

Storm King 291

Chapter 291: Other Business

Nothing. That was what Leon managed to find relating to Justin Isynos within the records of the attack on Argent Palace. There wasn't a single hint as to who killed Kyros Raime, not even a drop of blood for the blood priests to analyze, and the palace had been scoured looking for just such a clue.

This, of course, greatly disturbed Leon, as by all accounts Kyros and Alexander were formidable warriors, as were the knights who served them. For their murderers to kill them with what seemed like little effort...

Leon shivered at how momentous and out of his reach his revenge now seemed. Again, he began to burn with the urge to return to Elise's estate and begin his training.

Beside him, Antonius hadn't managed to find anything of value, either. However, unlike Leon, he wasn't looking all that hard. He was far too distracted with a possibility that had just occurred to him, that of the real identity of the young man standing right next to him.

'He couldn't be Leon Raime, could he? He looks a lot like what I remember Kyros looking like if my memory isn't failing me, but that in itself isn't enough... But with him sharing the name of Artorias Raime's son and his extreme interest in these matters... He has to be Leon Raime!'

If Leon could read Antonius' mind, he'd just about die; yet another person had managed to figure out his identity, though to be fair, he wasn't the greatest at hiding it.

'Uncle Trajan, what are you doing with this kid?' Antonius asked himself with a sideways glance at Leon, who was far too busy leafing through the information available to him to notice Antonius' behavior. *'You're going to get yourself killed if he is Leon Raime!'*

Antonius audibly gulped and barely managed to turn his attention back to the work at hand. He wanted nothing to do with the kind of people who could so easily destroy House Raime, the most powerful noble house in the entire Kingdom after House Taurus, and as such he wanted nothing more to do with Leon.

'They're probably looking for him, as well,' Antonius thought to himself as he began to sweat. He may be a Prince, but he was a scholar first and foremost and dealing with those who wished him harm wasn't something he was prepared for.

He was suddenly far more nervous and far less chatty than he was a few moments before, to say the least, and the quickest he could finish up his work with Leon, the better.

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After several long hours of silence as Leon and Antonius went through the reports, compiling and analyzing what information they had, they were finally done, much to Antonius' relief.

"Is there anything else that isn't here?" Leon asked Antonius.

"There isn't," the Prince responded.

"Then I think I have everything I need to report to Prince Trajan," Leon said as he started to put away what he had been reading.

"I'm always happy to help my uncle with anything he needs," Antonius said as he breathed a quiet sigh of relief that Leon was making to leave. The less time he spent in doomed company, he figured, the better.

"I'm sure Prince Trajan appreciates the sentiment," Leon said with as much politeness as he could muster under the circumstances.

He was glad to be done so that he could get back to the day's training. However, as he neared the door, his thoughts turned to when he ascended to the fifth-tier, and in turn, the Cradle. He still had the map of ruins he acquired from there, and he hadn't done anything with it other than make a few copies that he eventually decided not to send out to anyone.

Leon turned around and hesitantly asked Antonius, "... There is *something* else I could use some help with, and I wonder if you would be willing to render some *discreet* assistance..."

'*No! Just leave!*' Antonius screamed in his head, but he was a Prince, and he couldn't be so rude. He took a deep breath, then politely said, "That would depend on what it is you need help with, I obviously can only do so much..."

"I understand," Leon replied. "A little more than a year ago, I found myself in stone giant territory..." Leon began to selectively re-count the events that transpired around the Cradle while avoiding many of the details, such as the massive training chamber. As far as Antonius was concerned, Leon simply wandered around some ruins and found nothing but the map. Leon simply hoped that no one told him anything more about what happened there.

"This is fascinating..." Antonius muttered as he studied the map Leon procured. He was genuinely enthusiastic in the face of a new mystery as, despite his immense desire not to entangle himself with Leon, his dogged pursuit of knowledge of the past greatly outweighed it. The two great topics he became a scholar to study were magic and history, after all.

"And like I said, I would like to keep this between us, if possible..." Leon reminded the Prince. He wasn't too thrilled at the idea of the map leaking, but it was the ruin in the Forest of Black and White that he was most interested in, and so he gave the Prince a copy of the map without either the point in the Vales or Xaphan's prison marked. He wanted the former kept secret, and while the latter was largely devoid of anything he wanted, he still didn't want anyone poking around in there.

The rest of the points, though, he wanted to know about, but he wasn't in any great hurry to get to them. He guessed that, given their proximity to the center of the plane, most had already been discovered and plundered, and he wanted to know which ones. He also intended to give this edited map to Heaven's Eye, and while he expected he'd find more information with them than in the Bull Kingdom's Royal Archives, he wanted to be thorough.

"I'll tell you what, why don't I look into this, and you come back in a few days?" Antonius suggested. As soon as he realized what he said, the Prince almost tried to back out, but he caught himself. The words were said, he couldn't immediately back out of them without seeming fickle and unreliable and being too obvious that he knew who Leon was.

“Sounds good,” Leon said. He and Antonius quickly worked out a specific time, and Leon took his leave, finally giving Antonius some relief from the anxiety his presence was giving the Prince.

After Leon took his leave, Antonius turned away from the map and lost himself in thought. He was a scholar, and new mysteries about the past always fascinated him, oftentimes beyond the scope of reason. This was probably one of those times, in his opinion.

‘I shouldn’t have agreed so readily...’ Antonius thought to himself, but the deed was done and there was work to do. He turned back to the map and quickly memorized it. *‘I’ll finish this up for Sir Ursus and then try and keep my distance. Hopefully, I’m wrong about who he is...’*

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After leaving the Royal Archives, Leon made his way back across the bridge to the rest of the city. Trajan didn’t expect him to report until the next morning, and Leon felt like the Prince needed some rest, so he held off on immediately going to find him and sharing what he’d learned. For now, he wanted to process the information while he handled some other business.

He quickly made his way to the Heaven’s Eye Tower several miles away from the palace. He didn’t hurry, choosing to use the time he spent walking to trap more magic within his bones and to mull over the information he’d just received. Trapping his silver lightning in his bones was a decent enough distraction from the frustration he felt after learning so much of his family’s downfall, and the Heaven’s Eye Tower appeared in front of him before he knew it.

Immediately upon entering, he was approached by an incredibly respectful female attendant. Unlike many of the other attendants—both male and female—in the main hall he could see, she wasn’t flirty in any way. In fact, her behavior was as close as he’d ever seen a Heaven’s Eye attendant come to being conventionally professional.

She bowed slightly to him and asked, “Sir Leon, what can we do for you today?”

“I’m looking for a smith, enchanter, or other kind of artificer who is skilled in repairing enchanted items,” Leon said. He was hungry and the smells coming from the restaurant area were tantalizing, but he wanted this done so he could return to Elise’s estate as soon as possible; he needed to be out of the public eye quickly so he could get to training and properly vent.

“This way, please,” the attendant said as she led him to one of the magic lifts. Once the doors were closed, she asked, “May I ask what kind of item you’re looking to repair? It will help me find someone who can fix it.”

“A ring made of gold and set with an emerald, contains an invisibility enchantment,” Leon replied. He didn’t dance around the issue in an attempt to keep his ring a secret, he knew that as an employee of Heaven’s Eye she was far more trustworthy and discrete than just about anyone else Leon might encounter, and besides, he just wanted his ring fixed with as little hassle as possible.

“Just to be clear, Sir, you will not be charged for this visit,” the attendant said.

“Really?” Leon asked incredulously as he glanced at the young woman with an eyebrow raised in surprise.

“Yes, Sir. Lady Emilie ordered that any business you have with us be charged to her, within reason. If you needed a *new* enchanted item of similar quality, then you might need to dig into your account, but simply repairing something you already have won’t be a problem.”

“Huh...” Leon grunted as he thought about that. The last time he and Emilie had spoken, she had nearly ripped his head off his shoulders, so her paying for his business at the Tower was one of the last things he expected. Regardless, he decided to take her up on it, while hoping he remembered to thank her the next time they met.

That being said, he hardly needed it. As a knight in service to a Prince, he actually had about seven million silvers in his Heaven’s Eye account, a million more than he did when he opened it back in Teira. There was a part of him that wanted to spend some of that, but he honestly didn’t know what he would spend it on. He could use more enchanting supplies, but he only needed to buy those when he needed them. He had few other expenses, and whenever he thought about something that he might’ve wanted to have, he couldn’t quite bring himself to buy it.

He had never really put much thought into why he was so unwilling to spend his money, he just rested easier knowing that his growing hoard was there should he ever need it.

The attendant took him to a jeweler that took one look at his ring and agreed to repair it. Unfortunately, it would take about a day, but Leon was pleased to hear that his ring would be delivered the next day to Elise’s estate.

‘Perks of dating the boss’ daughter, I guess,’ Leon thought to himself with a hint of bitterness as the attendant escorted him out of the Tower. It was nice to get something for free, after all, but Elise and Emilie had already given him so much, and he was starting to feel more than a little awkward about it.

He wasted no more time with extra business and worked his way around the Tower and back to Emilie and Elise’s palace. He was a little surprised to find that Elise wasn’t there, but he supposed she just had some work to do at the Tower. Alix hadn’t come back yet, either, so Leon just changed his clothes and made his way into Elise’s training room.

To a degree, he was actually glad that he was alone. It had been a long time since he’d last been truly alone with his thoughts without the threat of death close by, and he immensely enjoyed it, even if the things he was thinking about equally infuriated him.

At the very least, though, Elise’s training chamber had been magically reinforced enough that Leon was able to truly let loose with his magic without fear of causing damage, something which he took full advantage of to bring himself some measure of catharsis.

But that catharsis wasn’t the main reason he needed to train. His enemies were strong enough to utterly destroy his family, and they were still out there. He needed strength and power, and he needed to speak with the Thunderbird.

Chapter 292: Octavius and the Paladins

“We should’ve hurried back to the capital sooner,” the Earthshaker Paladin grumbled.

“The war was supposed to last longer,” the Sapphire Paladin shot back. “Who could’ve guessed that those horse lovers were going to lose so quickly? I mean, they were always going to die upon the Horns,

especially once we arrived with the nobles and the Legions of the Central Territories, but to lose so *quickly*?"

"What's done is done," Octavius growled. He was obviously as upset at the swift resolution of the war as the other two, but he didn't want to dwell upon it when there were other matters to attend to. "We're here now, no going back to the Western Territories without giving the impression that I'm scared of that common bastard." Octavius would rather eat his own tongue than let people think he feared August.

The three were in the Royal Palace complex, walking out to the King's private villa where he had lain comatose for almost seven years. It had been more than five years since Octavius had seen his father, and now that he was back in the capital, the Second Prince thought it best to make time to visit, if only to show his filial piety. He didn't rush to do so, of course, there were still a great many people in the capital who were yet unaware of the King's infirmity and Octavius didn't want to tip them off until he was prepared to do so. So, he acted like the King was perfectly fine and that he had all the time in the world to go and visit his father.

"With your uncle here, things are going to get complicated," the Sapphire Paladin whispered to Octavius as she took the Prince's arm and looked his way with her big, glittering blue eyes. "We should do something about him."

"I would happily volunteer for anything that disposes of Trajan," Earthshaker said with a vicious smile. He had old grievances with Trajan, and he wasn't ever going to forget them.

"You two advocate me ordering the death of my uncle? A war hero so respected in this city that the advisory council ignores me and my bastard half-brother?" Octavius asked, his handsome features contorting into a smile. "No, we're not there yet. I'll admit that having Trajan here does ruin many of my plans, but don't forget that I have the support of more than half the high nobles in the Kingdom! His interference is only a setback, and I won't jeopardize my position by openly kinslaying, especially when that kin is as respected as my uncle is."

"You won't *openly* kinslay?" Earthshaker asked with an eyebrow cocked in interest.

"Drop this topic right now," Octavius growled. "We have more important things to go over, like the preparations for the triumphal games that will take place next week."

The ending to every triumph included grand public games, such as chariot races and gladiator fights, all paid for by the Crown. Since the recent triumph was so last-minute, though, the earliest Octavius was able to schedule his games were more than a week after the triumph had ended.

Earthshaker shrugged; he couldn't care less about things like organizing games if he tried. Sapphire, on the other hand, smiled at her Prince and said, "We've attracted some of the best gladiators in the entire Kingdom to come and fight for your amusement, and the chariot clubs have agreed to hold the preliminary races for their usual tournament a month early this year, to coincide with your games."

"Good," Octavius whispered. "Commoners are simple creatures; all they need to stay in line are bread and circuses. And I'll give them that much, at least."

"The commoners should be happy with what they have!" Earthshaker spitefully spat. "It's their duty to serve *us*, their betters, not the other way around!"

“Mm,” Octavius hummed, not truly hearing what his Paladin had to say. His mind had begun to drift to other things as his father’s villa came into view through the trees.

Upon his entering the villa, Octavius went straight for the bedroom in the back. The door was guarded by the Bronze Paladin, who had returned to his self-assigned post almost as soon as he returned to the city.

“Your Highness,” Bronze softly said as he slightly bowed, the soft clinking of his bronze armor almost deafening in the deathly silent villa.

“I’m here to see my Royal Father,” Octavius said imperiously, with all the pride of a Prince. He thought about openly asking about the Bronze Paladin’s allegiances, but he decided against it. That he was here, isolated from all the goings-on in the capital, was enough for Octavius for time being.

Bronze thought about it for a moment, but he had no reason to bar their entry, so he opened the door and made way.

