After separating, she whispered, "I'm glad you're back, but we need to talk..."

Leon's heart sank. 'We need to talk' were four of the most dreaded words anyone could hear in a relationship, and even though Elise's behavior up to this point hadn't led him to believe she wanted to break up, he still began to panic upon seeing her loving smile turn serious.

"What about?" he asked with trepidation.

"I've been thinking for the past few weeks," Elise explained, "ever since you told me about your situation with that Naiad."

"Find anything that could help me out?" Leon asked with a hint of hope in his voice.

His hopes were dashed when Elise shook her head.

"Not yet, but it has brought an issue we've been ignoring to the forefront of my mind," she said. "Nobles are expected to be polygamous in this Kingdom. I'm noble, as are you. The Kingdom at large may not know your real name, but you're still a fifth-tier knight, and thus noble enough to have multiple spouses."

"I see..." Leon whispered. It was true that he hadn't put much thought into this particular issue until Naiad had almost forced herself upon him; he felt like he could be perfectly happy with just Elise for the rest of his life. However, monogamy was an extremely rare thing among nobility—in fact, Artorias was the only high noble Leon knew of who hadn't built a harem.

But even though Leon hadn't thought much about it, this was something he and Elise were going to have to talk about at some point, and it seemed like that point was now.

"I want to say right off the bat that I don't want any husbands other than you," Elise said while looking Leon in the eye. He could see fear and dread in her eyes, but also determination and a complete lack of hesitation. It was obvious that she meant what she said.

"Well, I'm not exactly keen on looking for other wives," Leon replied with a smile, hoping that he was conveying the same seriousness Elise was.

"Then we have a problem," Elise said as she took a seat on the edge of her bed. "Only one of us can have a harem, but if neither of us does, then it would be an embarrassment for us both. To have a harem is a sign of authority and nobility that shouldn't be ignored."

"Hmmm," Leon hummed as he sat down next to his lady. His cheeks were rapidly turned red with this conversation and he had no idea what to say.

"Leon, do you think you could share me with another man?" Elise asked. Her tone wasn't playful or teasing at all, and her emerald eyes locked onto Leon's and didn't let him go.

"No!" Leon instantly replied. He didn't need to think about it, but when he did, he found the idea of Elise and another guy together to be detestable. "I guess I'm a selfish and greedy man," he continued after his initial negative reaction died down, "I know that other guys don't have a problem with that sort of thing... But I don't want that..."

Elise giggled and said, "I didn't think you would. Can I let you in on a secret?"

"... Sure..." Leon said with rapidly rising anxiety.

Elise leaned in and brought her lips to Leon's ear. Her breath tickled his ear and she whispered in a smooth and sultry tone, "I don't think I could say the same in return, if I had to share you with another woman..."

Leon's eyebrows shot almost to his hairline in surprise. He felt that, for sure, Elise would be as greedy and selfish as he was, refusing to share him as he refused to share her.

'But... I could be misinterpreting that...' Leon thought to himself. He turned to look at his lady to find that she was still staring at him with her big green eyes narrowed in playfulness and her full lips curled upward in a teasing smile. *'I see, she's just messing with me...'*

As if knowing exactly what he was thinking, Elise said, "I'm being deadly serious! I'm... *curious* as to what being with you and another woman might be like... Ever since the idea entered my head, I can't stop thinking about it!"

"Oh shit, you *are* serious...!" Leon said with as much surprise as he was capable of expressing.

"Yes, I am," Elise responded. She wrapped her arms around Leon's neck and pulled him in closer, whispering into his ear, "Listen, my love, if you don't get at least two or three more wives, it will be an embarrassment in this Kingdom, an embarrassment I will share as your first wife... It's best for us both if you were to be the one with the harem, here."

Leon's heart was racing so fast he felt like it was going to explode, and not just from talk about his finding another couple of lovers, but also because Elise was talking about marriage for the first time.

“Do you u-understand what I’m saying?” Elise quietly asked with a degree of uncertainty, her voice cracking for the first time since this conversation began. “I don’t expect you to go out tomorrow morning and return at night with another girl, but it’s something I want you to keep in mind... And I need to meet her before you do anything, got it?!”

“I-I...” Leon sputtered as he searched for the right words to say. When he separated from Elise’s tight embrace and saw how grave Elise’s expression was, there was only one thing he *could* say: “I understand.”

Chapter 287: Leon’s Ring

After Leon and Elise’s chat about polygamy, they stayed in her bedroom for a few more minutes until it was time to have dinner. It was fairly late, but the chefs on Emilie’s payroll still prepared a small feast just for Leon, Elise, and Alix, and laid it all out in Elise’s private living room. The chefs hadn’t expected Anzu to be there, however, so Leon tossed the griffin a few turkey legs, which he happily devoured whole.

“He’s so cute!” Elise gushed at seeing the griffin stretch out and lay down on a couch after eating.

Realizing that he was being talked about, Anzu raised his head and stared at Elise as if he was unsure how to deal with her.

Leon walked over and gently stroked Anzu’s head, much to the griffin’s obvious delight, and asked Elise, “Want a formal introduction?”

Elise almost bounced over with the biggest grin on her face, but as she drew closer, Alix said, “Careful, that guy doesn’t like *anyone* except Leon.”

Leon chuckled, then said, “It’s all right, he won’t bite or peck or anything else while I’m here.”

With some small amount of hesitation, Elise reached out to gently pat Anzu’s head, and the griffin warily watched her the entire time, but just as Leon said, the griffin didn’t do anything with his human there with him. He didn’t look too pleased with Elise’s head pats, though.

“I guess he’s a *little* unfriendly,” Leon admitted as Anzu’s glare slowly grew darker and more intense the longer Elise ran her hands through the gleaming white feathers on his head.

“He’s still more personable than you, love,” Elise said with a wry smile.

“You say that like it’s an accomplishment,” Alix added. “Just about every living thing is friendlier than Leon is with a stranger.”

“I... uh... hmmm...” Leon sputtered. He wasn’t able to seriously dispute those statements, but he also felt like he had to respond in order to maintain his dignity. Unfortunately for him, no good answer for this teasing came to mind, and he eventually fell silent.

Almost as if to rescue Leon from his awkwardness, someone knocked on the door of the living room. Without waiting for a response, Emilie pushed her way inside, and her face lit up at the sight of Leon and Alix in her home.

“Oh, I just *knew* you two were going to stay here, it’s so good to see you!” she said in an almost exaggerated display of hospitality. “Leon, Alix, you two may consider yourselves most welcome here! My home is your home!”

