

## Storm King 311

### Chapter 311: Unseemly Display I

"... and that's how it is, that's what we know," Antonius said as he finished his explanation.

"I see..." Trajan replied as he propped up his chin in thought.

Trajan and Leon had immediately gone back to Antonius' office in the Royal Archives after Leon delivered Antonius' letter to Trajan, and Antonius quickly explained what he and Leon had found. What was more, after Leon left, Antonius skimmed through the reports again and found that the rate of vampire attacks had been slowly increasing over the past century. It wasn't so much that it was noticeable year-to-year, but one hundred years ago there had been only five notable vampire attacks, while this year there had been more than a dozen, a rate that was consistent with the past decade or so.

"I owe you an apology, Leon," Trajan said after a few moments of quiet thought. "I'm still not convinced that this is all the work of a single demon, but there's definitely something strange going on here if the rate of vampire attacks is increasing and so many of them are followers of fire demons."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment, but he stayed quiet. Despite the statistical evidence showing that there had been a growing problem in the Kingdom for decades at least, there still wasn't anything that directly pointed to Amon save for Xaphan's word. But Leon both recognized the demon's presence when it had revealed itself to kill Lewis, and he trusted Xaphan, so his belief of Amon's involvement wasn't going to be shaken by Trajan's doubt.

"That still doesn't touch upon what we can do about this," Antonius said.

"We can't decide upon anything ourselves," Trajan responded. "I will call for an emergency meeting of the advisory council to figure out how to deal with this menace."

"Anything I can do?" Leon asked, and Antonius gave Trajan a look that asked the same question.

"Hmm," Trajan hummed in thought. "There is, actually, something you ought to deal with."

"What is it?"

"After you were brought back from your mission injured, I didn't want Lapis to go berserk or to do something that might affect the peace within the capital, so I asked him to move somewhere where it wouldn't be apparent that you weren't going to be around for a while."

Leon frowned a bit at this lie, but he could understand it from Trajan's point of view. He also felt a few pangs of guilt at the fact that Lapis had specifically left the Border Mountains for the purpose of protecting him, and that Leon hadn't let the giant fulfill that purpose. Leon wasn't interested in a babysitter, but after his encounter with Lewis, he also couldn't deny that the possibility of having a stone giant at his back when violence was expected of him wasn't something he ought to ignore anymore.

"Where is Lapis? I'll go check in with him," Leon said.

Trajan thanked Leon, then gave him Lapis' location, which was a fairly out of the way and little-used conference building on the north side of the island.

“Just know that I’d prefer if Lapis stayed here on the island,” Trajan said. “Just having him out in the city could provoke fear.”

Leon frowned again, but once more, he understood why Trajan would want this. They hadn’t yet made peace with the stone giants as a whole, but even if they had, centuries of conflict with them ensured that the public at large didn’t care for the giants, to put it mildly. It would simply be best to keep the stone giant out of the public eye for a few more years until people had a chance to get used to the idea that stone giants weren’t necessarily their enemies anymore.

“I’ll go and see Lapis,” Leon stated.

“Good,” Trajan said. “Antonius, I want you to come with me to the council meeting. You’ll give them the same information you’ve given me, and we’ll figure out the proper response.”

“Got it, Uncle,” Antonius replied, though he looked like he would’ve rather refused. Still, this threat that had been building behind the scenes was grave enough that he could put aside his personal feelings in order to take care of this business.

And with that, the three left the office, with Antonius and Trajan returning to the main palace complex and Leon—and Anzu—heading toward the north side of the island.

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The conference building that Lapis had been sent to was a good choice on Trajan’s part. Not only was it out of the way and rarely used, but it was also quite the feat of monumental architecture. It was essentially a massive terraced pit, like an amphitheater that was too big for regular people to sit in. Covering the pit was a huge and very old dome made of volcanic concrete more than a hundred feet high with a perfectly circular hole in the center.

The dome was held aloft by a series of tall columns and arches, more than large enough for Lapis to enter the building with ease. Running along the entire perimeter of the dome just above the arches was an intricate stone frieze depicting charging bulls and Legions conquering the enemies of the Bull Kingdom. Prominently featured were also the horsemen of the Talfar Kingdom, usually shown fleeing in the face of Bull soldiers, or otherwise defeated in battle.

In the center of the ‘amphitheater’ was a great rectangular stone table, large enough to seat fifty people. However, instead of being used as intended, the table had become little more than a chair for Lapis; the stone giant had sat itself down upon the table and froze, appearing to be no more than a statue. It hadn’t moved in days, not since it had arrived and occupied the building.

But when Leon made his entrance, striding confidently into the domed structure, Lapis stood up much faster than its hulking, stony frame would imply it was capable of.

“Leon, it’s good to see you,” Lapis said in uncharacteristically quiet tones. It had clearly been practicing at speaking with a more ‘human’ volume. “I was growing worried that something had happened to you and that that Prince had sent me here so I wouldn’t find out...”

Leon smiled awkwardly, as Lapis was right on the mark. He didn’t, however, tell the giant that fact.

“It’s good to see you, too, Lapis,” Leon responded as he wiped the smile off his face.

“What brings you out here, if I may ask?” Lapis inquired, its rumbling voice quite pleasant and soothing now that it wasn’t assaulting Leon’s eardrums.

“There’s going to be something happening in the near future...” Leon said as he thought about Amon. With two of the demon’s vampires now dead, Leon fully expected more overt plays on the Demon Lord’s part, and he wanted to be ready. To that end, Leon wasn’t going to take any chances, not with what happened the last time he contended with one of Amon’s vampires.

“Is this ‘something’ of a violent nature?” Lapis asked, its burly arms swaying in anticipation of crushing Leon’s enemies.

“It is, and I would feel much better if you were at my side when it all goes off,” Leon stated, smiling up at the giant.

Lapis had no facial muscles, so it couldn’t smile back, but when it responded, Leon got the impression that whatever the stone giant version of a smile was, Lapis was doing it.

“It would be my honor, Divine One.”

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Enough of Trajan’s assistants followed him to the Royal Archives that he could arrange for an emergency meeting as soon as he left the building. However, just because the meeting was called didn’t mean that it would happen immediately, as the members of the advisory council were all out and about performing their duties, assuming they had duties to begin with—many of the nobles on the council were only there as advisors and had no actual role in government, so some of them might not even be in the city.