Octavius strode into the bedroom but halted a few feet past the door once he caught sight of the King’s withered form. Julius hadn’t improved any since August had come to see him a little over a month before, though at the very least, his condition hadn’t drastically worsened. The King was much thinner, but still breathing.

At the King’s bedside was a man who appeared about middle-aged, with golden blonde hair, sky-blue eyes, a slight frame, and soft, round, almost feminine facial features. However, despite his rather unassuming appearance and decidedly pedestrian clothing, his body was strong and radiated more power than even the Paladins. This man was the doctor that August had hired, hailing all the way from the Sacred Golden Empire, a realm famous for its mastery of healing and nature magic.

In the corner sat the Penitent Paladin, watching the doctor and the newcomers like a hawk. He didn’t rise to greet the Prince or his fellow Paladins, but they were far too distracted by the King’s current state to care. By the door stood Bronze, watching the three newcomers just as intently as Penitent was, and focusing especially on his fellow Paladins. So intense was his gaze, in fact, that both Earthshaker and Sapphire had to fight the urge to shiver in fear.

Octavius walked over to the side of the King’s bed and asked the doctor, “My Lord, how is my Royal Father’s health?”

The doctor barely looked at the Prince and he curtly answered, “He’s doing fine. Better than expected, even.”

“I trust that you’re still working on the potion to heal His Majesty?” Octavius inquired a little sharper than he had intended.

The doctor dismissively glanced at the Prince and said, “I have most of the required ingredients. Once I have what I need, I’ll make the potion and use it on my patient. It’s not guaranteed to work, but rarely have I failed.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Octavius asked, partly out of an actual desire to heal his father, but also partly to make up for the tone of his previous question.

"No," the doctor replied. "I'm done here, anyway."

Octavius only now realized that the doctor had been packing up his instruments and preparing to leave. The Prince remained silent and didn't say another word until the doctor departed. The doctor was the King's only hope to wake up, and he was stronger than the seventh-tier Paladins besides, so Octavius silently endured his informality and light disrespect.

Silence fell upon the bedroom in the doctor's wake. Octavius stared at his infirm father and none of the Paladins wanted to disturb him. After about five minutes, though, Octavius quietly ordered, "Leave me alone with my Royal Father."

Sapphire and Earthshaker immediately moved according to their orders, but neither Penitent nor Bronze did likewise.

"Do you two think yourselves above a Royal command?" Earthshaker demanded when it became clear that neither of the elder Paladins were going to comply with Octavius' command.

"The King will not be left alone. With *anyone*," Penitent quietly but firmly responded.

Earthshaker glared at the bald, plain-robed Paladin and fought to suppress the urge to drag him out of the bedroom by force.

"I am a Prince, here to see my Royal Father!" Octavius said indignantly.

"Doesn't matter, Your Highness," Penitent replied. "The King will not be left with *anyone*, Princes included."

"You disrespectful—" Sapphire began as she took a few threatening steps toward Penitent, but she was immediately stopped when Bronze lowered his ax in front of her; she hadn't even noticed him drawing the weapon.

Bronze said nothing, but his position was clear; he stood with Penitent, they were not going to leave Octavius—or anyone else—alone with the King. Perhaps it was paranoia or perhaps it was sheer blind loyalty, but that was the way of things. The two elder Paladins didn't do anything else overtly hostile, but their auras spiked and put enormous pressure on their younger colleagues.

These two men were old and venerable, their individual experience in the various arts of war dwarfing that of Sapphire and Earthshaker put together. To put it simply, for all their posturing, neither Sapphire nor Earthshaker—or even Octavius, for that matter—had the ability to make them leave.

"Stay then," Octavius snarled.

'I'll remember this insolence when I'm King!' the Prince thought to himself. He then turned back to his father and deliberately softened his angry gaze. He knelt at the King's bedside and held his father's hand, looking every bit the humble son that he wanted to appear to be.

However, his thoughts were significantly more vicious than he let on.

'You ignored me my whole life, you worthless excuse for a father!' Octavius thought with bitter hatred, but with not a hint of it appearing on his face. *'Herculanus ran off to the blood priests, but I have always been here for you, not that you'd ever see it! Words do not exist to describe the hatred I feel for you after*

naming me co-regent with that bastard that your whore squeezed out! If you wanted to seclude yourself and train so much, you should've just abdicated to me! You will never wake up, which makes this Kingdom mine, and I will have what is mine, one way or another. But I hope you don't die anytime soon. If you do wake up one day, you can see for yourself what I've accomplished! To see the heights that I will climb to without you holding me back!

Octavius wished with all his heart that his anger and hatred could reach his father, but he let none of it show on his face or in his body language. When he was done shouting his frustrations in his head, he rose from his position at his father's side and made for the door without a word. Sapphire and Earthshaker followed him, both equally quiet, though Earthshaker did spare one last venomous glare for Penitent.

As the door closed behind them, Earthshaker growled, "I *despise* those two!"

"Drop it," Octavius said. "Now's not the time for it. We have other business to attend to."

"What kind of business?" Sapphire asked.

"The games and dealing with the number of officials in this city who are more loyal to August than to me," Octavius answered. "We need to replace them with nobles that support me, not upstart peasants who have stumbled into a modicum of magical power. There's also a private matter I need to take care of."

"If you tell us what that matter is, then maybe we could help," Sapphire said as she took Octavius' arm and shot him a smoldering look.

"... It's honestly nothing," Octavius said. "I just need to pay back some old friends, fulfill a few promises, that sort of thing. Nothing a Paladin need concern herself over."

"If you say so..." Sapphire replied as her mouth turned downward into a light frown. She didn't like Octavius keeping secrets, but she didn't push him on this. If Octavius needed her, though, she wouldn't hesitate.

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"Well... he was certainly... something," Penitent muttered as he took his seat in the corner once the door was closed and those outside could no longer hear.

"He was a damned prick, but not too unexpected for a Prince," Bronze added.

"Still disappointing. Even more so than August," Penitent said.

Bronze lost himself in thought for a moment, but eventually responded, "It's not for us to judge. We're just two old men playing at sentry, let those in the Kingdom choose who to follow. His Majesty will clean things up when he wakes, and should he have need of us then, then we can get involved."

"Mm," Penitent hummed in agreement as Bronze left to resume guarding the door.

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Lord Justin Isynos wasn't one to shirk his duties, but as he made preparations for his departure from Calabria, he quickly realized that he wasn't actually needed all that much. It was his servants and subordinates who were going to do most of the work, so about a week after August and Trajan left, he got in his yacht and made his way north, toward the capital. Most of his belongings would follow in a few days.

About a day after departure, his sleek ship slid into dock in the capital. Despite being quite possibly the most magically advanced ship in the entire Kingdom, it drew no attention, it was just one of many pleasure yachts owned by one of the nobles in the capital as far as anyone could tell. And that lack of attention was just as Justin wanted it.

However, there was one person watching the ship as its crew tied it down to the dock's cleats. Justin could see her from the deck of the yacht, with her silver hair glittering in the midday sun and her dark blue clothing fluttering in the gentle wind. Valeria, his daughter and only child, had come to welcome him to the capital.

Chapter 293: Justin's Arrival

An enormous smile bloomed on Justin's face, something which hadn't happened much since seeing his daughter off when she decided to join the Knight Academy. Now, he had to fight to maintain his dignity and not sprint off his yacht when he saw Valeria waiting for him on the docks. Instead, Justin walked as swiftly as he could without looking ridiculous.

"Ah, my Lord, there's something I need—" one of Justin's servants said as he passed, but he wasn't going to wait around for anything.

"Later," he growled, not even sparing the servant a single glance. The servant wisely shut his mouth and decided to just deal with his problem himself.

As he approached Valeria, a smile to match her father's appeared on the young woman's normally stoic face, shattering her icy demeanor and making her appear as warm as the sun.

Without a word, Justin pulled his daughter into a tight hug, and his concerns about his noble dignity vanished.

"I missed you, kiddo," he whispered into her ear.

"I missed you too, Father," Valeria replied, returning Justin's hug in full.

When they finally parted, Justin looked her over, inspecting her for any signs of unhappiness or mistreatment. However, Valeria appeared perfectly happy and healthy, so much so that she almost glowed under the sun. Her silver hair gleamed in the sun's light and her bright blue eyes glittered like the clearest of lakes. Her heart-shaped face, normally so expressionless that it almost appeared to be carved from ice, was warmed and brightened with a radiant smile at her father's arrival.

"Ahh, look at you, the spitting image of your mother," Justin said with a fatherly sigh, tainting Valeria's smile of joy with embarrassment. His own silver hair wasn't quite as shiny, and the beauty of his blue eyes was ruined somewhat by his lack of sleep leaving them as bloodshot as his body would allow.

"You've my colors, but you look so much like her... How are you doing, my dear? Has the capital been treating you well?"

"I'm doing just fine, Father," Valeria replied. "I have friends here, and I enjoy my work. Plus, I get all the time I need to train."

"And I see you haven't been slacking," Justin said appreciatively as he inspected his daughter's aura. "I know how seriously you tend to take your training, but I have to admit that I'm surprised to see that you're a fourth-tier mage already! Especially in such a magically barren land!"

"Yes..." Valeria said hesitantly, giving her father a slight look of panic and alarm, instantly cueing him into the mistake he'd just made. He didn't want to say such disparaging things about the Bull Kingdom out loud, but his joy in seeing his daughter again after more than two years had clouded his reason.

"Anyway," he continued, "let's find somewhere we can catch up!"

Valeria nodded, leading her father back to her waiting blue and silver carriage.

About a quarter of an hour later, they arrived at Asiya's estate, where both Asiya herself and Valeria had been staying during their time in the capital when they weren't fulfilling their duties guarding the Royal Harem with their assigned knights. Justin whistled appreciatively at the rippled black glass architecture that Asiya's family had brought with them from the Samar Kingdom.

"Most of the architecture in this Kingdom is fairly bland and uninspired," Justin said, "but this place sure is something to behold..." He ignored most of the statues, murals, and tapestries that filled the luxurious estate in favor of admiring the ripples in the thick glass walls. At certain angles, the reflected light would split and form beautiful rainbow streaks across the pitch-black glass, and the Samarid architecture took full advantage of this, with the walls being subtly slanted to allow these streams of rainbow light to fill the palace. Some sections were even so well built that they emphasized certain colors, with the two most common that Justin had seen as they walked through the palace being deep green and vibrant magenta. As a result of all of this, the palace had no need for magic lanterns, with the walls themselves providing all the necessary lighting.

"I agree," Valeria said. "Asiya has been incredibly generous letting me stay with her, and I've enjoyed my time immensely."

"Speaking of, where are Lady Asiya and her family?" Justin asked. "I would like to thank them for the hospitality they've shown you."

"Lord Samarid is currently working as a minor Exarch in the Southern Territories, and Lady Samarid is with him, so it's just been me and Asiya here for the past couple of years."

"Just the two of you here alone?" Justin asked incredulously. "I'm surprised the place hasn't burned down yet..."

"Hey! We're not that bad!" Valeria said in a mock-hurt tone.

"So no wild parties? No inviting hordes of boys and girls back here to have wild orgies that keep the entire city awake?" Justin playfully asked.

"Of course not!" Valeria cried. "The guard unit for the Royal Harem is only female, hardly the best place to look for boys, and besides, I've been too busy!"

“Too busy in our duties, but not too busy before that, right?” Justin asked as the two finally reached the guest quarters. Justin wasn’t going to stay there, he had a room in a high-class inn closer to the Royal Palace, but this was the group of rooms that Valeria had been staying in for the past couple of years, including a bedroom, living room, large bathroom, and even a private dining room and study.

“Daaad!” Valeria complained, her exasperation finally getting her to drop much of her usual formality.

“I’m just saying, I’d be surprised if you didn’t meet *someone* you weren’t at least tentatively interested in since your move here,” Justin said as he took a seat in a nearby couch.

Valeria sat down in an armchair across the table from him and went silent for a long few moments. Leon’s face flashed through her mind as she thought about her father’s inquiry, and she knew that she’d be lying through her teeth if she tried to claim that she hadn’t met anyone she was interested in and that her father would pick up on that. And yet, she hadn’t seen Leon in more than a year; even during the short time he spent in the capital after going north that she’d heard about from Elise, they hadn’t seen each other.

And yet, despite this long period of time, her crush hadn’t gone away. She certainly thought about Leon less than she did back in the Knight Academy since he wasn’t an active part of her life anymore, but when she did think about him, her heart still beat with the desire to spar and train with him, plus a few more feelings that she hadn’t quite gotten around to sorting out yet.

But she had no idea how to explain this to her father, who sat expectantly waiting with a smile on his face that grew wider with every passing second that she hesitated to respond.

Eventually, she just bashfully averted her eyes and whispered, “Not... not yet...”

“Are you *sure*?” Justin asked.

Valeria could only smile in response.

Justin shrugged and decided to drop his inquiry right there. If Valeria actually met someone she liked, then he was certain she’d tell him when she was ready. “Oh well, probably for the best,” he said. “I doubt anyone you could meet here and become romantically involved with could ever follow us home once our job is complete.”

“Speaking of... made any progress yet?” Valeria hesitantly asked. She quite liked her life in the Bull Kingdom, and she had never known what it was like where she was born, so she had no way to personally know if it was better than here. But Justin insisted that it was, and she believed her father.