“Thank you, My Lady,” Alix said with a great deal of formality.

Leon was significantly less formal, simply nodding respectfully.

“Hello, Mother,” Elise said quietly with a look of subtle suspicion. She wondered what Emilie was doing in her private wing of the estate, but she refrained from asking directly.

Emilie, however, wasn’t quite so restrained.

“Elise, dear, I’d like to speak with Leon for a few minutes, do you mind if I borrow him?”

Elise frowned, but said, “It’s not like I own him...” She shot Leon a look of warning, but Leon hardly felt like he could refuse, especially after Emilie had just offered such a warm welcome.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, and Emilie smiled and led him out into the hall.

As soon as the door was closed, though, the smile on her beautiful face vanished and her sparkling green eyes narrowed in anger—all trace of the playfulness that Leon had come to expect from Emilie vanished instantly. She spun around faster than Leon thought possible and wrapped her fingers around his throat, lifting him into the air. Leon was so surprised that it wasn’t until she was already holding him at arm’s length that he began to channel his magic and try to resist.

However, when he tried to pry open Emilie’s fingers, his efforts failed.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you,” Emilie reassured Leon, though the effect was ruined somewhat by the look of fury on her face and her steel-like fingers against his windpipe. “I just wanted to *impress* upon you the importance of my daughter to me. I have raised her to the best of my ability, I have done all I can to give her everything a mother can give, and I will *not* see her brought to tears because she gave too much to the first boy she took an interest in, no matter *who* he is! Do you understand?!”

Finally understanding what was going on, Leon stopped trying to resist. He looked Emilie in the eye as best he could in his position and croaked, “Yes...”

Emilie stood there, holding Leon in the air and staring into his eyes, almost as if she could see directly into his mind and soul. Her aura was towering, what little Leon could sense completely overwhelming him and filling him with a deep sense of dread. Emilie’s killing intent wasn’t as intense as Trajan’s was, but what it lacked in immediate inducement of terror it more than made up for with a slow, creeping, inevitable sense of doom, as if nothing Leon could ever do would allow him to escape her wrath.

Once she felt like she had made her point, Emilie dropped Leon back to his feet and said, “She’s giving up a lot to be with you. If you don’t prove worthy...” After her previous threat, she left this one unsaid, but Leon still understood exactly what she was trying to say.

“I’ll always do my best to make her happy,” he said. His bright golden eyes found Emilie’s and held that contact, despite Emilie’s all-encompassing aura. He didn’t flinch, he didn’t back down, he stared right back into Emilie’s emerald eyes and showed no signs of his fear of her killing intent.

A few moments later, Emilie muttered, "See that you do," and left. She said nothing else, didn't say goodbye to her daughter, she just turned around and walked away, leaving Leon alone in the hall.

Leon quickly wiped away the sweat that had started to bead on his forehead, composed himself, then re-joined Elise and Alix.

"What did my mother want?" Elise asked, noticing the change in Leon's appearance despite his attempts to regain his composure.

"Nothing much," Leon replied as he gave his lady what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "She just wanted to impress upon me just how much she cares for you."

Elise smiled bitterly and decided not to press for details, then went back to playing with Anzu, who was starting to come around to letting her touch him, much to Alix's consternation. However, Elise kept an eye on Leon, who collapsed into a nearby armchair and tried to take a few deep breaths without being overt about it.

It took him several minutes to truly recover, but even then, his knees were still a little weak and his hands subtly shook. But he remembered something important that he needed to get taken care of as soon as possible, something that he didn't want to postpone for later.

"Elise, there's something I could use your help with," Leon said.

"What is it?" Elise asked.

"Do you remember the ring I took from those assassins on the boat after I left the Knight Academy?"

"How could I forget?" Elise said with a deep frown of anger. Even after more than a year and nearly ruining House Decimus' finances, it still infuriated her beyond words that Tiberias had attempted to have Leon killed.

"Well... I broke it. Or rather, it broke when I was fighting with a Talfar warrior."

"Is that why it took you so long to get back to the Horns?" Alix inquired. She knew that it had been working just fine when he left her and Anzu in the gatehouse during the Talfar army's first assault, but she didn't know that the ring had been subsequently broken.

"That's probably the biggest reason," Leon admitted. "It was disrupted in the middle of rendering me invisible, and I guess the ring's more fragile than I thought because it almost split in half."

"The enchantment placed in it only made you invisible, it's still made of gold," Elise said with a smile.

Leon shrugged in mild embarrassment. Gold's relative softness hadn't occurred to him before, which was something he vowed to fix in the future. He had to be aware of all the limitations of the equipment his life depended on, but he hadn't once thought about the fragility of the material his ring as far as he could remember. As an enchanter, this was something he couldn't let stand, and he vowed to keep the materials of his gear in mind for the future.

"Let me see it," Elise said, holding out her hand. Leon immediately summoned the broken invisibility ring from his soul realm and handed it to her.

Elise closely examined the ring, making sure she saw every little detail that there was to see. The gold band had a long crack beneath the emerald, but the emerald itself seemed fine to her, which was a good thing. The enchantment also didn't seem too badly damaged, but she was hardly an expert on these things so she couldn't say for certain. Regardless, she knew that the Heaven's Eye smiths and enchanters were up to the task.

"It's not too bad, I'm sure we can get this taken care of in a couple of days," Elise confidently estimated as she handed the ring back to Leon.

"Out of curiosity, how much does one of those rings cost?" Alix asked. She didn't think they would be cheap, but she had built up a little nest egg in her time at the Bull's Horns and wondered if her meager savings would be enough. Of course, she didn't actually think that they would be, but it didn't hurt to ask.

"Depends on who you are and how many you're buying at once," Elise explained. "The man who had this commissioned paid about forty-three million silvers for twenty rings, but if you were to go in and try to buy one, it'd probably cost around three million."

"Holy shit!" Alix exclaimed. She only had about ten thousand silvers in her account, more than enough for a decent enchantment to be placed on her armor, but not even close to buying something that would bestow invisibility. However, she was now a knight in Prince Trajan's service, so her monthly pay was about to skyrocket, so she was trying to keep her gear in mind when looking to spend some of that silver.

"They're complicated enchantments and I doubt many enchanters like making them," Leon said.

"They don't," Elise agreed. "They're exceedingly easy to get wrong, and you can see, they also tend to make the object they're a part of rather fragile. If the process of turning invisible is forcibly halted partway through, the magic being channeled into the ring will almost explode out, damaging the object, as happened with your ring."