Enough important members of the council worked in the Royal Palace, though, that Trajan didn’t think it was an issue if some of the advisors didn’t show up. The meeting was arranged for about three hours after Trajan was briefed on the situation by Leon and Antonius, and the latter joined Trajan in brainstorming some potential solutions to the problem.

However, less than an hour after the two arrived in Trajan’s office, one of the elder Prince’s assistants cautiously knocked on the door. Upon Trajan’s order to enter, the assistant entered and reported, “Your Highness! I was unable to deliver the summons for the emergency meeting to either of the Prince-Regents!”

“Why not?!” Trajan asked as he stood from the couch he was sitting at. Antonius, too, rose from his seat in surprise and concern.

“Both of the Prince-Regents are in His Highness Octavius’ office,” the assistant reported. “I was not allowed access to deliver the summons, Your Highness.”

“I understand,” Trajan said as he immediately made for the door. He had no doubt that August and Octavius being in the same room together was not a good thing, and if there was a fire, then he had to put it out.

Antonius, not feeling like staying behind in Trajan’s office, accompanied him.

Soon enough, Trajan and Antonius arrived outside of Octavius' office, a large and opulently appointed room located much closer to the throne room than even Trajan's office. From the outside, Trajan could hear the sounds of raised voices, though he couldn't discern anything that they were saying through the wood, stone, and enchantments of the Royal Palace's walls.

As he and Antonius approached the door, some of Octavius' assistants, secretaries, and adjutants behind their desks outside of Octavius' office looked like they might try and stop Trajan, but fortunately for them, none of them were willing enough to make a move.

After pushing open the door, Trajan was immediately assaulted by a wave of killing intent and frothing magical auras; he didn't need to listen to August and Octavius' loud argument to know that it had gotten extremely heated.

"... is the definition of corruption!" August shouted as his fifth-tier aura raged, his face twisting in wrath.

"I was doing my due diligence!" Octavius retorted, his own expression not too different from August's and his aura raging within the office. "If there is no evidence uncovered, then there is no reason to conduct an investigation!"

"There was evidence! There was a tip about illegal activity from trustworthy sources!" August roared.

"ENOUGH!" Trajan bellowed, his voice practically shaking the office. In fact, the aura he released *did* shake the room, and one of the glass windows behind Octavius' desk shattered. However, both of the shouting Princes held their tongues as they realized that Trajan had burst into the room.

With the silence that fell in Trajan's wake, he took a deep breath and surveyed the room. Octavius' massive reddish-brown hardwood desk was at the opposite end from the door, and a wall of windows from floor to ceiling was behind the desk. In the center of these windows was a door leading out to a balcony that gave an enviable view of a small garden below, with enough furniture for Octavius to host a small party if he wanted. Within the office were a dozen armchairs, and enough couches to seat another dozen people. The carpets were thick and blood red, there were no less than half a dozen alcoves with marble statues of Octavius wearing silver plate armor and striking various heroic poses, and the walls were covered in huge, obviously expensive tapestries depicting things too abstract for Trajan to perceive with his quick survey.

More importantly than the décor of the office, though, was that Octavius and August were not alone; the Spymaster was sitting in one of the armchairs quietly smiling and waiting for the argument to be over. Octavius' squire was also present, a young man that Trajan vaguely recognized with blond hair and handsome face. He didn't seem to share the Spymaster's amusement with the situation, as his face seemed fixed into a stoic glare that Trajan had seen many times on Leon's face when the young knight was forced to do something he didn't want to do.

After a few seconds of silent staring on the part of Trajan, Octavius and August were thoroughly cowed. Neither spoke another word, and Trajan had their complete attention.

"*What...*" Trajan began before pausing for a moment. The absurdity of Princes, of *brothers* shouting at each other so loudly where their subordinates could hear them was something Trajan found difficult to process. After his pause, he began again. "What *exactly* is the meaning of this unseemly display?"

## Chapter 312: Unseemly Display II

"What *exactly* is the meaning of this unseemly display?" Trajan demanded as he glared at Octavius and August, both at least having the self-awareness to look a little chastised.

Octavius' expression quickly turned combative and he spat, "My *brother* has seen fit to come to my office and scream his bastard lungs out because I made a *sensible* call!"

"There was no sense to what you did, only blatant corruption!" August retorted, though he had at least kept it relatively quiet so that everyone outside the office wouldn't be able to hear.

Trajan rolled his eyes and said, "Both of you can shut your fool mouths!"

August complied, though it took quite a bit of obvious effort on his part. Octavius almost had to bite his tongue to keep from continuing the shouting match.

"What is all this about?" Trajan asked, directing his gaze toward the Spymaster, who had been sitting quietly throughout this whole event.

"Where to start..." Publius muttered with a chuckle of resignation.

Taking his mumbling at face value, Trajan growled, "Start at the beginning."

"Yes, Your Highness," Publius replied as he straightened up in his chair and looked the elder Prince in the eye.

For his part, Octavius was growing angrier the more readily the Spymaster answered Trajan, but in the few seconds since he and August had stopped shouting, Octavius had managed to compose himself. He walked out from behind his desk, leaned against the edge, and crossed his arms in a clear display of authority; at the very least, it was his office, so he had to present himself as being the most powerful person present.

"I received a few reports from a few of my teams of investigators," the Spymaster began, "and they had me quite concerned. After speaking with Prince Octavius, these teams recommended that their investigations be called off due to lack of evidence."

Trajan glanced at Octavius, who flippantly shrugged. Trajan chose to interpret this as tacitly not disagreeing with the Spymaster's version of events.

"What were these investigations?" Trajan asked. His eyes drifted over to August, wondering how he was involved.

"Mostly corruption charges," Publius answered. "There are a few Barons that have been accused of tax fraud, an Exarch accused of imprisoning local nobles on false charges, and most importantly, we received a tip that Duke Decimius of Aurelianorum was using his vast lands to grow Silverleaf."

Instantly, Trajan's mind turned to his own recent dealings with Silverleaf, namely that the reports Leon and Minerva had given him indicated someone powerful had been working with the Silverleaf smugglers in Ariminum. Duke Decimius *could* be that powerful person, he certainly had the resources to build the sophisticated network of smugglers that Trajan, Leon, and Minerva had partially dismantled, but there hadn't been any evidence to indicate that the Duke was guilty of smuggling.