“Not much,” Justin admitted. He didn’t want Valeria to become as entangled in such dirty business as he was, so he didn’t want to give her too many details, but he also wanted to keep her informed, since their mission affected her as well. “Honestly, it’s been long enough that I think the trail has gone cold. No sign of our team that went missing and no one in the Northern Vales has given us any solid information to work with. If our targets were indeed in those Vales, they’re probably long gone by now.”

“That’s... unfortunate...” Valeria said, unsure if she meant it or not. They had arrived in Aeterna when she was barely an infant to kill a boy her age and his father, a job that had never sat well with either her or Justin. But Lord Kamran had given them this job personally, and they had no ground to stand on to defy him.

"I know, sweetheart," Justin said, understanding Valeria's concerns. "I know, it's an ugly business, but it has to be done if we're ever to go home and see your mother again. It has to be done." Justin's face twisted in grief, but his conviction to see the job finished remained unshaken.

"So, I'm guessing the real reason why you came to the capital was for this?" Valeria asked. The letter she had received from her father several days prior only said that he had been asked by August to be one of his followers and that he'd accepted. No mention had been made of their real mission, just in case the letter was somehow intercepted.

"Yes," Justin affirmed as he simultaneously released his magic senses to ensure that they were alone. Once he was certain of their privacy, he continued, "It took us a dozen years since we arrived in this Kingdom to find these scant few clues, even after I killed Kyros Raime. If we're going to get this job done in any reasonable amount of time after this most recent failure, I'm going to need to enlist more of the locals and to do that, I'm going to need more influence than a single Exarchate will buy me."

"I understand," Valeria said, her flat tone masking a bitter undercurrent. "I look forward to the day you finish so that I can finally meet Mother."

Justin smiled sadly at his daughter and said, "Your mother loves you, and I know that she'd be proud in ways that no language that has ever existed could ever express. You two are separated by circumstances, not by choice, otherwise there would be no way she ever would've let me raise you alone."

Valeria nodded, having heard these things from Justin many times before. She had never known her mother, so there wasn't enough emotional attachment there for her to feel too depressed, but the sense of having lost something before she even had a chance to learn what it was hit her hard.

"W-When we get her back..." Valeria began to ask, her voice quivering with suppressed sadness and bitterness, "what are you going to do?"

Justin stared at his daughter, his smile frozen on his face. He had long thought about what he would do once he got his wife back, but he had yet to find a suitable course of action. The most practical thing would be to thank Lord Kamran and then return home with his family intact; Kamran was a man who was far above Justin, and the latter had little ability to harm him in any way. However, Justin was also a proud man, and he couldn't let the man holding his wife as a hostage get away with it, even if she was being well cared for.

"I... I don't know yet," Justin answered honestly. "We will have to get the lay of the land when we return to the Nexus. Right now, though, it looks to me like there're few options we are capable of taking."

"I understand," Valeria replied as she composed herself. "Sorry, Father, I shouldn't have asked such a childish question. I will do what you need me to do when the time comes."

Justin bitterly chuckled and nodded. "I appreciate the sentiment, little one, but I pray to the Great Lord that you never have to have Lord Kamran as your enemy. If there is action that should be taken, then I will be the one to take it. No one else. I don't want to endanger my family by doing something stupid."

Valeria frowned slightly, but she nodded in acknowledgment. She sighed as her eyes turned toward a nearby window. She loved her life in the Bull Kingdom. She had friends, she had a job that she enjoyed, she even had a boy that she felt warm and fuzzy about, but she knew that her time here was limited. She could spend another year here, or she might get fifty or a hundred years, but she knew that, eventually, she'd have to leave.

As she was sitting there, quietly thinking about her uncertain future and when that particular sword would fall, she heard the bubbly voice of Asiya shouting out her greetings as she returned home.

Valeria quickly wiped the frown off her face and said to Justin, "Time to meet the host, then!"

Justin agreed, and their conversation about such sensitive topics was over. At the very least, they now had some time to spend as a happy father-daughter pair, and they were going to make the most of it while they could.

Chapter 294: Demonic Consultation

Leon's entire body was covered in sweat from training. He'd been back from the Royal Archives for several hours, and he'd spent just about that entire time in hard training. From the events surrounding the vampire Bran to everything he'd learned from Antonius, Leon had more than enough motivation to completely immerse himself in training and reach with all he had for the sixth-tier.

To that end, he'd been filling his body with lightning magic and trapping all of it within his bones. His magic body still lacked everything below his hips, but if he were to try and form all of what was missing at once, then he'd probably injure himself. Consequently, Leon estimated what he felt was a safe amount, then pushed himself slightly beyond that, which amounted to his right leg from hip to knee.

Lightning surged through his body, concentrating in such large amounts around his right leg that his thigh sparked and crackled with lightning magic. But with so much magic flooding through him, there was no way that Leon could simply sit and meditate; instead, he grabbed a training spear from the wall and began to practice. He had decided that he was specializing too much in his sword and bow; when he was training with Artorias back in the Forest of Black and White, his father had him train in several different common weapons so that he was at least familiar enough with them if circumstances ever forced him to use them. This was a practice Leon had let lapse ever since coming south, and he decided to pick it up again, even if his family's longsword and his bow were still going to be his primary weapons.

And so, for hours, Leon swung and thrust the training spear while he channeled his magic and let it do its thing. Fortunately, Elise's training chamber had been extremely well built, and numerous enchantments fortified the place against elemental magic. It wasn't perfect and Elise's servants would undoubtedly need to do some cleaning and maintenance when he was done, but Leon was at least confident that he could use his magic without fear of irreparably destroying the place. So, he used his fire and lightning magic with relative abandon; his training wouldn't be complete without at least some practicing of elemental magic.

When he finally took a break, he realized just how tired and exhausted he was. He almost felt like he had just fought a battle, his exhaustion was so complete. He quickly returned the spear to its rack after wiping it down and sat down at the edge of the training area.

The entire room was essentially a dojo with a wooden platform raised about a step above the stone floor, weapon racks filled with training weapons of all kinds lining the walls, and wash basins near the door to wipe away sweat.

The stone floors weren't particularly comfortable, but Leon didn't care and sat down anyway to rest and think. He still channeled magic into his leg to continue building his magic body, but the intensity was brought way down while he rested. As he sat there, his thoughts drifted, and something occurred to him that he had been quietly curious about for a few weeks, now.

[Xaphan,] Leon called out in his mind.

[What?] the demon answered, the irritation in his voice almost tangible.

[Just thought that you've been extremely quiet, recently,] Leon said.

[What about that has been any different from the past year?] Xaphan asked.

[Just figured now that you've got three tiers on me, you'd start talking again.]

[Oh? Did the little boy miss me?] Xaphan asked with a condescending tone as if he was asking the question to a young child.

[Not really, but I would've thought that you'd be more talkative anyway,] Leon answered.

[Well, I *suppose* I could grace you with the pleasure of my conversation,] Xaphan said. [Is there anything in particular you wanted to know, or did you just disturb my meditations to wonder why I'm not disturbing you instead?]

[I had a couple questions, if you would indulge me,] Leon said.

[I guess I *am* in an indulgent mood, so go ahead.]

Leon quickly relayed to the demon all that he had learned from Antonius about how the descendants of the Sacred Bull could stimulate their blood and give themselves a few minor bullish traits.

[They... can *do* that?] Xaphan asked in shock. [Are you sure you didn't just hear things incorrectly? I mean, I know you humans aren't the most *attentive*, but even still, you couldn't have heard something *that* wrong, could you?]

[I heard everything correctly, demon,] Leon said through clenched teeth. [I take it you've never heard of something like this before?]

[I've definitely *heard* of people attempting it, but never of anyone actually succeeding!] Xaphan said.

[No one really knows why a beast that's possessed of enough power is able to transform into a human, and by all the Gods and Devils I have no idea why they would even *want* to in the first place, but as far as I'm aware, it's impossible for their descendants to do the reverse. They're human, through and through, and no Inherited Bloodline will change that. I suspect that there may be some other kind of shenanigans going on with the Royal Family in this Kingdom if they possess a technique like the one you described.]

[Really...] Leon muttered, slightly crestfallen. [But others have tried to do that reverse transformation, right? But none succeeded?]

[None that I know of, at any rate,] Xaphan said as his tone turned more thoughtful. [All right, I suppose I can admit that I'm not exactly a specialist in this regard-]

[Wow, to admit such a thing must crush your heart, demon,] Leon quipped.

[- but I will say,] Xaphan continued, ignoring Leon's interruption, [that it might not be *impossible*. That being said, I can't imagine that the Lords of a backwater Kingdom in the middle of a backwater plane found a way to do what those powerful clans in the Nexus and elsewhere time and time again failed to accomplish. Though... I suppose that if you get enough monkey's together, they could do just about anything, so...]

[So such a transformation could be done, then?] Leon asked.

[*Maybe*, and I certainly have no idea how it might be accomplished. Maybe ask your Ancestor when you get your magic body.]

[Mm, passing the responsibility on to the Thunderbird, just what I'd expect from you, demon,] Leon said with a provocative tone.

[Asking the Ascended Beast about Ascended Beast matters is not 'passing responsibility', it's telling you to consult someone with more damned knowledge about the subject!] Xaphan retorted.

[Mmhmm,] Leon hummed. It was a perfectly acceptable explanation in his mind, but it wasn't going to stop him from giving Xaphan grief over it, given the demon's pride. Just as he thought he could hear Xaphan's fire explode in anger, though, he said, [Anyway, there's something else I wanted to check with you.]

[What... *isit*?] Xaphan asked furiously and clearly through clenched teeth.

[Well, I was wondering how easily I'd be able to use your power if the need arose. I know that you managed to reach the eighth-tier thanks to those gems, but I don't think I'd be able to handle that kind of power.]

[I don't think you could, either,] Xaphan replied. [When you were a third-tier mage and I had fifth-tier power, you could only call upon my strength three times before losing all use of your arm. The difference between the fifth-tier and the eighth-tier, though, makes that previous difference look like an ant compared to a Kingdom. If you were to try to call upon my power, I wouldn't be surprised if your arm exploded before you got even a single blast off, though you'd be in so much pain from the attempt that I doubt things would progress that far.]

[Glad you told me that *before* I tried anything,] Leon griped.

[I believe I did, in fact, just do that,] Xaphan responded.

[Only because I had to ask!]

[I would've told you if you had tried to call upon my power! Probably...]

[Really? *Really*?]

[Yeah, I'm about ninety, maybe eighty percent sure about that. But you weren't using my power anyway, so what does it matter?]

[It matters because I don't want to have my fucking arm explode!]

[You say that like it's more than a minor inconvenience! Oh, wait a minute, you're so *weak* that it *is* more than a minor inconvenience!]

[You're really pushing it, demon,] Leon growled.

[Look, just don't call upon my power if having your arm blown off is such a big deal! You know, just stay the course!]

[I'm only refraining from using your power because I don't want to get seen by someone like Adalgrim who can identify demonic power. If I wound up in a terrible position where my power wasn't enough and no one was around, then I probably would've tried to use your power!]

[And now you won't, saving you the loss of the arm,] Xaphan smugly replied.

[I swear I'm going to kick your teeth in the instant I can access my soul realm, demon,] Leon bitterly spat.

[Promises, promises,] Xaphan said, provoking Leon's ire even further and absolutely reveling in it.

Just then, Leon heard the sounds of approaching footsteps, and he gladly took the opportunity to not speak with Xaphan anymore. He'd barely gotten to his feet when the door opened and Elise stepped inside, made eye contact with him, and smiled.

"Heard you got back before me," she said as she stepped into the training chamber.

"Didn't have much to do today," Leon responded as a smile of his own appeared on his face.

[Ugh, if you two are going to be all lovey-dovey, then I'm out!] Xaphan proclaimed as he immersed himself once again in his healing meditations, much to Leon's relief.

"Kind of expected you to be here, didn't know you were busy doing Heaven's Eye things," Leon said as he and Elise quickly gave each other a hug and a kiss.

"I didn't know I'd be busy, either, but my mother wanted me to meet with some blood priests who stopped by the Tower. Couldn't get out of it, otherwise I'd have waited for you to get back."

Leon nodded and filled her in on just about everything he'd learned during the day, from the investigations into his family conducted by the Royal Family to the potential for transformation in his blood.

"Hmm," Elise said as she sat back and absorbed his story. It took about half an hour to tell, and both had retired to her sitting room to relax, though Leon changed out of his training clothes first. "Let's start with the easiest things to take care of, how about I take a look at that map?"

Leon agreed and handed over his edited map from the Cradle. He was sorely tempted to give her the unedited version, but he decided at the moment not to. *'Best to keep that one just to me, for the time being,'* he thought to himself.

"And the sigil?" Elise asked, and Leon handed over a copy of the sigil he discovered from the plans of his father's old destroyed villa, the only thing he felt that could potentially connect with his mother, though he couldn't know for certain.

"I'll have Heaven's Eye look into both of these and get back to you," she said. "And I'll make sure it's discreet," she continued with a wink.

"If you didn't say it, I would've," Leon replied, agreeing wholeheartedly that all of these matters couldn't be looked into too openly without exposing everyone involved to far too much danger.

Elise's smile turned seductive as she put the papers that Leon had just given her away. He didn't need to guess what she wanted now, especially after just finishing up her work.

"Now that all that business is over with..." Leon said with a leading tone as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, "is there anything else we can do to fill the time?"

Elise's smile grew even wider as Leon took the initiative. She was extremely surprised, as for him to do so was a rare occurrence, but she was also greatly pleased with this turn of events.