"Makes sense," Leon said with a nod of his head. He'd read about plenty of enchantments that would do the same thing, but he hadn't yet experimented with any of them—his experience was mostly limited to enchantments that raised the defensive properties of his armor and those that augmented his own magical powers, neither of which placed too much stress on the enchanted object.

"We can head over to the Tower tomorrow and get this sorted out. You two aren't going to have too many duties, are you?" Elise asked, hoping that they could spend more time together. With Valeria and Asiya busy defending the Royal Harem, she didn't get a chance to spend a lot of time with people she considered friends anymore.

"We should be pretty free; I can't imagine there's anything substantial for us to do here..." Leon said with a questioning look sent toward Alix.

"I haven't been told anything, either," Alix said.

"That settles it, then!" Elise said with a joyous smile, startling Anzu a little bit. The griffin darted up from the couch, ran over to Leon, and jumped on his lap.

Leon shouted in surprise, but Anzu lay down over Leon's legs and refused to move while pressing one of his wings up against Leon's chin.

"Be careful, Elise, I think you might have some unexpected competition," Alix joked.

Elise stared at Anzu with a frown, but the griffin stared right back. There was a wariness in Anzu's blood-red eyes, but Elise also couldn't detect any hostility there. However, before she could do anything to try and make Anzu more comfortable with her, Leon wrapped his arms around the griffin's midsection and picked Anzu up off of his lap.

"Get off me, you're heavy!" Leon said with an amused frustration. "I think I might be feeding you too much. Either that or you're growing too damn fast."

"If he gets any bigger, he might have to sleep in the stables," Alix said.

Anzu was practically growing by the day, and his wingspan was already great enough that he had some trouble getting through the doors of the estate. Before too long, he'd be unable to enter the estate at all.

Anzu continued to stare at Elise after Leon put him down, but Leon gently pushed his head down and said, "Don't be rude!" When the griffin looked suitably repentant, Leon let him up.

Fortunately, Elise wasn't put off too much by Anzu's behavior, and she continued trying to make friends with Anzu. And it seemed to be working, by the end of the day, Anzu at least wasn't so on edge around her that he watched her every movement. When it came time to get some rest, though, he was a little more difficult. Leon had let him sleep on his bed at the Bull's Horns, but Elise wanted him to sleep on a large and luxurious dog bed at the foot of her bed. Anzu wasn't too enthusiastic, though, and it took a lot of coaxing from Leon before the griffin finally moved after sprawling out over Elise's bed.

Making things even more awkward, when Leon and Elise started getting a little more intimate, Anzu stared at the two and didn't look away no matter what. Leon and Elise, despite finding some amusement in the situation, were so uncomfortable that they ended up going to sleep without doing much more than making out.

Chapter 288: The Third Prince

Leon and Elise were woken up early the next morning by a hungry and rather cranky Anzu, who jumped up on the bed and began trying to push Leon out of bed with his beak—and to separate Elise and Leon, who had been sleeping snuggled up against each other. Elise groaned in surprise as she was so suddenly woken up, and then she almost screamed when she opened her eyes and found Anzu barely an inch from her face staring at her with his big red eyes.

The fright was momentary, though, as it became clear Anzu had just glanced at her and wasn't staring when he went back to trying to get Leon up and about.

"Arrgh! Ok, I'll get up!" Leon cried as he struggled out of the sheets.

As Elise's heart steadied, she quipped, "I think that's another reason to love that little guy, if he's so good at getting you up..."

Leon grumbled a bit, knowing that Elise enjoyed sleep just as much as he did, but he didn't waste time and quickly threw some clothes on. "I need to get him outside, any place I should take him?" he asked.

"Just out back should be fine," Elise replied as she lay back against the pillows. "It doesn't matter if he makes a mess, we pay people to keep the grounds clean."

"Got it," Leon said, feeling a little sorry for whoever would now have to clean up after his rapidly growing griffin. He quickly took Anzu outside and let him do his business, and when he came back, Elise had managed to struggle out of bed and Alix had started her morning training. With a couple hours until he and Alix had to make their way to the palace, Leon joined his former squire in training, and Elise did likewise a few minutes later.

During their breakfast after training, Elise said to Leon, "I can have a beastmaster come over from the Heaven's Eye stables and have him take a look at Anzu, just in case. He can also bring over some food for him."

Leon glanced at Anzu who was busy joyously tearing into a couple of small roasted chickens which Elise had her servants bring him for his breakfast. While Leon was sure the chickens were delicious, they weren't quite as nutritious as the specially prepared meals that he had been giving Anzu back at the Bull's Horns.

"I'd appreciate that," he responded. "I was planning on visiting a Legion beastmaster later today, anyway, this'll save me some time."

Elise giggled and said, "Not to disparage the Legion beastmasters, but I'm sure my people are better."

Alix frowned a bit at that statement, but Leon didn't have the same attachment to the Legion that she did, so he just shrugged and said, "I wouldn't be surprised if that was the case. That being said, the beastmasters at the Horns were pretty good."

"We should probably get going, Sir," Alix said as she glanced at the clock.

"Feel free to drop the 'Sir', We're the same rank now," Leon said, eliciting a smile of pride from Alix.

It took a bit of wrangling, but Leon managed to get Anzu into the stables to wait for the beastmaster. It hurt more than he expected to leave the griffin again, but he knew that it was good for Anzu to learn to be away from him a bit more. He was going to get much bigger than he was now, and Leon wasn't going to be able to take him everywhere like he'd been doing for the past year and a half. It was time to let Anzu get used to not being around Leon all the time.

Besides, the griffin's staring had been awkward enough that he hadn't been able to make love to Elise the night before, and both he and Elise had come to the conclusion that that situation would need to change, at least until Anzu got used to Elise's presence.

About an hour after leaving Elise's estate, Leon and Alix arrived at the Royal Palace. Elise had offered to lend them her carriage, but they decided to jog there instead as part of their training. They had been a bit apprehensive about where to go, but since all two thousand of Prince Trajan's knights and men-at-arms had been given the same instructions, they weren't alone; most of Trajan's retinue had gathered in the courtyard in front of the main palace building where the triumph had ended the day before.

Lapis was also there, waiting where the road met the courtyard in front of the palace. Leon had almost forgotten the stone giant in his joy of reuniting with Elise, who was far less furious with him than he had feared. Lapis had been staying on the palatial island since the triumph and had decided to wait for Leon at the courtyard. Leon quickly walked over to say hello.

As Leon and Lapis exchanged some pleasantries, a fifth-tier junior seneschal exited the palace, approached the former and asked, "Are you able to understand this thing's speech?"