"We began the investigation immediately after Prince August received the tip," the Spymaster explained.

"Who gave you this tip?" Trajan asked August.

August's face contorted in discomfort, and he glanced at Octavius, who was staring at him with a hungry gaze. "I'm... I can't say," he said.

"There has been an unfounded accusation against a *loyal* servant of the Crown," Octavius growled as his mouth turned upward into a subtle smile. "An investigation was conducted, and no evidence was found to corroborate that accusation. That makes the accusations against the Duke slander!"

"We didn't find any evidence because our investigators were murdered on their way to Aurelianorum!" August countered as he glared at his older brother.

"They were murdered?" Antonius asked, speaking up for the first time. Octavius and August almost seemed surprised to see him, as Trajan had so dominated the room that neither of the two irate Princes had noticed their brother until he had spoken up.

"They were killed on route, supposedly by bandits," the Spymaster said. "I believe they were about ten miles into the Duchy of Aurelianorum at the time."

"*Bandits* killed a team of investigators?!" Antonius asked incredulously. These teams were usually made up of a dozen or so investigators, plus up to another twenty or thirty support staff, and led by a fourth or fifth-tier knight.

"That is the story we were told," the Spymaster said.

"Given that these people were investigating him, I'd say his word is rather biased," Antonius said.

"It wasn't the Duke who informed us of the team's unfortunate fate, it was the Count of Etruria," Octavius said.

"... One of the Duke's vassals," Antonius said with an eyebrow raised in suspicion. "Hardly the most *trustworthy* of sources..."

"And what, dear brother, would you know about matters such as these?" Octavius asked as his eyes narrowed in muted fury. "A man who buries himself in books and trinkets of the past is hardly the most qualified to tell me anything about the present."

Antonius vehemently disagreed, but he didn't say another word.

"Bring me the reports, I want to know everything about these canceled investigations," Trajan said to Publius, breaking the tension between Octavius and Antonius, much to the latter's relief. He was only a few years younger than Octavius, but Antonius and Octavius had barely spoken throughout their lives, to the point of being all-but strangers. There was no love lost between them.

Without any hesitation, Publius said, "Yes, Your Highness."

“Rather than waste resources chasing down unfounded rumors and blatantly slanderous accusations, Uncle, wouldn’t it be better to spend that money on funding an expedition to the Serpentine Isles?” Octavius asked.

“You ask that like we can’t do both,” Trajan replied. “These are serious charges, and if I agree that they ought to be dropped, then we can drop them. If, however, I think that they have some merit, then we ought to look into them further. Are you going to fight me on this, Nephew?” Trajan stared at Octavius as if daring the younger Prince to challenge him.

“... No, Uncle, I’m simply trying to do what I believe is best for the realm,” Octavius replied, his face the picture of reasonability and cooperation.

“I hope so,” Trajan replied with a weary sigh. “I *truly* hope that you’re keeping the Kingdom’s best interests at heart, Nephew.”

“Uncle...” Antonius muttered.

“Right,” Trajan said as his rising anger cooled enough for him to remember his priorities. “I’ve called for an emergency meeting of the advisory council. I expect you three to be there.”

The Spymaster immediately replied with an affirmation, though it wasn’t him Trajan was concerned about.

“I’ll be there,” August quickly pronounced.

“As will I,” Octavius stated. “What exactly is this emergency?”

Trajan looked at his nephew and, with all the seriousness that this issue was due, said, “This Kingdom is being infiltrated by vampires.”

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After concluding his business with Lapis, Leon made his way back to Trajan’s office. As he was shown in by one of Trajan’s assistants, he found the Prince sitting in an armchair with his head tilted back and his eyes closed; he was obviously incredibly tired.

Trajan opened his bleary eyes as Leon walked in and said, “That was quick. Everything all right with Lapis?”

“Lapis seems to be fine, but I’ll be taking... him...? I’ll be taking the giant out with me when I next have to visit violence upon something or someone,” Leon responded.

Trajan frowned at the thought of the giant wandering around the capital, but before he could say anything, he remembered the sight of Leon without his left arm, and he held his tongue.

“Very well,” the elder Prince reluctantly said. “I’ve already decided not to use you except in the direst of circumstances, so it hardly matters.”

“I can’t say I hate that arrangement,” Leon said as he took a seat in an armchair opposite from Trajan.

For his part, Antonius stared at Trajan almost in shock. He hadn’t had much time to witness the dynamic between Leon and Trajan, and it was astonishing to see the man who had, not even two hours before,

told the Prince-Regents how things were going to progress without argument turn around and be so accommodating to Leon. If anything, it lent a great deal of credence to Antonius' suspicions about Leon's relationship with House Raime, as the younger Prince couldn't think of any other reason Trajan would treat Leon so much better than his own nephews.

"It's... about that time," Antonius stated as he glanced at the clock.

Time had flown by for Leon, as it was now time for the emergency meeting.

"I suppose it is," Trajan said as he got to his feet, glaring at the clock the entire time.

"Anything I should be doing?" Leon asked.

"Hmm, why don't you come with me?" Trajan suggested. "It wouldn't be a bad thing to see how things work in the council."

Leon frowned, but he responded with, "I... don't *want* to, but I understand the opportunity, and I won't refuse."

"Good man," Trajan said with a smile as he shook some life back into his tired bones. "Now then, let's get this damn show on the road."

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Despite Trajan and August both leaving Octavius' office, Gaius was unable to relax. Octavius was fuming over the whole affair, and his aura was permeating everything within his office, including Gaius.

*'I'm going to have to throw away these clothes...'* Gaius unhappily thought, and he wasn't quite able to tell if he was being sarcastic or not. His blue and black outfit was made of the highest quality cotton from the Indra Raj, a Kingdom far to the south famed for its high-quality textiles and spices.

Though he was using it to distract himself, his attire was hardly his most pressing issue. He could tell Octavius was furious about Trajan going over his head and looking into the younger Prince's cancelation of the investigations into various nobles simply from the way the Prince was leaning back in his chair with his chin resting in his hands. Gaius had only ever seen the Prince he served like this once before, when he was informed that two of the Legions in the Central Territories had accompanied August to the Bull's Horns.

For over an hour after Trajan and August had left, Octavius sat in the chair behind his desk and stewed, not saying a word and definitely not acknowledging Gaius' presence.