"Oh, I don't know..." she said teasingly. "How ab-"

Before she could finish her teasing, though, one of her servants knocked on the door of the sitting room and loudly called through the door, "Lady Elise!"

"Damn it all," she muttered while Leon glared at the door in irritation. "What is it?"

"The beastmaster you sent for yesterday has arrived!" the servant replied.

The two lovers sighed, but Anzu was still in the stables and he had to be tended to.

"No helping it, I guess," Leon said with a sigh of resignation. He loved that griffin, and the thought of delaying Anzu's check-up with the beastmaster in favor of his and Elise's own pleasure never once crossed his mind.

Chapter 295: Official Summons

"I suppose I give those Legion beastmasters too little credit," the Heaven's Eye beastmaster muttered as he took his leave. Anzu was perfectly healthy and growing quite well, the beastmaster assigned to him at the Bull's Horns had clearly done her job well. Still, there was always room for improvement, especially when the vast resources available to the family of a Heaven's Eye Tower Lord were brought to bear. To that end, Anzu had been given a new, higher-quality diet than he had at the Horns which the beastmaster intimated to Leon ought to help the griffin grow faster.

Leon had been a bit taken aback that Anzu's growth could speed up as the griffin had been growing incredibly fast already, but he also couldn't wait for the day when Anzu was strong enough to be a true war beast and not just a pet that follows Leon around picking off the weaker companions of whoever Leon might be fighting at the time. Given the way Anzu fought during the operation to retake

Ariminium's guild district, Leon felt like he'd be a ferocious and unstoppable fighter once that day came—and it wouldn't be long, given how large Anzu had already grown to be.

Leon and Elise saw the beastmaster out the door and Anzu affectionately rubbed himself against Leon like a cat after being held in the stable all day. He was big enough that Leon had to fight to maintain his balance, but he was just happy that Anzu wasn't staring daggers at Elise anymore.

Elise was happy about that, too, and she started running her fingers through Anzu's shimmering white feathers. The griffin barely seemed to mind, which was a marked improvement from the previous day.

Before any of them could do anything more, however, Alix came quickly walking through the doors of Elise's wing of the estate.

"Hey there," Elise said with a smile.

"Hey," Alix responded with a smile of her own, but she was far too tired to say anything more. She collapsed into the nearest armchair and groaned.

"Long day?" Leon asked.

"I have just waded through a *mountain* of paperwork!" Alix complained. "But I got my own place!"

"You did?" Elise asked in surprise. "So, you're not going to stay here? You can stay as long as you like..."

"No, though I appreciate the offer," Alix replied. "I just need my own place, you know?"

Elise sprouted a sad smile, but she said, "I understand."

"All right, then. I hope to start moving my stuff tomorrow if that's convenient."

"I'll have my servants help, we can get this done quick and painless!" Elise declared. She enjoyed having a friendly woman around to spend time with, but since Alix wanted her own place to live, Elise was going to help as much as she could. "For now, though, why don't we find something to do to relax?"

The other two agreed, and the three—plus Anzu—made their way to a sitting room and swapped stories of everything they had done since Leon and Alix had been there last.

—

Not long after night fell, everyone was ready for bed. It had been a long day for all three, and rest was the only thing on their minds.

However, just as Leon and Elise crawled into bed and Anzu took his place on a brand new animal bed that Elise had whipped up just for him, a servant nervously knocked on Elise's door.

"Uugh," Elise muttered in irritation as Leon's hands paused on their way up and down her body.

"What?!" she called out, doing her best not to shout in frustration.

"My Lady, I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, but a messenger has arrived from the Royal Palace looking for Sir Leon," the servant replied from the other side of the door, her voice quivering in anxiety.

"Fuckin' hells," Leon growled. "I'm on my way," he replied.

"If you take too long, I might just go to sleep," Elise said as she watched Leon get out of bed and reach for the clothes that he and Elise had almost torn off him just a few minutes earlier.

"This won't take long, I can promise you that," Leon said.

Once dressed, Leon left Elise's bedroom and the waiting servant escorted him to the palace's atrium, where the messenger had been asked to wait. Once he saw who the messenger was, though, Leon was momentarily shocked.

"Grim!" he called out once he regained his composure.

Sir Adalgrim, the man who had led the team that Leon had accompanied when they hunted down the vampire before the war broke out, was the messenger who had come calling. He and Leon had also fought together during the operation to retake Ariminium's guild district.

"Leon!" Grim replied with a happy smile and an outstretched hand.

Leon grasped it and each gave the other a firm handshake.

"You are a real *bitch* to find, you know that?" Grim said with a chuckle when their handshake ended.

"Not by design," Leon said. "Prince Trajan knew where I was, and as far I'm concerned, that was enough."

"Well, we had to go so far as to ask His Highness where you were staying, since it wasn't in our records," Grim stated. "This was *after* a rather thorough search, mind you."

"And what is it that is so important that you would search so thoroughly for me?" Leon asked.

"We got word that you're being summoned to the Royal Court in two days time," Grim explained.

"Is it for Lapis?" Leon asked with a grimace of displeasure. He had already been informed by a Royal Guard that this might happen when the man happened to notice him speaking with the giant.

"It is," Grim confirmed. "It shouldn't be long, they simply want Lapis' affirmation that the southern giants aren't going to launch any more raids on the realm, and then probably invite him to join all the rest of the politicians kissing ass or whatever it is they get up to."

"Oh joy..." Leon muttered. "When do I have to show up?"

"All I know is two days from today. Beyond that, you should be informed in a more official manner tomorrow. I'll make sure they know where you're staying so that we don't have to mount another search operation like we did today."

"Why did you get called, anyway?" Leon asked curiously. Fifth-tier knights were generally seen as too highly ranked to be used as mere messengers, so Leon was a little confused why Grim had been called in.

"After the messengers working at the Royal Palace couldn't find you, I ended up being called in to do the job they failed at. Dame Minerva handled the request when it came in and figured that since we worked together before then I should be able to find you."

"I see..." Leon said. "We didn't work together for very long, so it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me, but I suppose you did find me in the end."

"After requesting some assistance from Prince Trajan," Grim reminded.

"Right. I'm sure that went great, I doubt His Highness was pleased to be disturbed over something so trivial."

"He... *wasn't*..." Grim said with an exaggerated wince.

"My condolences," Leon sarcastically replied. "Anyway, if that's all..."

"Of course, it was good to see you again, Leon," Grim said. He then leaned in, gave Leon a quick wink, and continued, "And by the way, I've heard some things in the Royal Palace... There are a lot of nobles who have started to pay attention to you after you and Elise so publicly declared your relationship. Apparently, only Dame Minerva and Prince Trajan are talked about more... As a personal note, though, I say congratulations and good luck, she seems like she'd be hard to handle."

"Thanks, and I do my best," Leon said with a thin smile. He wasn't too thrilled with the way Grim referred to Elise, but he also didn't think the older knight meant anything malicious with the statement, so he didn't say anything about it.

Grim, with his official business complete, turned around to leave, while Leon and some of Emilie's servants escorted him to the door. However, just before leaving, he suddenly turned to Leon and whispered, "I almost forgot, but I think Prince Trajan is looking into finding something for you to do. Not sure what that might be, as he only muttered something to that effect as I was leaving, but I would expect something coming down the road that ought to keep you away from the Royal Palace for a while."

"Thanks for the heads-up," Leon said gratefully.

And with that, Grim was off into the night with all the enthusiasm of a man who was going home for the day after finishing all of his work.

Leon sighed as the door closed and he started making his way back to Elise's wing of the estate.

'I'm going to kill whoever interrupts me again...' he bitterly thought, though he had no intention of actually following through on it. However, if he did, he was certain that Elise would be right there with him, given the hungry way she stared at him when he finally returned to her bedroom. And, fortunately for them, Anzu had already fallen asleep.

—

Leon scowled at himself in the mirror. He was wearing a dark charcoal colored suit with bright silver accents, a white sash around his waist as a somewhat archaic way to denote his knighthood, and shiny black leather shoes. A light feather pattern had been woven into the darker parts of the suit, but it was faint enough that it was incredibly easy to overlook unless examined up close. The suit itself was largely made of silkgrass, while the white button-up shirt beneath was 'regular' silk, though it was still of the highest quality and woven with the same barely-perceptible feather pattern. The buttons on the

perfectly tailored suit were made of pure silver and were lightly engraved with images of birds of prey in flight.

All in all, it was a magnificent—and magnificently expensive—ensemble, but it was the only set of clothes he had that were suitable for his upcoming appearance in the Royal court. And he hated every stitch. It took almost fifteen minutes to get dressed, which in Leon's opinion, was about fourteen too many, and the entire thing he found exceptionally garish. And yet, he didn't complain out loud once when he tried it on.

Elise was there with him and frowned when she saw his scowl. The suit he now wore was one that she had insisted on buying him the last time he was in the capital, and she was ecstatic that he was now going to wear it, but she still wasn't too thrilled with his lack of enthusiasm.

"You look great," she softly said as she gave him a thorough appraisal. "Maybe it needs to be let out a bit more in the shoulders, they look a bit *too* tight..."

"Mmm," Leon mumbled. He couldn't bring himself to say exactly how much he disliked dressing up like this, though he didn't think he needed to, it was clear enough by his expression alone. He took a deep breath and forced his face back into its usual stoic appearance, if only so that Elise would stop frowning.

Once she was done giving Leon a look-over, Elise handed him his old coat made of snow lion fur, one of the few pieces of clothing he still owned from when he lived in the Northern Vales that he didn't lose during Hakon Fire-Beard's raid. A mortal might have found the entire ensemble to be stifling in the warm Central Territories, but as a fifth-tier mage, Leon was hardly bothered by the heat and could wear whatever fashion he so desired—or whatever fashion his circumstances required.

"Wow... you clean up very nicely," Elise said with an almost feverish tone when Leon donned the coat and his get-up was complete.

Leon sighed and said, "If you like it, then I have to admit that there's some value to all this. That being said, it *really* isn't my style..."

"Because it isn't plain black or grey?" she asked with a knowing smile.

"I can't help it if I prefer simpler designs!" he retorted with a raised eyebrow and mock-offended tone.

Elise wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered, "Thanks for putting it on. You *do* look good in it, so don't think too poorly of it. Besides, you're kind of *under-dressed* compared to many of the noble courtiers who'll be there during Lapis' audience."

Leon sighed, steeling himself for what was coming. He took Elise's words to heart, but that by no means meant that he was looking forward to these proceedings.

"Will you be there?" Leon asked.

"No, Heaven's Eye representatives don't participate much in politics, and so we don't go to the Royal Palace that often. Why? Do you want me to be there?" Elise asked with a teasing smile.

Leon chuckled and said, "I think I'd rather keep my embarrassment as far away from you as possible. Let me make a fool of myself where people I care about can't see me."

Leon stared at himself in the mirror one last time. It was now time to head for the Royal Palace, but not for Lapis' audience—that was still a day away. Rather, he had some things to go over with Trajan beforehand, like etiquette and the schedule. Plus, the Prince wanted to look over Leon's outfit, to ensure that he was presentable. If Trajan hadn't made this demand of him, Leon wouldn't be dressing up like this at all.

[Don't look so glum, boy, you look super cute, like a little harmless bunny that somehow learned to walk on two legs,] Xaphan said from within his soul realm.

[Oh, don't you even start with me, demon,] Leon growled as he started making his way to the Palace, all the while trying to ignore Xaphan's stifled giggling. [Don't you have better things to do, like healing yourself?]

[Better things than watching you do something that you utterly abhor? *Hardly*,] Xaphan replied with a tone that made Leon think his demonic face was twisted in a smug grin.

Once again, Leon sighed, knowing that it was going to be a long couple of days.

Chapter 296: Facing the Court

"Mm, yes, but don't feel like you have to bow all the way to the ground," Trajan said as he watched Leon practicing his genuflection. "You're not a slave, you're a fifth-tier knight."

Leon didn't think that he'd bowed so low, but he straightened up a bit anyway. "What exactly should I be expecting?" he asked.

"Nothing too onerous, I think. Octavius insisted on having the stone giant present himself before the court as is expected of any other foreign dignitary, so this shouldn't be much more than an introduction. I don't think there's going to be any business that either Octavius or August will have for Lapis afterward."

"Sounds... good, I guess," Leon said as he stood back up. "I imagined a lot worse, like hours of having to translate in-depth discussions about diplomatic minutiae, or... anything else equally lengthy."

"Don't worry about that," Trajan said with a chuckle. "I'll be sure to keep it short, and afterward, I'll see about getting you some extra duties that will keep you out of the capital for a while."

"Like what?" Leon asked, this not surprising him since Grim had warned him something like this was coming.

"I'm thinking of loaning out about half of my retinue to the local Legions as peacekeepers," Trajan explained. "Probably just more of what they've been doing at the Horns, like hunting down dangerous beasts and dealing with the occasional bandits, though I don't think either are particularly numerous in the Central Territories. Regardless of whether there's any actual work you have to do, though, I'll still be able to deny most, if any, requests for your time using this excuse."

"I can't complain about that!" Leon said with a broad smile, though there was a bit of doubt in the back of his mind that this would turn out so easy. He didn't think that he would have any further business with the Royal Court, but he would've thought the same before he was summoned, too. It was best to

just take the excuse and avoid the limelight as much as possible while he and Trajan looked into the events surrounding the fall of House Raime further.