"I am, and Lapis can understand you, too," Leon said with a chilly glare. He didn't like the guard's tone, though he could understand it somewhat given the stone giants had been dangerous enemies of the Bull Kingdom for as long as anyone could remember. The fifth-tier guard didn't show any outward sign of fear of offending the giant, but Leon did notice that his next statement was much less dismissive of it, and the guard straightened up a bit.

"Well, then, Lapis, I'm going to have to ask you to remain here for the time being. Your presence in the city could cause some problems with the people, and our Regents would like an audience with you sometime in the next few days."

The giant looked to Leon for guidance, asking, **"What should I do, Leon?"**

Leon smiled at the giant's use of his name, then nodded.

"Then I agree."

"It agrees," Leon relayed.

"And may I ask your name?" the guard asked.

"Leon Ursus."

"Sir Leon Ursus..." the guard repeated as he scrawled it on a form he pulled out of his pocket, making the accurate assumption from Leon's aura that Leon was a knight. "You may be called upon to interpret Lapis' words, Sir Leon. Expect a summons within the next few days to appear in before the Royal Court with your giant friend."

Leon grimaced, but the guard left before he was able to refuse.

"That sucks," Alix muttered. "You'd think in a city this size, there would be at least one other person who could speak the giants' language, but apparently they have to rely on a knight they found by chance."

"Such... is life..." Leon said through clenched teeth as he fought to contain his anger and distaste for what had just happened. To go before the entire Royal Court was not something he wanted to do, but he quickly did his best to suppress his scowl.

Noticing that they were done with that bit of business, Minerva waved Leon and Alix over to her, nodding to them both in greeting while Lapis went back to standing by the road, looking like a massive statue as it froze in place. To Leon's understanding, the giant was perfectly happy just standing around, as he had never picked up on any resentment or desire for anything else to do other than protecting him in the year and change the giant had been at the Bull's Horns.

“His Highness has some business with you, Ursus,” the Minerva said once her greetings were over. “He’ll be out in a few minutes. As for you, Dame Alix, you’re going to be reporting to me from now on, understand?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Alix replied, though she looked a bit conflicted with her new assignment. On the one hand, she had just been called ‘Dame’ Alix, but on the other, she had grown used to following Leon around as his squire and thought that she would be doing the same thing as his official subordinate, but since Leon had lost his rank as Tribune, that was no longer an option. Now she was being formally placed within Trajan’s retinue with Minerva as her direct superior rather than Leon.

Leon gave Alix a nod of solidarity, hoping to silently communicate his support for her. Once the nod was returned, he turned to Minerva and asked, “Anything of note on the schedule for today?”

“I’m not sure what His Highness wants you for, but he did tell me that you’re not going to be accompanying the rest of us as we get settled in here in the capital. All the rest of us have to get our accommodations sorted out so that we’re not resorting to staying in inns or the Legion’s guest barracks.”

“Sounds like fun,” Leon said sarcastically. He felt a sudden surge of gratitude toward Trajan for saving him from what was sure to be a day of hellish paperwork for the rest of the retinue. Besides, he already had a place to stay, so it wasn’t like he was going to miss out on anything if he wasn’t assigned a room in the Legion barracks.

It was only a few minutes later that Trajan emerged from the palace and found almost his entire retinue assembled in the palace’s vast front courtyard. He looked a bit haggard, with tired eyes, wrinkled clothing, and maybe even a little bit more salt in his salt-and-pepper colored hair. He hadn’t left the palace the entire night, and it showed.

“Minerva, get them on their way!” Trajan shouted, wasting no time whatsoever.

“Yes, Your Highness!” Minerva responded, and she instantly started getting the retinue organized and moving toward the Legion headquarters.

“Ursus, on me,” Trajan ordered as he started walking further into the palace complex, but away from the main building.

Leon quickly fell in beside the Prince. “Rough night?” he asked once they were alone—Trajan had even left his usually omnipresent assistants and secretaries behind. Leon decided not to bring up his imminent day in the throne room translating for Lapis given how rough Trajan looked; he didn’t want to add any more stress to the Prince than he was under already, at least for the time being.

“*Long* night,” Trajan responded. “There were more problems that needed addressing than I expected, many of them obscure legal issues or related to the Kingdom’s finances. Dealing with these damn things is exhausting.”

“I can’t say I’m envious of your position right now...” Leon said with a muted look of pity. He couldn’t imagine a worse hell than being in charge of such a large bureaucracy as the Bull Kingdom possessed. He knew that many people would—and did—kill to gain that kind of power, but it sounded to him more like a way to get gray hair and die young than anything worth striving for.

“Don’t get too comfortable thinking you’re not going to have similar responsibilities one day,” Trajan warned the younger knight. “A man like you may not have much choice once he gains a little more fame and his name is more widely known.”

That statement brought a deep frown to Leon’s face. Trajan phrased it carefully, making it seem more like he would gain responsibility with fame, but he was actually saying that once his identity as the last scion of House Raime was widely known, then people would be trying to give him administrative and political power. He’d almost be forced into dealing with similar problems that Trajan was now submerged in.

“Well... here’s to hoping that day never comes,” Leon muttered. Unfortunately, he knew that it was only a matter of time before his real name got out. Too many people knew now, despite the fact that he had never actually told it to anyone—some people guessed correctly, and it simply spread from there. The only thing he could do was prepare for the time when the secret came out.

“Anyway,” Trajan continued, “there’s someone I want you to meet. He works in the Royal Archives and was the main analyst who compiled all the information we have on the attack on your father’s villa and on your family’s palace in Teira.”

Leon almost stopped walking in surprise. He knew that Trajan was going to start looking into these matters once they had reached the capital, but he didn’t think it would happen so soon. Once his brain processed what Trajan had just said, Leon quickly caught back up to the Prince and fought to calm himself down as quickly as he could.

The Royal Archives was as titanic a building as a Kingdom that had lasted for five thousand years deserved. It was built in a cylindrical shape, with granite pillars and arches making up the façade, and capped with a shallow dome. Flanking the arched entryway were a pair of bronze bulls posed like they were preparing to charge, each large enough to tower over Leon and Trajan.

As the two approached the big two-story oak doors, Leon sensed them tripping some kind of enchantment, causing the doors to open by themselves. This seemed a bit wasteful to Leon, but he supposed it was the sort of extravagance expected of a state with the Bull Kingdom’s resources.