But, when the time came to go to the emergency meeting, Octavius stood up and made for the door. As he did so, Gaius breathed a quiet sigh of relief, both because Octavius restrained his furious aura quite a bit and because he had a modicum of hope that Octavius would do something about the vampire issue that Trajan had mentioned. The elder Prince had declined to give more information, indicating that he would wait for the meeting to go into details, but Gaius was already almost shivering in his boots at the implications.

Finally, as Octavius reached for the doorknob, he turned to Gaius and spoke to the young nobleman for the first time since August had stormed into his office.



“You will tell no one what happened here, understand?” the Prince growled.

Having gotten used to these kinds of orders over the past year and a half, Gaius automatically said, “Yes, Your Highness.”

“You’d better,” Octavius rasped, his smooth, soothingly deep voice taking on the sinister undertones of unstated threats.

As his squire, Gaius had seen Octavius in such moods and behaviors that were, in the Prince’s own terms, ‘beneath the dignity of the Royal Family’. Whenever Gaius had borne witness to the Prince’s undignified anger, he’d always been sworn to secrecy, no matter how subdued Octavius’ fury may have been.

It was a short walk to the council chamber, and most of the council members had beaten them there; everyone waited for royalty, after all, so Octavius always insisted on being the last to arrive. This time, however, both August and Trajan hadn’t yet made their appearance, and though Octavius’ pleasant facial expression revealed none of his anger, Gaius could see it in the subtle tightening of the Prince’s shoulders and the way his head tilted when he smiled, turning it into more of a grimace from Gaius’ angle.

The rest of the council members rose upon Octavius’ entry, giving the Prince some small amount of satisfaction, and he immediately sat at one end of the council table, with the Consul of the Central Territories on his right, and the Countess of Lindinis on his left.

The Countess was an elderly woman, with sharp facial features and long grey hair. She was almost two hundred years old, but her body was still possessed of obvious strength, despite what the wrinkles on her face would say. She sat in her chair, her back ramrod straight, her pale blue eyes glittering with haughty pride as she refused to let anyone else enter her gaze.

Lindinis, her County, wasn’t that large, populous, or wealthy, but it was the last territory that bordered the capital city that had yet to fall into the hands of the Royal Family. Her personal army of an estimated five thousand, plus at least another twenty thousand if she levied her peasants, right on the doorstep of the center of power in the Kingdom made her one of the most influential nobles in the realm, despite her territory’s lack of overall importance in the grand scheme of things.

And she had already declared for Octavius.

Gaius couldn’t help but zone out less than a minute after his and Octavius’ arrival. He stood behind the Prince, just as other squires stood not far behind their knights or lords sitting at the table, ready just in case they were needed for something. Of course, if the council members actually needed something, they would call upon the numerous scribes on the other side of the room, while their squires were mostly there as a sign of prestige.

When Octavius took his seat, the quiet chatting of the council members that had been interrupted by the Prince’s arrival resumed, and it was all boring as porridge to Gaius. Sale of property, the weather, and their fashion choices were what these most august men and women of the Kingdom were discussing. In other words, nothing but small talk.

Gaius only snapped back to attention when the door opened again, revealing Trajan, who confidently strode into the room, followed closely by August, and then by Antonius. Few noticed the fourth man who followed the three Princes, and only Gaius's gaze lingered for longer than a few curious moments.

For the first time since leaving the Knight Academy, Gaius was in the same room as Leon.

### **Chapter 313: Emergency Meeting**

Gaius froze as Leon walked into the council chamber. All the hate he held for the other man was still there, though it was now mixed with strange feelings of muted gratitude and guilt after Gaius' behavior during their time at the Knight Academy. In the end, even after Leon's eyes swept over him and displayed signs of recognition, Gaius was unable to do anything.

But it was also the middle of the council chamber, hardly the place for greetings.

For Leon's part, even though he recognized Gaius, he didn't do much more than take note of his presence. He disliked the nobleman for having his fellow trainees assaulted early into their cycle at the Knight Academy, but after more than two years, his feelings weren't strong enough for him to have much of a reaction to Gaius' presence.

Leon's indifference might've once infuriated Gaius, but now, the nobleman couldn't honestly blame Leon for his lack of reaction. In fact, Gaius couldn't think of anything he could possibly say to Leon that could communicate his complicated feelings, so he felt it was for the best that he remained silent and avoid Leon as best as he could for the foreseeable future, at least until he sorted himself out.

But Gaius wasn't the only person there to recognize Leon. His arrival was obscured by the fact that he was accompanying three Princes, but as the latter took their seats at the council table—Antonius didn't have a seat, so he had to wait for one of the nearby scribes to pull one up—more and more of the council members began to realize that he was in the room. By the time he took his place leaning against the wall behind Trajan, both his presence and status in Trajan's retinue were unmistakable, and no one wanted to question him for fear of provoking Trajan's anger.

There was one exception. After the Spymaster so quickly listened to Trajan's orders that explicitly went against his own, Octavius had been unconsciously looking for something to publicly criticize Trajan about. He had been tempted to say something snide about them being late, but he was grateful that Leon was here so that he had something more legitimate to complain about.

"Ah, my uncle and brothers are finally here, all we're missing is Herculanius and we'd have a veritable family reunion..." Octavius said with a sarcastic smile. But as August was about to reply about how he had left out their sisters, Octavius continued by looking at Leon and asking, "Sir 'Leon', was it? My uncle must have quite the good opinion of you to bring you here."

"Leon is one of my most trusted knights, he's here as my adjutant," Trajan replied, saving Leon from the need, which the younger man was grateful for. Now that Octavius had drawn attention to him, all eyes in the room were drawn in Leon's direction. After his appearance in the Royal Court with Lapis, as well as his and Elise's almost public declaration of their relationship during the triumph, almost everyone in the room already knew his name.

"It's your right to bring someone with you Uncle, but surely there were better choices than a Valeman?" Octavius asked with a slight narrowing of his warm brown eyes, the pleasant smile on his lips never wavering.

Instantly, the temperature in the room dropped as many of the powerful members of the council began to leak killing intent at the revelation that Leon was from the Northern Vales.

Taking her cue from Octavius, Floriana, the Countess of Lindinis, said, "Barbarians do not belong here, Your Highness!"