"All right, you're good enough. You'll survive tomorrow," Trajan said. Leon's manners were by no means perfect, but they were as good as they were going to get with so little time to prepare.

"I have my doubts about that," Leon drily quipped as he stood up.

"Don't be so pessimistic, I said you'll do fine and fine is what you will do," Trajan said with an amused smile. "By the way, how did your meeting with Antonius go?"

"It was very informative," Leon said, and he quickly filled Trajan in on what he felt was relevant. Passing along a copy of the mural he found was something he struggled with a bit, but he figured that since he'd already drawn Antonius' attention to it then Trajan would find out anyway, so he held nothing back about the investigation.

"That's not a hell of a lot to go on," Trajan muttered as he sat down in a nearby armchair. He had been given an extraordinarily comfortable office, much larger than what he had used back at the Horns, but it was lit with bright white magic lanterns which aggravated him and most of the furniture was just too soft for his liking. He liked chairs and couches with more support. The place was also a bit over-decorated for his tastes, but since his presence in the capital was only a temporary measure—he hoped—he didn't make a big deal out of it.

"What should we do next?" Leon asked.

"What would you do next if you had the opportunity?" Trajan countered.

"I would check out my father's old villa, but since that's been forbidden..." Leon trailed off at the end knowing that him getting access to the villa was effectively impossible.

Trajan nodded, being fully aware of this. "When my brother returns, I will speak to him about this matter. I won't divulge your secret if you don't want me to, but I can't speak for old Bronze. Regardless, I'll do what I can to get you access to the site."

"Thank you," Leon said with genuine gratitude. "If possible, my family's old palace in Teira might also contain some information that I would like to look into..." He didn't honestly think that he'd find something in either of those sites that the investigators missed, but he would at least like to have more official access to his family's Archives beneath the palace in Teira. The last time he had gone there, it had ended with him being nearly caught and subsequently killed by the Legion soldiers guarding the palace against looters and other trespassers.

"I'll try to make that happen as well so that even if you can't do much in the way of investigation, you can at least poke around your family's old home," Trajan said. "In the meantime, I have people scrutinizing Justin Isynos' records, everything from his finances to his history. When he arrives in the capital, I'll also have him put under surveillance."

"No chance of this leaking to him?" Leon asked.

"I trust the people I have working on this," Trajan said with a smile. "It's going to be a waiting game for the time being, especially since there just isn't much reliable information to go on. So, for now, go get some rest and prepare for tomorrow."

"Got it," Leon responded, though rest was the farthest thing from his mind. Instead, he spent the remainder of the day training.

—

The audience was scheduled for late in the morning, and Leon arrived at the Royal Palace in all his finery at ten a.m. sharp. Lapis was waiting for him at the front of the palace as he'd been doing since their arrival in the capital.

"Ready for this?" Leon asked the giant, though he didn't expect Lapis to shy away from something he'd essentially been doing for his own leader back in the Crater Tribe.

"I am," the giant simply replied. **"It's only meeting with the Bull Chief, isn't it?"**

Leon looked a little shocked for a second before he realized that he hadn't had an in-depth discussion with the giant about what was going on. "It's actually meeting with two of the King's sons. And his brother, Trajan, who you've already met. The King himself is currently indisposed. Doing some solo training, I believe, and he hasn't been back in years."

Lapis ground its bones in a manner that Leon thought indicated displeasure, and Leon's thoughts were confirmed when Lapis said, **"A Chief that abandons his people is no Chief, even for greater magical power. If he was going to leave for such a long time, he should've relinquished his position to someone more suitable."**

"I... don't disagree..." Leon said. He hadn't put much thought into it as the matter didn't really concern him, but now that he was thinking about it, he couldn't say he approved of the King leaving for such a long time. Not that it was his place to judge the actions of a King, though, since he was only a lowly knight. Still, he didn't like it.

The two were waiting outside for the palace seneschal to come and get them. The audience wasn't the only piece of business going on in the throne room today. If Leon remembered correctly, there were a few petitions from minor nobles for Royal aid of some kind, and then after that were trials for the two Legates who took their Legions with August to the Horns. As soon as they had left the city, the Consul of the Central Territories quietly charged them with treason and desertion. However, in practice, this wasn't anything more than a complicated way for the Consul to make a formal complaint since the Legates were being judged by Trajan, August, and Octavius rather than an Arbiter, as they would've if they weren't in the Royal Legion. With two of the Princes on their side, the Legates would have no need to worry.

Of course, these charges would still remain on their record, and it would likely block them from receiving Consulships in the future, but at least they wouldn't be brought before the headsman to be made a head shorter for treason.

About twenty minutes after Leon's arrival where he and Lapis watched from a corner of the courtyard the various well-dressed men and women file in and out of the palace, one of the junior seneschals

finally came outside to get them. Fortunately, the front door was large enough for Lapis to comfortably enter, so they didn't have to make any detours. Just as they were entering the atrium, Leon saw the two Legates who had been on trial leaving the throne room, one with a triumphant expression and the other with little more than a bit of subdued happiness, indicating that their 'trial' went about as well as Leon suspected it would.

"The Prince-Regents will see you two, now," the seneschal said with the utmost professionalism. In fact, Leon suspected that everyone in the palace had been informed to expect the company of the giant, as Lapis attracted nothing more than a few inquisitive glances from the nobles and officials in the atrium going about their business.

Leon took the lead and walked into the throne room. The sides of the room were packed with hundreds of people, leaving only a relatively thin path for him and Lapis to walk through, though the path was at least wide enough to allow the giant to pass. Many of the people to the sides of the path were extraordinarily well-dressed, to the point that Leon even felt a little under-dressed in comparison.

Colorful silk, cotton, wool, and even some silkgrass here and there of the highest quality woven into the latest fashion drew Leon's attention the most, as did the rings on most of their fingers and ostentatious pendants and amulets made of gold, silver, and precious stones around their necks. What made them even more ostentatious was the fact that, to the best of Leon's ability to sense, few of those pieces of jewelry contained any enchantments, which was a waste of good gemstones if ever he saw it. Surrounding these nobles were people who Leon assumed to be bodyguards or other members of a noble's entourage, with most wearing spotless white tunics and green sashes around their waists.

Leon also saw a number of Legion knights, fifth and sixth-tier mages who were mostly wearing their dark green Legion dress uniforms, which Leon genuinely wished he was wearing rather than his black and silver ensemble. In the upper galleries were the less important members of the court in much less varied outfits and styles, though no less colorful overall.

The people that Leon paid the most attention to were those at the farthest end of the throne room, those closest to the throne itself, which sat empty. To the left of the throne in a chair made of white granite sat the thin, pale August, and to the right in an identical chair was the tall, well-built, handsome figure of Octavius, each dressed in the green and gold of the Royal Family. They were joined by a number of other high-ranking individuals upon the raised platform. Trajan, who was one of those officials, notably both sat next to August and was dressed in Legion red rather than the Royal colors, and when he glanced back at the crowd, Leon noticed that most of the Legion knights had gravitated over to that side of the throne room.

Octavius' side, though, was filled with more of the extravagantly dressed nobles and their followers, making those comparatively few dressed in the Legion uniform stick out like sore thumbs.

It was a lot of faces, enough that Leon's eyes started to glaze over the more he tried to remember, and everyone was staring at him and Lapis as they walked toward the throne; he doubted he'd know any of these people from a hole in the ground after he walked out of the throne room.

Leon arrived at the platform in front of the throne's dais and bowed to the empty seat. His genuflection wasn't as crisp and clean as it could have been, but he at least didn't make a fool of himself, despite his anxiety from having hundreds of eyes on him and the background noise of the hundreds of people

behind him whispering amongst themselves—he might have just been extremely self-conscious, but he was certain they were talking about him.

Lapis, following Leon's lead, bowed as well as its giant frame would allow. At the very least, Leon hoped that Lapis would be enough to distract everyone from the combination of his obvious youth and fifth-tier power. While age was always hard to tell when it came to mages of his strength, Leon couldn't even grow a full beard, and it was obvious to the entire court that he hadn't yet seen two decades of life.

"What a marvel..." Leon heard Octavius say as the Prince's eyes swept over Lapis' form. "I have to admit... Lapis, was it? I have to admit that I never once considered the possibility of a stone giant appearing in these honored halls."

"I go where Sir Leon commands me to," Lapis responded in its rumbling stony language.

"What is he saying?" Octavius politely asked Leon, his eyes turning to the young knight as he stood up, making the reason for Leon's presence clear for anyone who didn't already know.

"He says that it's a pleasure to be here, Your Highness," Leon said. He thought he screwed up a bit because the Prince's mouth momentarily tightened in what Leon thought to be anger, but the expression was gone so fast that Leon almost believed it hadn't happened at all.

"And it's a pleasure to receive him," August said as he gave Leon as pleasant a smile as his tired face could manage. "To hear of peace on our borders is always a wondrous thing."

"Peace is all well and good, if hardly glorious," Octavius stated, and the throne room was filled with the murmuring of nobles and knights who seemed to agree, "but we must always be prepared for war. I understand your people are terrific warriors, Lapis, might it be possible to hire some of them into our Legions?"

"My people fight for whoever they choose," Lapis answered, and Leon relayed the statement.

"Fantastic!" Octavius replied.

"Let's not get carried away with fantasies about filling the Legion ranks with stone giants, Brother," August said, "we still have some business to get through today."

Octavius shot a subtle glare at his younger brother over the throne, though his face never slipped into anything resembling a scowl.

"Lapis, do you swear before all the Old Gods and the Ancestors that your people will never make war upon this Kingdom again?" August asked with as much formality as he could manage.

"So long as the descendants of our Gods reside here, we will not launch raids into this land," Lapis stated.

"He agreed," Leon said as he did his best to control his embarrassment and nervousness. That he was currently the center of attention was almost too much already, he could never fully translate what Lapis was saying.

"Is that what he truly said? He seemed to be speaking for a long time," Octavius said with his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“The giant language is long and slow and without direct translation, Your Highness,” Leon said as an explanation.

“Sir Leon is my knight,” Trajan stated in warning, speaking for the first time since Leon had entered the throne room, and Octavius sighed and let the matter go. Leon and the stone giants weren’t a worthy enough matter for him to cross his uncle before he was ready.

Fortunately for Leon, there wasn’t much more need for him and Lapis anymore. The giant had appeared, had its introduction, bowed to the throne, and affirmed the peace. There wasn’t a need to continue.

“If there’s nothing else, then...” August said as he glanced around at the other dozen or so officials sitting next to him and Octavius beside the throne. None of them answered him, but when he moved to dismiss Leon and Lapis, Octavius beat him to the punch.

“Thank you, Lapis, and you, Sir Leon. The Royal Court has nothing else for the two of you, today, though I personally hope that you both will be available for further summons if need be,” the elder Prince-Regent said.

Leon glanced at Trajan, who nodded that it was all right for him to go, so he rose and made for the door as fast as he thought he could without throwing away his dignity, and Lapis closely followed. Hardly anyone noticed, though, as almost every eye had turned to watch the two younger Princes, and as soon as Leon and Lapis left, the throne room fell completely silent.

Chapter 297: Invitation

The Royal Court remained in session taking care of miscellaneous business like minor property disputes between landed nobles and other civil suits between members of the nobility for several hours after Leon and Lapis left. It was so boring that by the time Trajan walked out of the throne room, he could barely remember even half of what had just happened.

‘This should be the business of Arbiters, not Princes!’ he silently complained while he maintained as stoic an expression as his tired face was capable of making. Unfortunately, as much as he wished for it to not be the case, Arbiters rarely made judgments on cases to do with civil law, leaving much of that work for the King, his lower nobles, and his Exarchs. They ruled on criminal cases, only stepping into the realm of civil law when the two overlapped.

To delegate more judgmental authority to the Arbiters would drastically weaken the Crown, but Trajan couldn’t deny that doing so would free up a lot of the King’s—and by extension, his representatives’—time to devote to other things. Passing laws in the King’s demesne wasn’t a power that Julius was going to give up, and neither did Trajan think that August or Octavius had that intention, but at the very least, Trajan wouldn’t mind letting the Arbiters do as their titles indicated and arbitrated property disputes according to the King’s regulations.

For the time being, though, he knew that he would have to get used to days like this, where nothing he cared about was done. Octavius and August cut each other off at nearly every opportunity, with varying levels of subtlety. If it wasn’t clear to the entire Royal court prior to this that the two hated each other, then it certainly was now, which Trajan knew was only going to lead to even more extreme factionalism.

The elder Prince quietly groaned in stress and anxiety about the direction that the Kingdom was heading for, and he didn't think that his presence in the capital was going to be enough to stop what seemed like an inevitable civil war. If it was going to be averted, he was going to have to get more involved than he would ever want, which would undoubtedly bring accusations against him of attempting to usurp Julius' crown while the King was gone.

Trajan was unable to decide on any course of action, though, as his thoughts were interrupted before he and his assistants had even reached their new offices.

"Your Highness!" came a voice from behind their small group. Trajan turned around and saw the familiar face of the Legate of the Knight Academy, Germanicus Ahenobarbus Aeneas, the brother of Count Aeneas, a nobleman in the Eastern Territories. Over Trajan's long stewardship as the de facto Lord of the Eastern Territories, he had maintained a good relationship with the Aeneas family, as they were one of the most powerful noble houses in that region. They had fought against the stone giants in the north for so long and had grown so skilled in the arts of war that they were widely considered the best family of military strategists in the entire Kingdom.