On the other side of the door was a long colonnaded hall that ran the entire distance of the archives’ perimeter, while most of the rooms were concentrated in the center. A few spiral staircases afforded access to the upper floors. On the opposite side of the hall from the door was a reception desk with some secretaries waiting to help anyone who showed up, but Trajan waved them back into their seats as they rose to greet him. He led Leon past them with barely a word.

Their destination was an office on the first floor, but around the back of the building rather than higher up. The lighting was fairly dim and the muted bustle that Leon could hear closer to the front door was gone. It was clear to him that this was a much less traveled part of the building, despite being on the ground floor.

Trajan knocked on the door of the office they were going to and after waiting a second or two, pushed it open.

On the other side was a large, roughly pie-shaped room with more than a dozen huge tables covered in various documents and artifacts. Ancient weapons and armor, stone tablets, tools fragments, and

broken pieces of pottery were the majority, but there were a few items of gold and silver among them. Lining the walls were dozens of large bookshelves containing thousands of books, some of which appeared as old as some of the artifacts on the tables.

At the far end of the room tucked away in a corner was a desk covered in more stacks of books, and when Leon and Trajan stepped into the office, a thin, pale, scholarly man leaned to the side and peered out from behind these barriers of paper and leather.

"Uncle!" he shouted as he sprang up from behind the desk and hurried forward to greet Trajan.

"Ah, there you are!" Trajan responded as he met the man—who Leon now assumed was a Prince—halfway and pulled him into a strong bear hug. Leon was well aware of how strong Trajan was, and it didn't seem like he was being particularly gentle with the man, but despite the man's slender body, he didn't seem at all affected by Trajan's strength. In fact, he hugged Trajan back seemingly just as hard. Upon further inspection, Leon realized that he was a fifth-tier mage, not just someone who devoted themselves to more erudite pursuits.

"Sir Leon," Trajan said as he released the man and turned back to Leon, "I would like you to meet Prince Antonius, my Royal Brother's third son."

Chapter 289: Prince Antonius

"Antonius, this is Sir Leon Ursus, one of my knights," Trajan introduced Leon to Prince Antonius. "With the duties I've taken on with the advisory council, I won't have enough time to conduct my investigation personally. Thus, I've placed Sir Leon, one of my most trusted knights in charge of this matter."

"It's good to meet you, Sir Leon," Antonius said with a bright smile on his pale face. His features weren't as chiseled and defined as Trajan's, with his round, flat face and small nose, but he was still possessed of a certain boyish charm. He wasn't too tall—Leon was several inches taller than him—but he wasn't short, either. He had a slender frame that well-complimented his scholarly disposition and his dark brown eyes glittered with intelligence. His dark brown hair was relatively long and unkempt for a man of the Bull Kingdom—the fashion for the past few hundred years had been short hair, but Antonius' practically covered his eyes and down the back of his neck, as if it had been months since it had last been cut.

"And you, Your Highness," Leon replied with an obligatory bow.

"Oh, please, that's not necessary when we're not in public," Antonius said with a wave. He may have given up his claim to the throne, but he was still a Prince, so those of lower station were obliged to bow to him. However, he preferred to have a looser and more laid-back attitude not too dissimilar to Trajan's, so he didn't mind if people didn't honor such ceremonies in private.

"You're now introduced. Leon, I'll leave the investigation up to you. You may act as you see fit, invoke my name if you must, but I want to know everything to do with the fall of House Raime," Trajan commanded. He trusted Antonius, but he wasn't going to tell Antonius Leon's real name; he regretted being so open with August and the three Paladins when Bronze so quickly guessed Leon's identity, and he wasn't going to make that mistake again.

"I think we can handle this, Uncle. You go get some rest, we can catch up later," Antonius said. He could see just how tired Trajan was from riding the last leg of the journey to the capital, the triumph, and then staying up all night tending to council business.

When Leon nodded in agreement, Trajan sighed and said, "Good." He then turned around and left the office, leaving Leon and Antonius alone together. A long, deeply awkward silence followed with neither Leon nor Antonius quite knowing how to speak to one another.

"Soooo, Sir Ursus, how long have you been in this Kingdom?" Antonius asked, trying to break the ice a little.

Leon, wanting to get to their business as quickly as possible, wasn't too appreciative, but since Antonius was a Prince, he had little choice but to humor him. "About two and a half years," he answered.

"Hmm," Antonius hummed as he nodded, hoping that Leon would give him a little bit more than that. Unfortunately for him, Leon did not, instead standing and letting his gaze wander around the office in clear discomfort. Antonius couldn't let Leon's awkwardness discourage him, though, especially since they were going to be working together a lot for the foreseeable future. "Well, I have to say that it's rare to see someone so young possess fifth-tier strength, especially from such a desolate and barbaric place. I mean, I hope I'm not being presumptuous as to your age..." the Prince said.

Leon easily could've taken offense to Antonius' casual dismissal of the Northern Vales, but that would've required him to care a lot more than he did about the Vales. He really only cared about the Forest of Black and White, and even then, he knew exactly how uncivilized of place it was and his nostalgia wasn't going to keep him from acknowledging it.

"You, yourself, seem to be possessed of the same amount of power, and you don't look significantly older than I am," Leon observed.

"You can't really compare what I've accomplished with Royal resources with a Valeman who did the same after starting with nothing," Antonius replied with a smile and an averted gaze. He didn't notice Leon's own slightly troubled look as response.

Leon had done his fair share of training to get to where he was, but he would also be foolish to deny the advantages he had in that regard. His progress in the magical arts had stalled when he was younger at the first-tier, his dormant blood preventing more than his lungs from adapting to magic. Once his Thunderbird blood was awakened, however, his power almost instantly jumped to the second-tier, with his muscles adapting on the spot. After that, he was aided in further ascensions by the power boost he received any time a thunderstorm rolled through his vicinity, not to mention the Cradle, the building that housed what seemed to be a massive training chamber left behind by the Thunderbird Clan.

It wasn't like he relied upon outside power to grow stronger, but he certainly had a few advantages that couldn't be ignored. Of course, he wasn't in a hurry to inform Antonius about these things, but they deserved his consideration.

As all these thoughts flashed through Leon's mind, Antonius continued, "My family, like most wealthy noble Houses, demands a certain amount of power from the members of its main branch in order to maintain our position as the Monarchs of this land. To that end, the heads of my House—the reigning Monarch, in other words—have rarely shied away from spending a great deal of money on their

children's development. My power isn't the result of hard work, but of the expenditure of millions of silver coins and an ocean of potions and salves."

Leon frowned. "That seems a horribly inefficient way to give the members of your family power..."