"Indeed," the Consul of the Central Territories agreed, "his presence demeans these storied halls!"

With their Prince giving them direction and emboldened by two of the most powerful nobles present, several other council members began to make similar remarks.

"Your Highness," the Primarch of Lineage hall began, addressing Trajan, "is it not in poor taste to bring a barbarian to this meeting?"

Leon felt his face grow hot, but he kept it as stoic as possible. He didn't have much sympathy for the Bull Kingdom's government, nor for its nobles. He was still human, though, and it strung more than he would've predicted for so many people to reject him out of hand.

Trajan glared at the wizened old man, dressed in simple crimson robes with a golden chain set with rubies around his neck, and was about to retort, but another noble beat him to the punch.

"This sacred place is sullied by that barbarian's presence!" the Count of Tarsus, the richest man in the Central Territories shouted. "He should be--"

Trajan slammed his fist down upon the council's table, instantly silencing the Count as well as anyone else who felt the urge to speak up. Silence fell upon the council chamber for several agonizingly long seconds, and Trajan asked in a dangerously temperate tone given his obvious fury, "Does anyone else wish to add their voices to those just heard?"

Trajan glared around the room, making eye contact with every person seated at the table. No one could meet his gaze for longer than half a second, and neither did anyone speak up.

"To be clear, it is not for any of you to decide who I do and do not bring with me when a meeting is called. Sir Leon Ursus is one of my most trusted subordinates, and that is where this matter ends!"

With Trajan's stance made abundantly clear, Octavius refrained from saying another word, and without him, none of his nobles did either. This matter wasn't big enough for Octavius to truly get into conflict with Trajan over, this small public disagreement was enough for him, at least for now.

For his part, Leon wasn't so offended that he'd carry much of a grudge, but the nobles had made a terrible first impression upon him. Throughout all this, Gaius was staring at Leon with an incredibly strange look. Not only was Leon a knight despite Knight Academy traditions, when Gaius examined his aura out of curiosity, he found that he could barely sense it all.

*'He's fourth-tier already?!'* Gaius incorrectly thought to himself in shock. If he understood what Leon's actual power level was, then he would need a large team of specialists to pry his jaw off the floor. Many

of the nobles who had spoken out against might have been the same if they had realized just how young Leon was, but appearance wasn't the best way to judge the age of a mage after the third-tier.

Hoping to get everyone to move on, Antonius said, "Sir Leon's place of origin doesn't matter, that's not why this meeting has been called." With a look, Antonius handed the explanation over to Trajan.

"After some digging by my nephew," Trajan said with a nod sent Antonius' way, "it has been discovered that vampire attacks have been on the rise for the past century at least, and more than half of them whose elements were identified were users of fire. There has been some circumstantial evidence that it was one demon to blame for this, but regardless of whether that's true or not, what is certain is that there is a vampiric crisis in this Kingdom, and it needs to be addressed."

When he was finished, he saw more than a few skeptical looks from many of the council members, most notably from Floriana and the Consul of the Central Territories—the latter most likely because he and his subordinates were mostly responsible for the recording of Legion activities, so this rise in vampiric activity was happening under his nose. Making his mood even worse, that Trajan called an emergency meeting of the advisory council rather than bringing the issue directly to him spoke volumes to everyone around the table about Trajan's confidence in the Central Consul to deal with the problem.

After Trajan was finished, Antonius then began to outline the evidence he and Leon had collected. Leon remained quiet and was quite content with neither Antonius nor Trajan giving him credit for helping to uncover this issue, as he had had quite enough attention for the day.

Antonius finished his spiel in about ten minutes, and Trajan asked, "Any questions?"

"Do you truly think this is all the work of one demon?" asked the Count of Tarsus with a look of extreme doubt. He clearly didn't think much about this issue.

"I have it under good authority that it is, though I haven't any direct evidence to support it," Trajan responded, to Leon's muted delight.

Tarsus wasn't of the same mind as Trajan, and asked, "How is this worthy of summoning all of here on such short notice? So, a few dozen vampires have been killing peasants, there's always going to be more of them, so this hardly deserves such attention."

With gritted teeth, narrowed eyes, and some leaking killing intent, Trajan responded, "We need to address this *now*, before things spiral out of our control. Vampirism has been on the rise, that much is beyond question, and it is up to this council to deal with that threat until my Royal Brother emerges from training."

His invoking of the King made a few of the high officials nod in agreement, like the Chancellor and the Spymaster, but many of the nobles were unimpressed. Even if they hadn't yet been informed of the King's infirmity, they still greatly enjoyed the increased freedoms that came with having an absent monarch and didn't appreciate the reminder of their feudal duties to him as the King's vassals.

"This isn't a threat, this is a joke," Avidius, the Central Consul grumbled. He spoke softly, though he made little attempt to hide his voice or his contempt for these proceedings. "One or two dozen vampire attacks in a year is hardly something that requires the attention of this council."

"These attacks have been growing in intensity for years," Trajan testily responded, his black eyes turning to Avidius, the Consul of the Central Territories. "That they haven't been noticed yet is an incredibly worrying sign..."

"What are you saying, that my Legions have been collaborating with these leeches?" Avidius inquired with faux-politeness, his own eyes meeting Trajan's with little fear.

"I'm saying nothing, simply that it is your purview to analyze the information sent back from the other Territories, and that those you have doing that job are letting important details slip through the cracks."

Trajan glared at Avidius, but it wasn't until Prince Octavius, whom he was sitting to the right of, said, "There's always some information that gets missed. I can't blame the Central Legions for failing to realize this when they have so much to keep track of. And I most certainly don't believe that there are any soldiers within our ranks who cooperate with such monsters."

Taking Octavius at face value, despite knowing that there would be much more to this if he were only to look for it, Trajan moved on and cast his gaze around at the rest the council. At the very least, the council chamber in the middle of an emergency meeting wasn't the place for him to launch an investigation into corruption and incompetence.

"Does anyone have any suggestions?" Trajan asked the rest of the council members. He and Antonius had done some brainstorming, but they hadn't come up with much that couldn't be summarized as 'what we're already doing, but more'.

"We could put out notices to the largest magic guilds in the Kingdom," suggested Tacitus, the Chancellor. "The Legions can't scour this entire Kingdom for vampires, but we can enlist guild mages to assist us in this endeavor. Doubling the bounty on vampires ought to do the trick."