"Lord Aeneas!" Trajan said as he did his best to wipe away the fatigue in his face and muster up a smile. All Legates were technically equally ranked, but the Legate of the Knight Academy was one of the most important and prestigious non-combat posts in the entire Royal Legion, so Trajan didn't want to just brush him off.

"Please, Your Highness, it's my brother who's the Lord," the Legate said with an understanding and good-natured smile. He bowed at the waist as he approached the Prince.

"What can I do for you, then, Sir Germanicus?" Trajan asked, hoping that his use of the Legate's first name would signal to him to drop the formalities, though being in the middle of the Royal Palace with hundreds of other courtiers making their way out of the throne room close by, he wasn't optimistic about the Legate dispensing with the tiring ceremonies.

"I happened to notice that Your Highness claimed Sir Leon Ursus as one of your personal knights," the Legate said with a stony look on his chiseled face. "I was hoping I could speak with Your Highness about him in private. He was a trainee at the Knight Academy less than two years ago, you see..."

"Ah, I understand," Trajan replied with his tone turning serious. Leon was knighted against Knight Academy guidelines, those being a year in training, ascension to the third-tier, and a two-year minimum squireship. Leon's squireship had only lasted a matter of a few weeks, and Trajan guessed that this was what the Legate wanted to speak about.

The Legate accompanied Trajan and the Prince's assistants to his office, and once the two arrived, the assistants left with barely another word. The two men then took their seats in the richly appointed office. The Legate seemed ill-at-ease, and he shifted several times in his armchair as he struggled to get comfortable. Trajan even noticed a bead of sweat on his wide brow between the strands of his black, unfashionably long hair.

"So, for what reason did you need to speak with me about my knight?" Trajan asked with only a hint of hostility and well-concealed killing intent.

“Your Highness, I simply wished to make an invitation to you and to Sir Ursus to join the graduation and knighting ceremony for Sir Leon’s class,” the Legate said with a light tone as he finally settled down in his chair.

Trajan’s eyes narrowed in suspicion and confusion and he asked, “Is this all? This hardly needed a private setting, did it?” Perhaps Trajan was paranoid, but he couldn’t help but think that the Legate knew something about Leon’s identity just by the way he was acting, though he couldn’t fathom why the Legate would want to approach him about it in that case.

“This is a somewhat delicate situation...” the Legate said with noticeable hesitation. “That Sir Ursus was knighted outside of the regulations that my Academy has dictated isn’t widely known, and I would like to keep it that way. I have no intention of petitioning the Crown to revoke his knighthood, especially as it would only be reinstated in a few months when the ceremony takes place, and besides, the Consul of the North himself knighted Sir Ursus, or so he bragged in the official statement he sent to me not too long ago.”

Indeed, the Consul of the North had boasted to the Legate of knighting one of his Academy’s squires as if he were daring the Legate to try and blacklist him from receiving any squires from his institution from that day forward—and this was long after he’d told Roland that Leon was dead. The Consul was a whimsical man, and he could always fall back on faulty records if Roland and August ever found out that he lied to them. It wasn’t like they could do anything to him with the King indisposed, anyway, so he acted largely with impunity.

“I don’t want to act against a Consul, but nor do I want this to establish a precedent,” the Legate continued. “I don’t want the knights to whom we send our squires to start knighting them of their own accord. I would consider it a personal favor if just Sir Ursus were to attend, but as his direct superior, a Prince, and a Consul, I would be most remiss if I were to not also invite Your Highness as well.”

Trajan frowned in thought. It wasn’t that onerous of a request, and Trajan could admit that he was probably just being paranoid about the Legate’s knowledge of Leon’s identity. Plus, it could get him out of the palace for a few hours, even if it was for just another tiresome ceremony.

The Prince began to slowly nod, and he said, “I’d be happy to attend this ceremony, and I’ll pass on your invitation to Sir Leon, though I won’t force him to attend. Have your people get in touch with mine, we’ll get it on my schedule.”

“Will do, Your Highness,” the Legate said, grateful even for that much effort on the Prince’s part.

“Now, is there anything else you wanted to speak with me about?” Trajan asked, clearly angling to get back to his own work.

For a moment, it seemed like the Legate was going to say something substantial, but after some hesitation, he simply said, “No, Your Highness, thank you for this meeting.”

Trajan simply smiled and nodded as the Legate rose, bowed, and made for the door. However, that smile ended when he saw one of his knights waiting outside with a poorly concealed look of panic. Once the Legate had left, the knight hurried inside and closed the door behind him.

"What is it?" Trajan asked in concern. The man was a fifth-tier knight and Trajan didn't think that there would be much that could shake him.

"Your Highness..." the knight said as he dropped to one knee in a hurried bow. "The man you ordered me to watch for... he entered the capital two days ago!"

Trajan's eyes widened in shock and surprise. *'So, Lord Justin has come to the capital early, has he?'*

"Tell me everything you know," Trajan demanded of the knight.

Unfortunately, the knight didn't have much information about Justin himself, as Justin had only gone to the estate of a foreign noble with his daughter and then returned to his yacht in the docks. Those he traveled with, however, did not return.

"Who were these others?" Trajan asked as he stroked his chin in thought. "Servants? Knights?"

"We can't say for certain," the knight responded. As he explained Justin's schedule, he'd taken the Legate's seat. "Most of them were doubtlessly servants, though, given their low tier and the mundane tasks that they partook in. Mostly restocking the yacht with provisions and charged gemstones."

"How many stones?" Trajan asked in mild curiosity. It was a general rule that the more magically advanced something was, the more gemstones charged with magic power it would need to operate its enchantments.

"*Many*," the knight replied. "They cleaned a Varro's in a dockside forum of all their rubies and emeralds, and more than half of their sapphires, a total of more than a million silvers worth of stones."

"More than a *million*?" Trajan asked in disbelief.

"Yes, Your Highness," the knight confirmed.

"Why go to a Varro's when they needed that kind of volume...?" Trajan wondered out loud. Varro's wasn't a bad place to buy charged gemstones, but for that kind of money, they could easily go to the Heaven's Eye Tower and purchase gems of much higher quality for that same price, though it would take much longer for the gems to be delivered. "They must need the stones soon..."

"There were three individuals that we identified as persons of interest, as well," the knight continued, drawing Trajan's attention back to him. "The first, a short man with a stocky build-"

"I don't need complete descriptions, just so long as all of you can recognize them," Trajan impatiently interrupted.

"Yes, Your Highness," the knight quickly said. "The most important feature they all possessed was power in excess of the sixth-tier!"

Again, Trajan stared at the knight in disbelief, as that kind of power at Justin's fingertips could've made him the strongest noble in the entire Kingdom, and possibly even King if he played his cards right. And yet, if Leon hadn't tipped Trajan off about his suspicions, Trajan would've had no idea that Justin had that kind of fighting potential.

'I suppose it makes a certain kind of sense...' the Prince thought to himself. 'It would take a powerful group to wipe out House Raime.'

"Keep an eye on Lord Isynos and tell me where he goes, but keep your distance from those three for the time being," the Prince said out loud.

"If I may ask, Your Highness, what are you going to do about them?" the knight asked. "It isn't much of a surveillance operation if the Lord we're watching can act through intermediaries."

"I know that, but I doubt that you'll get very far watching seventh-tier mages," Trajan said. "It's entirely possible that you've already tipped them off, and I don't want my people to end up dead. And make no mistake, if these people are who I think they are—and they are, if their sheer power is anything to go by—then they'll think little of killing anyone who gets too close. So, don't get close."

"Yes, Your Highness, I'll pass that along to the rest of the team," the knight replied.

"Good..." Trajan muttered as the knight departed his office with his orders. He had another meeting to plan, this time with the Royal Spymaster, and he needed to figure out just what to tell the man, and even before that, if he should even be trusted. He was chosen by Julius, so Trajan was inclined to say yes, but still, he needed to speak with him first.

The news of Justin's arrival almost a month before he'd planned was throwing him off a bit. He needed to speak with the 1st Legion's Legate, too, so that he could proceed with his plan to get Leon out of the city. He thought it best to keep Leon and Justin as far away from each other as he could for as long as was possible.

The Prince sighed, then rose and had one of his assistants summon Minerva. He would have to foist some of his duties off on her while he took care of these new pressing matters, something which he hated doing but needed to do while Justin was still settling into the city. He'd strike while the iron was hot, and if Justin was truly involved in the deaths of Kyros and Alexander Raime, then Trajan was going to see him dead.

Chapter 298: Spymaster

Trajan hated the feeling of powerlessness that he felt when thinking about Justin Isynos and his absurdly powerful companions. It would be nigh-impossible to have all of them tailed, not to mention extraordinarily dangerous. A seventh-tier mage could easily detect someone following them if they were attentive and observant enough, and they would then be able to kill those following them with ease. They might not be able to do so in public, but Trajan wasn't going to risk sending his knights to keep watch over Justin and his people.

However, time was critical, he had to get his surveillance established while Justin was still settling in to the city. Unfortunately, he didn't think his knights were up to the task. When it came to killing monsters and defending the borders from hostile states, Trajan thought his knights unmatched in all the Kingdom, but for such delicate work as spying and surveillance, they were possessed of only limited expertise.

To that end, Trajan could only turn to one man: The Royal Spymaster, Sir Publius UMBER. He had been appointed to his post by King Julius, and to Trajan's knowledge, hadn't overtly supported either August or Octavius.

In fact, neither had the other two of the top three officials within Julius' government—Tacitus, the Chancellor, and Laurus, the Chief Steward—publicly declared for either of the two Princes. Still, as useful as these latter two could be in this situation, Trajan wanted to keep his investigation tight and need-to-know only, so he decided to only contact Publius.

So, after passing his duties off to Minerva for an hour or two just in case anything came up that needed attention, he left his office and made his way over to the Spymaster's wing of the Royal Palace.

Many thought of the Spymaster as being a master manipulator, a dark mage that used strange rituals and even took the risk of projecting his own magic body outside of his physical body to spy on the entire Kingdom, all from a secret dungeon beneath the Royal Palace or some other confidential location. The truth, however, was much less dramatic. Publius UMBER was a bureaucrat, a paper pusher that had more in common with accountants than with a stereotypical spy. After all, most of the 'spies' who worked for him *were* accountants.

The Spymaster's office was in a wing of the palace separate from the main administration building where the throne was located. It was as nondescript as a wing of the Royal Palace could be, and if Trajan didn't know any better, he would've guessed it was nothing more than a guest house or something of an equally boring nature. In reality, it was a much more boring building than most thought, as it was filled with tax records, census data, copies of intercepted messages—most of it utterly worthless—and other such paperwork that made it almost worse than a more stereotypical headquarters for a master of spies.

Trajan made his way toward the front door, with one of his assistants hurrying forward to open it for his Prince. However, the door swung open just as the assistant reached for the door handle, and out came Octavius and his own entourage of assistants and secretaries which for once didn't include either of the Paladins in his corner.

"Uncle!" Octavius cried out in surprise as his mouth turned upward in a bright smile. "What a coincidence!"

"Indeed, Octavius," Trajan responded as he smiled at his nephew. "I wasn't expecting to run into you so soon." Since their time in court had ended not even an hour before, Trajan had thought that both August and Octavius would've done like him and returned to their offices to take care of their last bits of business for the day.

"Ah, well I wanted to speak with some of the Spymaster's investigators regarding a recent incident in the Duchy of Aurelianorum," Octavius explained.

"I assume you mean that team of investigators that were sent to look for signs of Silverleaf production? The ones that were wiped out by a group of bandits?" Trajan asked, his eyes narrowing as he remembered how much Silverleaf had been moving through Ariminum under his watch, and how likely it was that an exceptionally powerful noble was somehow involved.

"The very one," Octavius responded. "I simply wanted to know how the investigation was proceeding. Such lawlessness in our Kingdom is something that a Prince-Regent ought to concern himself with, no?"

"It is," Trajan replied. "All those of the Royal Bloodline ought to be concerned when the King's own knights are killed in a vassal's territory. Some might think the Crown is weak if such things aren't punished..."

"Indeed. Do you have some business with the Spymaster?" Octavius asked curiously as he tried to deflect the conversation. "Whatever it is, it must be important for you to come all the way here, Uncle. Perhaps I could help as well?"

"It's nothing too important, I just ran out of work and decided to handle this myself," Trajan responded. "I guess I've picked up some micromanaging habits in my time as a Consul that I need to drop."

"Mm, micromanaging is hardly the worst trait for a Prince and a Consul," Octavius countered.

"It can sometimes get in the way, though," Trajan replied. "Not always the worst thing to trust your subordinates to do their jobs."

"Well, I should let you get to it, but if Sir Umber is unable to help, please don't hesitate to call upon me," Octavius said as he started walking back toward the main palace building.

Trajan sighed as he watched the Second Prince walk away. He didn't know the real reason why Octavius had been here, but he also wasn't in the mood to investigate, not when Justin Isynos was still running around completely unhindered in the center of the Kingdom's power. He turned and walked into the Spymaster's headquarters.

Several minutes later, Trajan was led into Publius' office, where the Spymaster was going through a few reports on his desk. As soon as the Prince walked in, though, Publius set aside the papers and hurriedly stood up, saying, "Your Highness! What a pleasure to see you here!" The Spymaster bowed and waved his secretary out of the room so that he and the Prince could speak privately. He was under no illusions that whatever Trajan had come all this way unannounced for wasn't something he wanted anyone else to know about, even the tight-lipped employees of the Spymaster's department.