"And you wouldn't be wrong," Antonius said. "However, to awaken the Bull's blood within all of us would be even more expensive, and as such is reserved only for the designated heir and maybe one or two other siblings—I don't even think anyone in my generation save for my eldest brother have had their blood awakened, and this *years* after my elder brother renounced his claim to the throne. Without awakened blood, progress for the rest of the main branch of the Royal Family quickly halts at the first or second-tier. Flooding our bodies with magical potions is the only way to force us to advance through the magical tiers, and even then, that only works for the first four tiers."

Leon nodded in understanding. The first four tiers were little more than letting the human body grow used to and adapt to magic power. With the proper training, time, and patience, then anyone could easily advance through these tiers. For those lacking in one of these resources, but endowed with great wealth, then their tier could be forced to grow with potions that flood the body with magic power, but this was an undirected and chaotic method, causing small parts of the body to remain un-adapted to magic. These small flaws would slow down and obstruct the mage as they advanced through the tiers, eventually halting the mage's progress until they could be resolved. However, the longer the mage has gone without dealing with these flaws in their magical foundation, the more difficult and time-consuming they would be to fix.

Such a method of forcing a mage to gain power was one that only exceptionally rich families would take, and even then, usually only for their scions who lacked the will or want to grow in magical power. In that respect, Leon could understand why the scholarly Antonius was made to go through this process.

"Your Highness still made it to the fifth-tier, though," Leon said. "No magic potion can teach elemental magic."

"True enough, but five thousand years of Kingship can," Antonius replied. "I work in the Royal Archives, I'm surrounded by the recorded experiences of not just my Ancestors, but nearly every important person who has ever lived in this Kingdom. I and all of my siblings were forced to laboriously study ancient texts on magic, especially earth magic which our blood allows us to excel at, so learning how to utilize elemental magic isn't the hardest thing for us to do. Advancing from the fifth to the sixth-tier, however, becomes nearly impossible with all these things put together. Only awakening our blood would allow us to advance further."

Antonius looked a little depressed, but he explained these things in such a matter-of-fact tone that Leon was certain he had long ago made his peace with his situation; he was a young man, probably barely thirty years old and with at least a century and half of life ahead of him, but he was most likely never going to see the sixth-tier before his death, even if he diligently trained every day. The flaws in his body from overuse of various magic-enhancing potions were too deep, and he would require serious and expensive medical attention to even attempt to fix them, if fixing these flaws was even possible at this point.

Unfortunately—or, perhaps, fortunately—no such potions existed to assist Leon in his ascent to the sixth-tier. If such things did exist, he might've been tempted to use them, regardless of the

consequences. As it was, even in his conversation with Antonius, Leon was still diligently training by slowly trapping magic within his bones, though he obviously wasn't training as intensely as he would be if he weren't busy with other things.

"There... is one thing I was curious about, if Your Highness would indulge me..." Leon hesitantly said. "I would understand if this isn't something Your Highness would wish to explain, though..."

"We won't know unless you ask," Antonius said with a jovial smile. "And please, call me Antonius. 'Your Highness' is so damned formal; I hate it when people call me by that title."

"Antonius, then," Leon said. "Feel free to call me Leon, I have a similar distaste for formal titles."

"I think we'll get along famously," Antonius replied. "Your question?"

"Right. Back at the Bull's Horns during a battle with a seventh-tier vampire that was working as one of Talfar's Marshals, I saw Prince Trajan do... *something*, channel his magic in some way or other, and it caused his muscles to grow... He's already a giant of a man, but that was something else."

"I see," Antonius said knowingly. "Out of curiosity, any reason why you haven't asked my uncle himself about this?"

"Other things were on my mind, what with the war and all. Made such a small thing easy to forget..." Leon answered with a slight smile and a shrug.

"So, you know that as magical beasts grow in power, they gain intelligence, correct?" the Prince asked.

"I'm aware of this," Leon said.

"Around the eighth-tier or so—depending on each beast's individual circumstances it might be the seventh or ninth-tier, maybe even the tenth—they can transform into humans. We're not quite sure *how* this process works, or why it's humans of all things they turn into, but the fact remains that it happens."

Leon nodded, showing that he was following along.

"Well, for those of us with Inherited Bloodlines, something similar can happen in reverse, we can stimulate our blood and take on some of the characteristics of our Ancestors. In the case of my family, we can take on some *bullish* traits, most notably a temporary increase in muscle mass. It's extraordinarily taxing on the body, though, and even more so on our magical reserves. Someone like me could never utilize such a power, I would probably tear every vein and artery in my body should I attempt it. Only someone as physically robust as my uncle or my Royal Father could ever hope to achieve it."

Leon's eyes almost popped out of his skull. "I've never heard of something like *that* before!" he excitedly exclaimed. In all his years learning under Artorias, in all his studies of his family's magical arts, he'd never come across even a faint allusion to this kind of technique.

"It does make a kind of sense, though, doesn't it?" Antonius asked, reveling his chance to finally share his knowledge with someone who so obviously cared about it. He didn't get a lot of visitors to his corner of the Royal Archives, and his family wasn't the most academically minded, so he rarely had a chance to flex his knowledge. "If a beast can transform so completely into a human that they're capable of

interbreeding with humans and then shift back and forth between their beast and human forms at will, why should something similar not apply to their descendants?"

"I don't... it's not something I ever considered," Leon admitted. For perhaps the first time in his entire life, he almost wished he was able to reveal his identity and power to someone, but too many people knew of at least some of his secrets already, and he clamped down on his want to reveal his power until reason came back to him and that want died down.

"I've heard that some of my most powerful Ancestors, some of the most famous Bull Kings, could even grow *horns* in that state," Antonius said, enjoying the look of shock that crossed Leon's stoic face.

'If I could learn such a power, what might it do for me?' Leon wondered. *'What might the Thunderbird give me? Wings? Claws? Something I can't even imagine?'*

Whatever the case, his resolve to ascend to the sixth-tier so he could finally begin consulting the Thunderbird about these matters grew immensely, and it had already been almost overpowering.

"Well, I could talk about magic all day, its study is part of why I joined the Royal Archives to begin with, but that's not what you're here for, is it?" Antonius said now that the ice between him and Leon was thoroughly broken.

"No, it isn't," Leon said with a smile of anticipation. With some difficulty, he put away his excitement and refocused on the more important issue at hand: all the information Antonius had compiled relating to the fall of House Raime.