"There are a few magical rituals we can perform to seek out demonic power," said Laurus, the Chief Steward, almost stopping Leon's heart in the process. "They're expensive and of fairly limited range, but we should be able to find all traces of demonic power around the major cities in the Kingdom if we use our resources correctly."

"Vampires are often given shelter by organized groups of criminals," Publius, the Spymaster said. "I'll put the word out and see if that doesn't bring me any useful leads. Even one or two vampires can lead me to more simply by sharing the power of the demon they worship."

"All good ideas, we'll need to do everything we can," Trajan said. There was little disagreement from around the table after the three top officials in the Kingdom came on Trajan's side. The elder Prince himself gave August and Octavius a steely look and said, "I expect us all to be on the same page on this issue. Get the word out to the Consuls, increase patrols in the countryside, investigate the smaller villages especially, and hunt down any trace of vampirism that can be found."

August immediately exclaimed, "For the sake of our Kingdom, I will do this!"

"As will I," said the Second Prince. With the pressure now on him, Octavius couldn't disagree even if he wanted to.

"We also need to send word to the nobility, so that any vampires we might miss can't find sanctuary in their lands," Antonius mentioned.

“August, Octavius, I’ll leave that part to you two,” Trajan said, his tone brokering no argument from either of the Prince-Regents.

With that, everything that absolutely needed to be discussed had been. Everyone was on the same page, and all that remained was to work out logistics and to coordinate between departments. The meeting went on for about half an hour more as the council members debated how best to use and share their resources amongst themselves, to varying levels of enthusiasm. Many of the landed nobles, in particular, weren’t happy that Trajan was so dominant in the council chamber. Even the few nobles that sympathized with August were getting a bit upset that the younger Prince was letting Trajan take so much of a lead in matters of state.

As the meeting drew to a close, Trajan settled on a timeline. “The triumphal games will begin a few days. Once they are over, we will launch into our operations to root out this vampire menace. I want every demon-worshipping bastard within this Kingdom put to the sword!”

“Yes, Your Highness!” many of the council members responded in unison, including the high ministers. The nobles on Octavius’ side joined in, though their acknowledgment of Trajan was significantly less enthusiastic.

And with that, the meeting was over. The council members departed to begin their arrangements, and Trajan and Leon returned to the former’s office.

“Will I be sent out against these vampires when they’re found?” Leon asked in a neutral tone.

Trajan simply replied, “No.” He honestly couldn’t tell if Leon was disappointed or overjoyed with his decision, but he wasn’t going to back down either way. Leon returned from his last mission mostly dead and missing an arm. Trajan had no intention of letting that happen again. “Go home,” the Prince said to Leon. “If I get you killed, your lady will never forgive me. Go home and train, so that when I am eventually forced to send you again, whenever that may be, you won’t come back in pieces.”

Leon nodded, then made his way to the door. With one last glance back at Trajan, who was stretching his tired body on his couch, Leon left the Prince’s office, picked up Anzu just outside the central palace building, and then went back to Emilie’s estate.

Not even ten minutes after he left, Trajan received a message from August. After the meeting, Trajan thought that it had something to do with the vampire situation, but when he opened it and saw what it truly was, he almost blacked out in anger.

August had issued a formal invitation to Leon to watch the upcoming triumphal games from the Royal box, joining all members of the Royal Family that might attend, as well as the Paladins and a select few other high nobles, in a place of prominence where practically the entire city could see him.

### **Chapter 314: Housing Needs**

The Royal box in the capital’s arena was reserved for the exclusive use of the Royal Family and their personal guests. To be invited to attend the games with a Prince, Princess, or the reigning Monarch meant sitting in that box, where one could be seen in the most public place in the entire Kingdom rubbing shoulders with royalty. Naturally, the Royal Family tended to be quite selective when inviting

others to join them, oftentimes inviting no one but the members of House Raime to watch the games with them.

And August had just sent an invitation to Leon to join him in the Royal box during the triumphal games.

Trajan didn't know how to take this. He knew Leon would likely prefer to refuse, but refusal of a Prince wasn't to be lightly done. He also knew that August was probably trying to buy his way into Leon's good graces since August was aware that Leon was the last heir to House Raime. In fact, Trajan suspected that the only reason August hadn't done anything more overt to try and win over Leon was because of Trajan going out of his way to insulate Leon from the politics of the capital, at least until Leon's recent discovery of vampirism spreading through the Kingdom like a demonic cancer.

With a deep, tired sigh, Trajan set aside the invitation. He wouldn't pass it along to Leon, and he'd give August an excuse as to why Leon couldn't attend. If that failed, he'd simply order August to leave his knight alone.

On the other hand, Trajan was also aware that he couldn't keep Leon away from the politicians forever, his rise was too quick for that. Most of the advisory council members took the step to learn his name after his appearance in the Royal Court and due to his relationship with Elise, but Trajan suspected that if they knew his actual age then they wouldn't give Leon a moment of peace. There would be constant invitations to parties, small get-togethers, private meals, gifts, bribes, and all the rest. And his youth wouldn't stay hidden for long, it would likely be made widely known after his training cycle's knighting ceremony at the Knight Academy.

*'I fucking hate this,'* Trajan bitterly complained in his head. There had been no new information on Justin Isynos, and he hadn't the faintest clue how to handle Leon's presence in the capital. *'Julius, you had better wake up soon, you always knew what to do far better than I ever did...'*

If there was one man who Trajan could always count on to handle the nobles in the capital, it was his younger brother. Now, he could add Leon's status to the list of things he hoped his brother could fix when he awoke.

*If* he awoke.

—

"So what are you doing for the games?" Elise asked Leon as they relaxed in her sitting room. Anzu was sprawled out on the rug in front of them, his wings extended and gently rocking as he breathed.

"Hadn't really thought about it," Leon admitted. "Prince Trajan has intimated to me that he expects my attendance, soooo, I guess I'm not blowing it off. I kind of want to, though. *Really* want to."

"Then how about this," Elise said with a knowing smile, "I'm going to be getting a box with Valeria and Asiya, and they both have said that you're more than welcome to come with!"

"... Really..." Leon mumbled in thought. He hadn't thought much about Valeria since leaving the Knight Academy, and if he were honest with himself, he didn't particularly want to think about her. He'd gotten far too close to her in their time at the Knight Academy, given what he knew.