As the two men sat down in armchairs by a hearth, Publius made some meaningless small talk while he made sure his enchantments preventing all sound from leaking were working properly, as he did for every visitor he received. The walls of his office had been so heavily enchanted to prevent outside surveillance that the air within the office became almost twice as dense with magic as the air outside of it.

While the Spymaster was doing this, Trajan sat silently in his chair and took stock of the man. He was of about average height, with short dark brown hair and light brown eyes. His jawline was relatively weak, as was his chin, but his cheeks were wide, and his nose was long with a prominent hook. He was fairly thin, had a weak sixth-tier aura indicating his recent ascension, and his dark grey clothes were modest and monochrome. All in all, he was a man with average looks and Trajan would have a hard time picking him out in a crowd without some thorough inspection with his magic senses.

All that being said, though, his mind was anything but average. He could take one look at the tax statement of a noble and be almost always able to tell if the noble wasn't paying their share. He had a gift with numbers, and no irregularities that could indicate illegal activity escaped his notice.

“... but it ended up being a warm day, anyway, so I brought the coat for nothing!” the Spymaster said with a smile. Trajan politely chuckled but he had no idea what Publius had been talking about, as it had been so boring it was almost impossible to pay attention. “So, anyway, what brings you out here, Your Highness?” Publius asked once his quick inspection of the defensive wards was over.

“Hmm,” Trajan hummed in thought. It had been a difficult decision to decide where to start, and he hesitated a bit before beginning. But he couldn’t wait forever, and Publius stared at him patiently waiting for the Prince to get around to his sensitive business.

“No need to rush, Your Highness,” Publius said with a soothing smile. “If there is anyone who is able to keep a secret, it’s me, so rest assured that anything we talk about will be kept confidential.”

“I appreciate it,” Trajan said. He had intended to make that clear himself, but he was grateful that Publius said it first. “I need information on a foreign noble currently in the employ of one of the Regents,” Trajan finally said.

“Which one?” Publius asked. Each of the Prince-Regents had hundreds of nobles in their service, and there were more than thirty nobles in both camps who were not born in the Bull Kingdom.

“Justin Isynos,” Trajan stated.

“Justin Isynos?” Publius repeated as he leaned back in his chair. “A popular man, I just had a request come in yesterday for information about him...”

“Who made that request?” Trajan asked.

“Someone in Prince Octavius’ office. His people have made similar requests for information on just about everyone within Prince August’s employ, just as Prince August’s people have requested information on Prince Octavius’ subordinates,” Publius answered. He shrugged his shoulders and half-smiled half-grimaced at Trajan as if he were asking the elder Prince what he could do. “As Lord Isynos’ was one of the last of the men whose information was requested, his name naturally sticks out to me.”

“Did you give either of them any of their requested information?” Trajan asked exasperatedly.

“Only what I’m authorized to give them,” Publius replied. “There’s a lot I had to keep confidential, though, things that are either of a personal nature or restricted by the King’s regulations.”

Trajan knew that many of those who were with August and Octavius were members of the government, and a lot of their activities would be kept secret. There were also strict regulations dictating what the Spymaster could share with people other than the King. Julius had access to whatever information he wanted in the Spymaster’s possession, but the same could not be said for anyone else in the Kingdom. Privacy was always a sensitive topic, and the King didn’t want to alienate the powerful people in the Bull Kingdom by allowing his Spymaster to spread their secrets.

Of course, most of those powerful people would’ve preferred if the Spymaster didn’t look for those secrets, but since many of those secrets involved violating the law, there had yet to be a case made that convinced Julius or any previous Bull King to restrict what information could be collected.

“What kind of information did they ask for?” Trajan inquired.

“Standard fare, basically anything they could get,” Publius answered. “Records of how well he administered Calabria were of particular interest to them, but personal details, family records, and anything I could tell them about where he came from were also sought.”

“I assume that you didn’t pass most of that along,” Trajan said.

“Correct, Prince Octavius’ people only have a few things from his time as Exarch of Calabria that I gave them, aside from the information that is already available to Prince Octavius as a Prince-Regent such as the bureaucratic records of his time in Calabria,” Publius confirmed. “What are you looking for in regards to Justin Isynos?”

“Everything,” Trajan stated. “I want to know everything that you know about the man. Will you give me this information?”

“Why do you want it?” Publius asked.

“Does it matter?” Trajan replied.

“It does, I can’t give sensitive information, not even to you, without direct authorization from the reigning Monarch,” Publius said.

“In that case, what does my motivation matter? My Royal Brother is currently busy with his training.”

“I do have... *some* discretion when deciding what constitutes ‘sensitive’ information,” Publius said with a smile. “I rarely give over anything without His Majesty’s approval, but if I find that the motivations of the requester are pure and honorable, perhaps I might bend my current definitions...”

Trajan was silent for a long moment as he contemplated what exactly to say. He was already determined to keep his cards close to his chest, but he also wanted that information. The key thing was that he didn’t want to say too much and stir up trouble for himself and for Leon if Publius couldn’t give him anything of value.

“I consider you an honorable man, Your Highness,” Publius said as Trajan sat in contemplation.

“I *want* to help you, but I need a reason.”

“I... have reason to believe that Justin Isynos may have treasonous intentions,” Trajan finally said, choosing his words carefully. “How clean was his administration of Calabria?”

“Spotless,” Publius said as his smile faded. Treason was a grave charge, and he gave it all the seriousness it deserved as he recalled everything that he could remember about his own investigations into the Isynians over the past fifteen years. “I haven’t heard so much as a rumor about him enriching himself at the expense of the state, not even a single whisper about him taking a bribe. He even cracked down *hard* on the corruption that had been seeping into the dock inspectors that monitor and tax the trade going up and down the Naga.”

“Then he’s very good at what he does,” Trajan said with a sigh. “How about his subordinates? How big is his clan? How many people work directly for him personally, rather than through the Exarchate?”

“What is it that has led you to believe that Justin Isynos is a traitor?” Publius asked instead of answering Trajan’s question.

Trajan stared at Publius, his killing intent slowly leaking out of his body. Publius felt fear start to fill his body as he was quietly submerged in the Prince's terrifying aura.

"You will not spread this, you will not tell your people about what I am going to say, you will let no one know what I am about to tell you," Trajan said with the confidence of a man holding all the cards. "I know this because you are a smart man and you don't want to die. And if word of what I'm about to say leaks, then your head will quickly be parted from your shoulders."

Publius nodded his head so fast that his neck popped, and he glanced down at his panel of enchantments to ensure that his defensive wards were still functioning perfectly.

"Justin Isynos is probably responsible for the death of Archduke Kyros and the fall of House Raime," Trajan said.

Chapter 299: A New Mission

Several days after his and Lapis' introduction to the court, Leon found himself heading toward the Royal Palace once again. He hadn't been there since the audience, as Trajan had sent him a message to stay away for a little while, after which Leon hadn't heard anything from the Prince. But just that morning, the Prince unexpectedly summoned him back without explanation, so Leon set out from Elise's estate early in the morning with Anzu at his side. He'd also been told to pack his weapons and armor and to prepare to leave the capital for a few days, so he had everything he needed in the event violence broke out stored away in his soul realm.

Alix had been officially transferred to Minerva's command, and after moving into her own barracks room, he hadn't seen much of her. Leon wasn't too broken up about it, as he knew that he wasn't the best knight for her to follow, and he also knew that Minerva would be a far better teacher and mentor to Alix than he could ever be. Still, he did feel a bit lonely with Anzu as his only companion; he'd gotten quite used to Alix always being there, and her being gone was going to take some getting used to.

When Leon finally arrived at the Royal Palace's island, he found that he wasn't the only knight in Trajan's retinue to be summoned; about one hundred and fifty knights, their men-at-arms, and their squires had been assembled, many of whom Leon recognized. The only knight present that Leon knew well enough to speak with, though, was Adalgrim, but he was lost in conversation with a handful of other knights and didn't notice Leon's arrival.

Fortunately, Leon didn't have to stand around awkwardly for too long, for Lapis was still spending its time around the palace courtyard—no one knew exactly how to deal with the stone giant, but given that it seemed perfectly content just standing around in the courtyard, no one was in a hurry to change its situation.

"Leon, it's good to see you in good health," the giant said in greeting as it approached him.

"And you, too," Leon automatically responded. Lapis was as massive as it always was, and the blue streaks flowing through its gray stone sparkled in the morning sun. "At least, it looks like you're in good health... do your people even get sick?"

"Not in the way that humans do, as our stone bodies aren't susceptible to disease," Lapis explained. **"However, these bodies are only shells, our true forms are pure magic, and we do**

occasionally get... I guess it could be described as 'sickly' if we are in a magically inhospitable environment, such as at sea."

"I see," Leon said as his interest was piqued. It occurred to him that, for all that the giants were supposedly loyal to him, he hadn't actually taken the time to get to know them. He found it hard to trust these inhuman things, at least as hard as it was for him to trust a stranger. However, he had to admit that Lapis had earned more than a modicum of Leon's trust, and Leon decided at that moment to make a bit more of an effort to get to know the giant. "So there needs to be a sufficient amount of earth magic in the air for your people to function?" Leon asked.

"Indeed," Lapis confirmed.

Most of the magic in the air lacked any elemental power, as most elemental magic came from living things, with humans and other intelligent creatures being the most common source. However, elemental magic was occasionally generated in nature, not to mention some elemental magic stayed in the environment after a mage used their power. Mages below the fifth-tier couldn't make use of that power as they were unable to control it, but mages of the fifth-tier and up could absorb this ambient power through their lungs and either fuse it with their blood or store it in their soul realms, though there typically wasn't enough elemental magic in the environment for this to make much of a practical difference.

However, it seemed there was enough earth magic in the air around the capital for the stone giant to remain healthy, even so far from Lapis' home mountains which Leon guessed were much richer in earth magic.

"So, your bodies are just 'shells'?" Leon asked. "Does that mean you can... like... shed them? And get another?"

"We are not snails, Leon," Lapis said in its deep, rumbling voice. Its tone didn't sound any different than usual, but Leon still got the impression of mild amusement from Lapis, as if it were answering the questions of a child that didn't know any better. And to be fair, compared to the stone giant, Leon was sure that he was essentially a child in its eyes, no matter how many times it may have called him 'Divine One'. **"Our true selves are bound to our bodies, and without the latter, the former cannot exist."**

"Huh..." Leon mumbled in thought. That did bring to his mind questions of reproduction, and he was sure that Lapis would explain that to him if he were to only ask, but he felt like it was probably a sensitive issue—or at least, he knew that he would never want to explain human reproduction to Lapis if the giant were to ask—so he restrained his curiosity.

Fortunately, Leon wasn't left standing there in awkward silence as the doors of the palace opened and Trajan and about half a dozen Legion knights of varying strength came walking outside. Leon felt Trajan's gaze linger on him for a moment, but the Prince didn't stare.

"Gather 'round!" Trajan called out from the front steps, and all those that he had assembled started to congregate around him. Once he felt like he had everyone's undivided attention, he explained, "As I'm sure most of you are already aware, I have decided to loan out a portion of my retinue to the 1st Legion to aid them in their peacekeeping duties. That portion will be made up of all of you. I expect all of you to

follow the orders given to you by the 1st Legion's Legates as if they were my own for the duration of your assignments. Policies for rest and relaxation after any missions will be the same as at the Horns."

Once he was done with his spiel, Trajan silently waved to one of the Legion knights behind him, an elderly Legate with a head full of snow-white hair and a pale face more wrinkled than a plowed field.

"Greetings, everyone," he said politely, drawing everyone's attention. "I am Caelestius Leo Hostilianus, an admin Legate with the 1st Legion. I'll be handling the assignment of your duties, so you'll be effectively reporting to me for as long as His Highness is willing to loan you all out to my Legion. For the time being, I don't have much for any of you, but there are a few knights that I've taken the liberty of assigning an immediate task."

Leon began to subtly frown. He greatly enjoyed the laid-back days he had had at the capital, filled with little else but Elise, training, and finally finding out some details about the fall of his family. However, he knew from Caelestius' statement alone, let alone Trajan's previous declarations to get him out of the capital that he was going to be one of those few knights. Regardless of his mild reluctance to go on missions for this Legate, though, he did acknowledge that the capital was a dangerous place for him to be and that not being around would be a lot safer.

He turned out to be correct, as both he and Adalgrim were called out by the Legate, along with about half a dozen other knights.

Once he'd called who he intended to, Caelestius said to the rest, "I have nothing else for the rest of you, so go home and rest, but report to the 1st Legion's base at the Legion Headquarters tomorrow morning at nine a.m."

For a moment, most of the knights looked to Trajan, but once Caelestius was finished, the Prince nodded and turned around to leave, saying as he went, "I'll leave the rest to you." This was as definitive a dismissal as the Prince was going to give them, so the knights who were not called out began to file out of the courtyard.

Once the Prince returned to the palace, Caelestius said to the small group who stayed behind, "I've singled you all out because I've been told that you're the go-to knights for dealing with more *monstrous* opponents. Was the person who told me that correct?"

The knights all glanced around at each other, but it was Grim who was the first to respond. "You were not lied to, Sir, we are the best in His Highness' retinue at killing the less mundane threats to our Kingdom."