Chapter 290: The Bull's Investigation

"So, this is what I have," Antonius said as he led Leon over to a table covered in wooden boxes of various sizes and stacks of official documents. "All the physical evidence our investigators were able to collect and copies of sworn statements from every witness we were able to find, though to be fair, we weren't able to find many. Other than that, I've procured everything from birth records to extensive reports of the damage inflicted on Lord Artorias' villa and upon Argent Palace."

"Argent Palace?" Leon asked in slight confusion.

"The old palace in Teira that House Raime built," Antonius explained. "It's since been declared a black zone, anyone who trespasses there is considered a traitor to the Kingdom or a foreign invader and immediately put to death. Not even I or my siblings, or even my uncle are technically exempt from such punishment, though the likelihood of it being carried out if we were to trespass there isn't high."

"I see, I didn't know it had a name," Leon said. "I got a distant look at the place as I passed through Teira on my way south from the Northern Vales. I imagine it must have been a beautiful estate before it was attacked."

"Few care to use its name anymore," Antonius admitted, "but as a historian, I'm a fan of such things. I deeply regret that I never managed to see it when it was intact, as you're not wrong, it was supposedly a palace that put all others outside of the Four Empires to shame."

"It's a good name, then," Leon said. "Where should we get started?"

"I think we ought to proceed chronologically, starting with the very first thing we were able to find from Lord Artorias' villa, then move on from there."

Leon nodded, following the Prince's lead.

"Lord Artorias married a woman of unknown birth named Serana and moved to the capital to serve my Royal Father," Antonius began. The Prince thought that Leon likely knew these things, but he wanted to make sure they were on the same page. "Using the money he made as a knight, he bought an estate and built a small villa upon it. It was a secluded place, with no guards and mostly covered in forest."

"Sounds like he valued his privacy," Leon muttered, though it was more for Antonius' benefit so the Prince knew he was following along. Leon himself was already intimately aware of just how little Artorias enjoyed crowds and uninvited guests if he wasn't in a sociable mood.

"Indeed. This actually turned into something of a problem when, a little over eighteen years ago, a battle broke out at the villa. The local Legion guards were eventually alerted, but when they arrived at Lord Artorias' deliberately isolated villa, the battle was long over, and the villa was in ruins. Lord Artorias, his wife, and their newborn son were nowhere to be found, and believe me, my Royal Father looked for them. Not even a month later, Archduke Kyros himself arrived to participate in the investigation, but still, no trace of the family was ever found."

"Any clues as to who attacked the villa?" Leon asked with a long frown. He had to fight back even more than just a frown, though, as he felt a stinging in his eyes and his heart beat faster as it tried to flood his bloodstream with magic.

"None besides a few disparate details," Antonius replied. "Lord Artorias and his wife were both on record as being too weak to use elemental magic, and yet there were signs of wind, light, ice, earth, and most notably, fire magic all utilized. In fact, more than half of the evidence discovered for elemental magic was related to fire."

The Prince directed Leon's attention to a report detailing the damage done to the villa and its surroundings, and from melted stones to ash on the ground, most of it was related to fire.

"Using this evidence, we concluded that there were one or more users of fire who attempted to defend the villa, and the attackers were a mix of mages capable of using most of the other elements, though notably lacking fire," Antonius explained.

"How do you know that?" Leon asked.

"Most of the fire damage was consistent with someone using much larger attacks, the sort that might be used if one were outnumbered and surrounded. What little we could glean from the evidence of the rest of the magic was that they were mostly used as a defense against fire, or in attacks designed to hit one person. Of course, we can't know for certain without having been there, but our investigators were thorough and they're quite good at their jobs, so I believe their report."

Leon nodded. He knew that the fire users were his mother and her cousin Ryker from when Artorias had told him this story. The evidence collected by the Kingdom's investigators backed that up, but that wasn't what Leon wanted. Instead, he wanted something he didn't already know about, something he

might even be able to use to tie Justin Isynos to the attacks, or failing that, something that might prove his innocence.

Antonius and Leon continued to talk about the aftermath of the attack on Artorias' villa, but there was little discussed that Leon wasn't already aware of. Antonius even showed him an exceedingly detailed diagram of the villa with markings indicating where the damage was and what the investigators believed caused it—the best the Prince could do without the King authorizing Leon to access the villa, which had also been declared a black site like Argent Palace—but Leon wasn't too interested in such details. There was nothing in the reports that might reveal to him the identity of the attackers.

Just as they were about to move on to the attack on Argent Palace, though, something stuck out to Leon. It was a fragment of black cloth that he found as he dug through a box of personal affects with a white pattern embroidered upon it. The cloth was soft and seemed to be a fragment of an article of clothing rather than something like a handkerchief or banner or other kind of embroidered cloth. The partial design stitched into the torn fabric, though, was what drew Leon's eye.

"Can I see that diagram again?" he asked the Prince, and Antonius passed him the plans. In the center of the floor of the living room was a mural that was replicated with extreme accuracy on the diagram, consisting of mostly black tiles and a flowing white design. Leon held the cloth he'd discovered up against the mural and found that the fragment on the cloth perfectly matched about half of the mural in the diagram.

"Look at that!" Antonius muttered as he noticed the same thing now that Leon had drawn attention to it.

"Do you know what this mural is?" Leon asked the Prince.

"I... can't tell," Antonius admitted with a frown. "I would've just said it was a decorative design, but if it's also on a fragment of clothing, maybe it's some kind of sigil. Whatever it is, though, I don't recognize it. It's certainly not the sigil of House Raime, that's a golden eagle with its wings spread... I'll look into it, though..."

Leon frowned slightly, and then with a borrowed piece of paper, he quickly copied the design and enlarged it quite a bit. As he surveyed his work and made sure it was as accurate as he could make it, he quietly thanked both his time spent writing enchantments and spells and the elegant simplicity of the mural making it relatively easy to copy. If it were an actual image, then he'd be out of luck and forced to either remember it as best he could or try and get a more detailed copy of the mural made for his reference.

The mural did seem to him to be some kind of sigil, but if it depicted anything specific, it was too abstract for him to see it. If he squinted hard enough and looked at it from the right angle, it could've been some kind of roaring animal head, but it was impossible for him to be sure. If it was what it seemed, then it might've been anything from the reptilian head of a wyvern to the sleek head of a mane-less lion. Leon resolved to tap into the Heaven's Eye information network and seek anything he could find on it, but he wasn't going to rely on finding anything concrete resulting from that.

Leon went through the information collected again, searching for any similarly small but potentially important clues, but found nothing. He was a little disappointed but not too surprised that nothing of

much substance turned up from Artorias' villa; Leon already knew far more about what happened that night than even Prince Antonius did, though he wasn't going to let the Prince know that. It was time to move on.