However, Leon didn't want to force Elise to choose between her friend and him. He also didn't know how to avoid that choice from eventually coming up; he couldn't keep lying to Elise, but he also had no idea how to approach the issue.

"I... will check with Trajan," Leon eventually said. "It'll probably be fine, but since he's all-but ordered me to be there, I should make sure he needs nothing from me, first."

"All right!" Elise said with a glowing smile, and her obvious enthusiasm caused Leon's heart to sink into his feet.

"So..." Leon began in an attempt to change the topic of conversation, "My left arm has been bothering me a bit..."

"What's wrong with it?" Elise asked as her face slid from excitement to concern, which caused Leon's heart to sink even further than it already had.

"... It's a bit stiff, and I can feel some stinging in the joint," Leon explained. "I can channel magic into it just fine, and it doesn't feel like it's lost any strength, but it has been concerning me lately."

"Let's go and speak with my healers," Elise firmly said. She wasn't going to take any chances with Leon's newly regenerated arm.

About fifteen minutes later, Leon found himself in the lead healer's office in another wing of the estate. Elise was there as well, watching the lead healer give Leon's arm a check-up with an anxious look on her face.

The lead healer poked Leon's arm, channeling some of his light magic into it.

"Can you feel any pain right now?" he asked.

"No," Leon answered.

The lead healer nodded, then began to move and stretch Leon's arm, rolling his shoulder around in its socket.

"Anything?" he asked again.

"It's a bit stiff, but it doesn't hurt right now," Leon said.

"Does it hurt at any particular times?" the healer inquired as he channeled some of his magic into Leon's shoulder again.

"None that I can tell, it just flares up a bit at random times," Leon explained.

"Mmm," the healer hummed as he stared at Leon's shoulder and lost himself in thought.

Both Leon and Elise were dead silent as they waited for the healer's diagnosis.

Finally, after an agonizingly long half minute, the healer said, "My best guess... Well, my *only* guess, really, is that because the Meligaent's Obsession wasn't fully mature, there may have been some issues connecting your regenerated tissues with the rest of you."

"Is this something we can fix?" Elise asked.



"I... don't think it will be that difficult," the healer responded. "We need to assist your body's natural healing ability in order to help your new arm adapt itself to your body, and the sooner we start, the better, as this could be a sign that your body is trying to reject the newly-grown appendage."

"That can happen?" Elise asked in shock. She'd seen the arm regrow before her eyes, so she couldn't imagine it would be rejected by the very body it grew from.

"It's exceedingly rare, and I've never seen it happen before, but I've spoken to those who have," the lead healer explained. "However, that's usually from a more normal limb regeneration with applied light magic and healing spells over the course of six months or more. I've never seen a Meligaent's Obsession used, so I couldn't say how much it would help or hurt Sir Leon's chances."

"Do what you can," Elise said. When the healer looked at Leon, he agreed with a quick nod of the head.

What followed was a round of healing spells to dull Leon's pain, though Leon insisted that the pain was more than manageable, and then downing a vial of some kind of potion that would stimulate tissue regeneration. It was a standard part of the bevy of potions and spells that Leon would've taken had he gone the more traditional route of appendage regeneration, so the lead healer was confident that they would work, given enough time.

When it was finished, the healer sent Leon off to rest with the instructions to come and find him if the pain continued for more than a week.

Leon, of course, wanted to spend that time training, but Elise insisted that rest meant rest, not physical exertion. As a result, Leon found himself with Elise back in the sitting room.

"Don't be so difficult!" Elise said as a light-hearted reprimand. When Leon sat down on the couch beside her, he groaned in dejection at being forced to rest.

"I'd rather be training, I'm so close to the sixth-tier I can practically taste it!" Leon complained.

"Your healing comes first, you can focus on your training later!" Elise shot back. Then, with a much softer look, she leaned against Leon and said, "Trust me, love, I know. I'm quite close to the fourth-tier, as well, and I wouldn't mind some training time. However, resting is an important part of life, we can't spend all of our off time training. Besides, this isn't even off time, we have some business to conduct!"

"What business?" Leon asked.

"You said you wanted us to find a house of our own," Elise reminded him. "I can't look myself, nor can you with your duties with Prince Trajan, so I've taken the liberty of bringing in someone to look for a house on our behalf. We just need to get on the same page for what we want this place to have."

"Somewhere relatively small, somewhere private," Leon immediately stated. He didn't want a massive, ostentatious mansion that drew attention, he just wanted a nice place that was relatively out of the way where he and Elise could find some peace when they needed it.

Elise giggled at Leon's instant reply, and said, "We might not be able to find somewhere that's perfect, but we can do our best. For instance, I'm going to have to insist that we get a place in the western part of the noble district. That way, we'll be almost in the middle of the Heaven's Eye Tower and the Royal Palace, so we both can easily get to where we need to go."

"Makes sense," Leon said, agreeing with her reasoning.

"Most of the places in the noble district are on the large side, with a lot of open land," Elise continued. "If we want somewhere private, then we're going to have to organize some landscaping. Do you have any preferences on that front?"

"Not really," Leon replied. "I don't have the slightest clue what would be acceptable on the landscaping side. Honestly, if I had my way, we would drop a small forest down in the middle of the city with our house right in the center, though I doubt that would be the best..."

"No, no that won't do, I don't do well in the forest," Elise said with a smile of both understanding and exasperation. She was a city girl through and through, and she did not like the forests. "Perhaps some trees and hedges, and maybe a large garden for me to practice my nature magic."

"I'll need a good place to train, so if we can't find a place with a training room then we're going to have to have one built," Leon added.

"Indeed, I'd need one, too," Elise said. "We're also going to need a large dining room, just in case we host company."

Leon scowled at that, but he didn't say a word. If Elise wanted to host some people at their home, then he would do his best to accommodate that.

"We're also going to need to take Anzu into account," Leon said as he glanced down at the sleeping griffin. Anzu hadn't moved in the entire time they'd been with the healer, he'd just laid on the floor in Elise's sitting room contentedly napping away.

"So a stable, maybe?" Elise wondered aloud. "It wouldn't be entirely feasible to have the entire house adapted to fit his size, so maybe a comfortable stable, along with an open floor plan that opens out into the courtyard so he can access at least some parts of the house with us..."