"That's encouraging to hear," Caelestius said, taking note of Grim's confident tone. "Well, we have received word of a possible werewolf that has been killing livestock about a hundred miles north of the capital. I'm tasking all of you with heading over to the farms who reported this issue and hunting this werewolf down, assuming it exists. Since this is information from peasants out in the boonies, this could just be a big wolf or other such misunderstanding. Regardless, you'll be handling it."

"Additionally, since all of you are fifth-tier mages, I'll leave it to all of you to decide on your leader, but I want it settled right now."

There wasn't much deliberation among Trajan's knights, Grim was the one with the most experience in these matters and he was well-liked to boot, so he was unanimously chosen to lead the team. Given his own history with the knight, Leon fully supported Grim's leadership, as he felt the older knight had the perfect temperament for a job like this. Despite this, Leon had a few misgivings about working with the man, given Adalgrim's familiarity with demonic power and the demon resting in Leon's soul realm.

Still, there was little choice in the matter, and Leon trusted Grim reasonably well.

"So, can we expect some specifics?" Grim asked Caelestius once his leadership was decided upon.

"Your destination is a farming village about a hundred miles or so north of the capital's outskirts..." Caelestius explained, quickly giving Grim the specific directions and ensuring the knights knew the way to their destination. "You can requisition horses at the stables, but this shouldn't be a job that lasts longer than a day or two. Still, take all the time you need to do this right."

"Got it, Sir," Grim said.

"Now that all of that is over and done with, I'd like to be perfectly candid," Caelestius began. "I think that sending all of you out there for a single werewolf is extreme overkill. I don't think that this thing, if it even exists, is any stronger than the third-tier, so sending *eight* fifth-tier knights after it is a gross over-use of resources."

"If you think this, why send us at all?" one of the knights asked.

"Because His Highness insisted," Caelestius answered. "I guess the thought of having all of you sitting on your asses and relaxing in the capital, as you all deserve after pushing those Talfar bastards out of our Kingdom, wasn't something His Highness was able to stand. It's not my place to question the orders of a Prince, though, especially when he's lending me so many good fighters to keep the peace with. I just wanted all of you to know that, what you do with that information isn't for me to decide."

With that, Caelestius walked right past the knights and started making his way toward the bridge back to the rest of the capital and the Legion Headquarters. In fact, his parting words and his immediate departure was so out of nowhere that it wasn't until a few moments after he left that any of the knights were able to do so much as grunt in confusion.

"What was all *that* about?" a blond middle-aged lady knight wondered out loud. "There was no *need* for him to say that! So why do it?!"

"I don't... know..." Grim said, his speaking cadence stilted by bewilderment.

With a sigh, Leon said to the rest, "It doesn't matter. If he wants to be an asshole, then let him be an asshole. However, he did essentially tell us to get lost for a couple of days, so we might as well just do that. Personally, I'm looking forward to spending a couple days outside of the city."

"Not surprised you prefer the wilds, Valeman!" one of the younger knights playfully said with a laugh as he threw an arm over Leon's shoulders, though Leon could feel a couple of the other knights subtly glare at him at the mention of where he had come from.

"Yeah, I guess we should get to it, then..." Grim rambled as he cleared the last few confused thoughts from his head. Leon was right, though, it didn't matter why they were being sent out, only that there was a werewolf that needed killing.

Chapter 300: A Relaxing Mission

Leon and Grim's group of knights rode north along a road so small and untraveled that it wasn't even paved after leaving the capital. It would've been paved if it were more well-traveled, but most people would take the much bigger road toward Teira when heading north, but that went north-east, whereas their group wanted to go roughly north-west.

It was just the eight of them, as those that had squires or men-at-arms didn't bring them, but none of them disagreed with Caelestius when the Legate said that he thought that even this small group was too much for the mission they were assigned. A single third or fourth-tier werewolf killing livestock was barely enough of a threat to deploy a single fifth-tier knight, let alone eight of them. Needless to say, the atmosphere between the knights was incredibly relaxed as they rode along, as none of them had any doubts about whether or not they would succeed in their mission.

"... but the place was filled with mold, there was a dresser covering up a hole in the wall, and I could hear rats scurrying around beneath the floor!" one knight, an older man with a thick black beard and graying hair, complained.

"It sounds like it should've been obvious the place was a dive from the moment you saw it," a brown-haired lady knight responded.

"You should just stay with us in the barracks!" said a third knight, a blond man who would've been the youngest had Leon not been present. "The apartments we got are actually better than what we were assigned back at the Horns!"

"My wife doesn't want to live so close to the Legion Headquarters," the first knight explained. "She wants someplace we can raise our kids with other kids. Not a lot of families in the barracks, and even less schools."

"Still, that kind of dinginess shouldn't be legal," the second knight said with a disgusted look on her face.

"It isn't," Adalgrim mentioned. "There *are* multiple regulations dictating that houses must be safe to live in, but the inspectors readily accept bribes, so most of the major landowners will cut a *lot* of corners when it comes to maintaining their properties. Few people with the power to change that seem to care, though, they're far too concerned about the corruption of higher officials to bother themselves with simple safety inspectors."

"Fucking dickheads," the young blond knight bitterly muttered.

For his part, Leon wasn't paying any attention at all to this talk of housing, he was too busy quietly training as best he could in the saddle. They had left the outskirts of the city not too long ago, and he allowed his mind to wander a bit as the group made their way through the countryside. Their horses were fast and well trained, so Leon's horse didn't need much encouragement from him to follow the rest; he could afford to just sit back and relax now that there weren't millions of people all around him.

He was jerked out of his reverie when the young knight asked him, "Hey, Leon! I couldn't help but notice that you weren't assigned a barracks room, where are you staying?"

Leon looked over at the man, his blue eyes sparkling with curiosity. It took a moment for him to refocus on what was around him and process the question, but once he did he simply answered, "I'm staying with my girlfriend."

None of the knights were particularly surprised with his simple answer given that they had all become decently acquainted with him during his time at the Horns, but most were at least hoping for something more since, apart from Grim, this was their first mission with Leon. But after a moment of silence, it was Grim who gave more specifics.

"Leon's lady friend is *extremely* rich, I had to go to her place to deliver a message to him. Her house is... well, more of a palace than a villa. It was in the noble district!"

"Wait, wait, wait," the young knight said—Leon was starting to wish he could remember the man's name, but it was eluding him. "You have a girlfriend? I always thought that you and your squire were... you know, since you two were inseparable, living together, and so close in age..."

"Did you not see this lucky dork and his lady during the triumph?" the old knight asked in disbelief.

"You'd have had to be blind to miss it..." the brown-haired lady knight said with a teasing smile.

"No, I *didn't* see him, I wasn't *looking* for it, and I was busy with my *own* wife!" the young knight retorted indignantly.

"Alix and I are friends, we're not involved in that way," Leon clarified.

"You know, I have to admit, I'm a little surprised, myself," a blond lady knight said. She'd been quiet up until this point, but the surprise of Leon's reveal was so much that she had to join the conversation. "I guess, it makes a bit of sense since you never seemed to be interested in anyone else while we were at the Horns, but you didn't let on at all that you were dating someone!"

"No one asked," Leon replied as he suppressed a smile of embarrassment.

"Doesn't seem like the kind of thing that people keep to themselves, most at least bring up their significant others in casual conversation," the older knight said. "Not even to draw attention to it, just something like, 'my girlfriend once told me...' or other things of that nature."

Leon could only shrug. He never intended to hide the fact that he and Elise were an item, but he wasn't close to any of these knights, and he spoke to them so rarely that Grim was the only one of them whose name he could remember. In fact, this problem was getting to the point that he was feeling extremely awkward, and he couldn't alleviate it by asking their names without looking like an asshole.

The blond man had been riding in front of Leon, but he trailed back a bit and fell in beside the teenage knight. He reached over and threw his arms around Leon's shoulders, just as he'd done when their mission had been given to them and said, "The opportunity to brag has come up! Come on, I can only speak for myself but I'm sure we're all dying to know just what kind of woman has caught your eye!"

Leon smiled sheepishly, then hesitantly began to describe Elise to the other knights. All seven of the others went silent, even those who hadn't participated in their conversation as they were all interested

in hearing some details of the extremely taciturn Leon's life. Plus, he was nearly always completely stone-faced around them, and the sight of him actually embarrassed by their questions was a sight that they all wanted to see.

"The daughter of the Heaven's Eye Tower Lord..." the blond man whispered in amazement.

"How did... is she... I don't..." the old knight sputtered in disbelief, his natural friendliness leaving him unable to say anything disparaging toward either Leon or Elise.

"I'm impressed," the blond lady said with an expression to match her statement.

"As am I," the brown-haired lady agreed.

"That makes a lot of sense," Adalgrim said, dispelling any doubts they may have had regarding Leon's description. "I only saw her once during the triumph, but her family's palace is right next to the Heaven's Eye Tower. If she isn't related to the Heaven's Eye Tower Lord, then that palace would've long been bought out from under her, I'd think."

"I've got to know, what's your strategy? How did you land a girl like that?!" the blond man asked as he pulled Leon closer and stared wildly into the eighteen-year-old's golden eyes.

"Don't be an ass, Lothar!" the blond woman chastised, slightly offended at his womanizing language.

"Yeah, why are you looking for tips when you're married? Looking for a second wife?" the brown-haired woman asked.

"I love my wife, but that doesn't mean I won't be taking another!" Lothar shouted. "I just want to know how a Valeman who never speaks started a relationship with one of the noblest and most beautiful women in the entire Kingdom! Is that so wrong?!"

"Maybe a little," the old man said as he cleared the last traces of shock and disbelief from his expression. "How about you start telling us about your own wife, then? I certainly haven't met her, and I don't think anyone else here has, so who's to say she's not completely mythical?"

"You..." Lothar said in friendly anger. "I will have you know, old man, that my wife isn't fictional!"

"Then tell us about her!" the old knight replied. "Sir Leon shared, so now it's your turn!"

Leon silently chuckled as Lothar removed his arm from his shoulders and began to vigorously defend himself and insist that his own wife wasn't made-up. Of course, no one actually thought he was lying, they were just having fun at his expense, but the fun was infectious, and Leon couldn't help but smile along with all the rest of them. Even Anzu, who had been happily trotting alongside the group, got into the swing of things and began to jump and chirp and flap his wings every time Lothar got angry, kicking up quite a bit of dust.

Over the course of all this, Leon finally managed to learn the other knights' names from their conversation.

The old knight was named Cyricus, and he not only had five wives, he also had fifteen children, more than two dozen grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. However, only one of his wives and her children were staying with him in the capital, the rest were living in his villa in the Southern Territories.

The blond woman was Olympia, and her family included three husbands, though she had no children yet.

The brown-haired lady knight was named Fara, and she chose not to date, as she was still in her mid-forties, a very young age for a fifth-tier mage—and the third youngest of the group after Leon and Lothar—and she wanted to rock the single life for a while longer before settling down with someone else.

By the time everyone had finished regaling the others with tales of their love lives, the village that they were traveling to appeared over the rolling, lightly forested hills of the Central Territories. It was fairly standard as far as rural villages went, being mostly just a small collection of several dozen families that either operated ranches or supported those who did. Miles of fencing made of unenchanted wooden stakes crisscrossed the countryside, clearly designating where one rancher's property ended and another's began.

"What do they raise here?" Lothar wondered aloud.

"Horses, mostly," Grim answered. "I think there are chickens and pigs here, too, but horses are the biggest draw."

"Where are we heading?" Leon asked, cutting straight to the chase.

"That big villa," Grim said, indicating the largest house in the village, a place large enough to be called a small palace. The other houses in the village weren't quite as large, but as they approached Leon could see that they were at least well off, at least compared to some of the other rural villages he'd seen. They were relatively spacious homes, and he could sense enough magic coming from them to know that they probably had some amenities like fine temperature control and magic lanterns in addition to the standard food preservation and water enchantments, and the facades of the houses were painted in dark red and dull gold, rather than simply being the plain brown of the wood that they were made of.

"I thought Sir Caelestius said we were dealing with backwoods hicks, not country nobles," Fara whispered.

"That place is just owned by some rich guy, not a noble," Grim said. "I think we're here in the Exarchate of... shit, what was it called...? I can't remember, either way, there aren't any landed nobles on this side of the capital."

"Might as well get this show on the road," Cyricus said as he led the group toward the mansion on the hill. "We've got a werewolf to hunt down, and if we get it done soon enough, we can sleep in our own beds tonight!"

"Right!" Grim responded.

The mansion was made entirely of wood, though it was surrounded by a low stone wall that Leon could sense a fair amount of magic flowing through, so he guessed that there were more than a few defensive enchantments woven into the stone bricks. The thick wooden gate opened on their approach, leading them into a small cobblestone courtyard edged with thin wooden columns, forming a kind of pavilion around the gate. In the center of the courtyard was a mosaic depicting horses and a bull in blue, black,

and gold, surrounded by a green field. To the right were stables, and the main mansion was directly ahead of them.

However, their attention was drawn to the left, where there was a small detached wing of the mansion that opened up into the courtyard. A middle-aged man possessed with third-tier magic had walked out of this wing just as they came to a halt in the courtyard.

“Welcome!” he called out. “I am Odulf, the guard captain for this estate!” Given that he was unable to sense anything distinct about any of their auras, he acted with as much politeness as he was able to muster.

“I am Sir Adalgrim, I and my comrades have come from the capital after receiving word of a possible werewolf in the area!” Grim responded.

“You’ve come to the right place, then, Sir!” Odulf replied. “Please, let the servants take care of your fine steeds and come and join me inside! We have much to discuss, I think!”