"How about Argent Palace?" Leon asked.

"Hmm, yes," Antonius said with a grimace. "That was a whole other affair. Lord Artorias' villa was relatively isolated here in the capital, leaving no known witnesses to the events that left his villa in ruins. Argent Palace, on the other hand, being right in the center of the second most populous city in the Kingdom, had quite a few surviving witnesses, so we have a rough idea of what happened."

Antonius led Leon around to the other side of the table and began to shuffle through some more papers, eventually retrieving another diagram of the central administration building of the palace.

"So, here's what we know," Antonius began as he drew Leon's attention to the diagram. "About two years after Lord Artorias' disappearance, three individuals clad all in black and with their faces covered appeared in the atrium of the central palace. I'll save you the time asking and just tell you that as of right now, we still have no idea who these people were or why they attacked the palace. And attack the palace they did, as the first indication that they had arrived was when the front doors were torn from their hinges."

"How warded were the doors?" Leon asked.

"*Heavily*," Antonius replied with a grave look. "I'm not too familiar with the specifics of how well guarded Argent Palace was or the exact nature of the wards woven into the structure, but I do know that it was legendarily impregnable. However, whatever was there clearly wasn't enough; the interlopers went through those doors like a hot knife through butter. The atrium was filled with several dozen people at the time, as any ought to expect from such a powerful and influential noble as the Raime Archduke, and about half of them were killed in the blast that brought down the door. From what the survivors told our investigators, the magic used seemed to be water, though we can't know for certain."

"Water magic brought down the doors?" Leon asked, seeking clarification. Water magic had innumerable uses, but the destruction of fortifications was something generally left to earth or fire magic.

"Yes," Antonius confirmed. "After that, the three individuals were surrounded by a couple hundred of the finest knights that Archduke Kyros had in his employ in less than two minutes. They had barely moved an inch, as if they were waiting for just such a thing to happen. The leader of the Raime knights demanded their surrender, while the supposed leader of the three, in an oddly incongruous display of politeness, requested to see the Archduke.

"By this point, all of those who survived the initial attack had managed to flee, and we no longer have any accounts of what happened. Whatever transpired next, we have no idea. However, when the local Legion and additional Raime knights arrived at the scene, all of the knights that confronted the three were dead, as was Archduke Kyros Raime and his firstborn son, Alexander Raime. Argent Palace itself had been almost completely destroyed in the fighting."

Leon clenched his teeth and balled his fists in anger. He had no personal relationship to Kyros and Alexander, but they were still his family and Argent Palace was his family's possession. Just hearing these small bits about what happened infuriated him to no end.

"Is there anything else we know about these three attackers?" Leon quietly asked the Prince as he fought to contain himself. Fortunately, he didn't think Antonius had noticed his anger.

"There is," the Prince replied with a smile. "The battle that took place was known to nearly all of Teira, it was so intense. The skies of Teira were filled with bolts of silver lightning, and they were answered with pillars of ice and beams of light. The lightning was obviously from Archduke Kyros and Lord Alexander, while we believe the ice was from the one who brought down the doors and the light from his accomplices."

"And we know it was a 'he'?" Leon asked as he instantly thought of Justin Isynos. It was an almost insignificant detail, but one he still noted.

"If his voice was any indication, then yes we do," Antonius said.

"Anything else?"

Antonius thought for a few brief moments, but then shook his head. "Nothing immediately comes to mind, though I suppose it might be relevant to note that the three aforementioned kinds of magic were the only ones witnessed, meaning that by the time Archduke Kyros and the interlopers fought, all of His Grace's knights were likely dead, otherwise we would've received reports of their magic as well. The time between our survivors evacuated and the start of the battle was a matter of minutes, which should go to show the sheer power of the three who attacked the palace."

"And the Archduke was a seventh-tier mage, correct?" Leon asked. He knew that when Artorias left the palace after marrying Serana, Kyros was a seventh-tier mage, but he wanted to know if that had changed in the subsequent few years.

"According to our records, he was," Antonius said.

Leon nodded, having a general idea of what went down. It was clear to him that in the two years following the attack on Artorias' villa and Artorias' subsequent flight to the Northern Vales, those who attacked the villa were probably searching for him. However, they were obviously unable to find him, which probably led them to believe that Artorias was being sheltered by Archduke Kyros. Their attack on Argent Palace was likely an attempt to flush Artorias out or to force Kyros to reveal his location.

If Kyros had any idea of where Artorias had gone, he clearly didn't say, and when he understandably came to blows with those who were hunting his prodigal son and the grandson he'd never met, he was killed, along with Alexander, his only other child.

The more he thought about it, the more incensed Leon became. He wasn't unhappy about his upbringing—he grew up with a loving father and learned a great many skills that had kept him alive in the two and half years he'd been in the Bull Kingdom—but in the few minutes it took Antonius to narrate the events that took place sixteen years ago, the more it hit Leon just how much he had lost and how much he would never know.

He could've grown up not just with Artorias, but with Serana, Kyros, and Alexander. As far he was aware, he was the only member of his family that still drew breath. He didn't even know if his mother and her two cousins were still alive, and given the amount of force that was deployed against them, he was starting to think that they were long dead, as well. At the very least, he knew that something happened that had kept Serana from looking for him, as Artorias had made it clear enough to Leon that Serana loved both her husband and their son, and that she would've looked for them if she were able.

'Or maybe Mother is alive and well and we've simply never run into each other, and her side of the family is just waiting for me to find them. And maybe the Thunderbird will come back to life and whisk me away to their location and everyone will be happy and have cake,' Leon bitterly and sarcastically thought. His hand shook with barely contained anger and grief and he was struck with the sudden urge to return to Elise's estate and get back to training. He'd need every ounce of power he could get, after all.

"Are you all right, Leon?" Antonius asked the obviously not all right Leon.

"I-I'm fine," Leon said, his voice cracking and wavering in his current state. Antonius wasn't convinced, but he wasn't going to press the issue—he didn't know Leon well enough and neither did he have the social skills to do so. "Let's j-just... look into these documents," Leon said as he grabbed a random stack of papers and began to leaf through them. They were the incident reports from the investigating knights containing the sworn statements from the survivors of the attack. There was nothing within that he didn't just learn from Antonius.

"... Right..." Antonius muttered as he did likewise, but he was as distracted by Leon's current state as Leon was processing the story just told. And then, something occurred to him.

'Artorias' son was named Leon, wasn't he?'