"Works for me," Leon said.

The two spoke for a while longer, but in the end, there wasn't much more that they wanted that was important to them. Elise quickly wrote down their few restrictions, and then handed them off to the agent she commissioned to look into available properties.

After that, there was nothing more to do, except to affirm that they would both pay an equal share for the place. Fortunately, neither Elise nor Leon tried to pay more or less than the other, it was going to be equal ownership. Leon greatly looked forward to it, so much so that for a while at least, he completely forgot that Elise was expecting him to go to the games with her, Asiya, and most importantly, Valeria.

### **Chapter 315: Royal Invitation**

For most of an entire day, Leon desperately tried to think of an excuse that he could use to get out of going to the games with Valeria. When remembering how much fun he used to have when sparring with her, a part of him couldn't help but want to go with her, but his reason swiftly overpowered that desire, though he had yet to think of any reason he could invoke to excuse his absence.

His original intent was to consult with Trajan, but early in the morning, a messenger appeared at Emilie's estate bringing word from the Prince that Leon had the day off. Accompanying the messenger was a

letter that Prince Trajan wrote that *strongly* encouraged Leon to stay at home for a day or two while he worked something out.

In this, Leon was more than a little conflicted. For one, there was no reason for Leon to stay at home, so Trajan's insistence on Leon not coming to the Royal Palace felt more than a little demeaning. It was an issue the last time Leon was told not to show up, and Leon was now sick of it.

And yet, Leon didn't want to go against Trajan's orders to stay home. He'd done plenty of reckless things over the past few years, and with Justin Isynos in the capital, he knew that it was best to be cautious.

But Leon needed to get out of going to the games with Justin's daughter.

After spending most of the workday in Emilie's estate, Leon decided to go and speak with Trajan.

—

Trajan was furious. August had gone over his head and invited one of his knights to join the Royal Family for the games. It would all-but announce to the entire Kingdom that Leon was more than just a simple Valeman immigrant.

Still, Trajan wasn't entirely sure how to deal with this situation. He could go directly to August's office and shout at his nephew until the invitation was rescinded, but that might damage the credibility of the Royal Family. An honorable person keeps their promises, and August promised Leon a place in the Royal box.

On the other hand, Trajan didn't want to do anything without consulting Leon first. He'd already made it clear that Leon was expected to attend, so he likely already had plans, and Trajan was hoping that he might be able to use that as an excuse to ensure August could drop the invitation without losing face.

For more than an hour, Trajan sat in his office blankly staring at a wall, carefully controlling his anger so that he wouldn't storm over to August's office and start berating his nephew. That option he wasn't comfortable with, especially since he'd already pledged his support to August.

As he was contemplating August's invitation to Leon, he heard a knock at his office door.

He sighed in irritation and growled, "Come in!"

The door opened, revealing Leon and one of Trajan's secretaries. Trajan was so surprised at Leon's appearance that he didn't say a word as Leon entered the room and the assistant closed the door behind him.

After a few moments, Trajan overcame his surprise and regained his voice. "What are you doing here?" he asked the young knight in a low growl, almost as if Trajan was so enraged at Leon's arrival that he was tempted to bite his head off. Despite this dangerous tone, Trajan's face was completely, almost harshly, impassive.

"Wanted some answers, and needed to ask a favor," Leon answered.

"Favor first," Trajan said, wanting to know what Leon wanted of him before anything else.

"I need an excuse to not sit with Elise during the games," Leon answered in an almost desperate tone.

“Did something happen between you two?” Trajan asked with an eyebrow raised in curiosity.

“No,” Leon honestly replied. “However, she just so happens to be friends with Valeria Isynos, Justin Isynos’ daughter, and Elise is inviting her along with another friend to share her box during the games. I would prefer to keep my distance from Valeria, if at all possible.”

“I see...” Trajan whispered. He closed his eyes and propped up his chin with his hand. He looked tired of life, but that wasn’t too different from how he had usually appeared during the past week and a half since the journey from the Bull’s Horns to the capital.

Silence fell between the two for what seemed like an eternity. However, it wasn’t much more than ten seconds.

“It just so happens that I received something last night,” Trajan said as he waved his hand dismissively toward the letter of invitation on the table between them. “August has formally invited you to watch the games in the Royal box.”

“I’ll be there!” Leon said without hesitation.

“Listen, boy, you shouldn’t be so quick to jump to acceptance,” Trajan said as he sat forward to reprimand his knight. “You’ll be in the most public place in the entire Kingdom, where a hundred thousand people will be able to see you rubbing shoulders with Royalty. They’ll wonder why a Valeman is there, and what secrets he could possibly hide. It might not be the best place for you if you want to avoid attention.”

“Is there any other place I could go to get out of being around Valeria?” Leon asked with deadly seriousness.

“I could make some arrangements to have you seated with my other knights,” Trajan said.

“I’m dating the daughter of the Heaven’s Eye Tower Lord, and I’m one of your knights. There’s no way Elise wouldn’t ask me to ditch them,” Leon said. “If I’m with you in the Royal box, I have an excuse to not only stay away from Valeria but to do so for the entirety of the games. I won’t be asked to stop by for an hour or two, I won’t be expected to make an appearance in her box.”

Trajan sighed deeply enough that his entire body seemed to deflate.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Trajan said after spending a moment to let his stressed and fatigued mind rest. “There are better ways to get you out of this...”

“I’m open to suggestions,” Leon said.

Trajan stared at Leon, his pitch-black eyes boring holes into the younger man. And yet, he didn’t pick up on any hesitation, Leon genuinely wanted to get out of watching the games with his lover and her friends. Since one of those friends was the daughter of Justin Isynos, though, Trajan completely understood Leon’s desire to not hang around.

“Very well,” Trajan whispered with great reluctance. “I will inform August that you’re accepting his invitation.”

—

Two days after Leon agreed to August's invitation, the day that the games were scheduled to begin arrived. The arena could seat a hundred thousand people with ease, plus even more in the private boxes. Hours before the games would begin, the people who had bought tickets had already started to file in.

Leon and Elise were not among these people, and neither were most of the people who bought private boxes. The arena catered quite well to those who didn't want to mingle with the mob, and so offered private entrances to VIPs.

"I would prefer if you were coming with me," Elise said with a look of dejection. She and Leon had taken care of their morning rituals, gotten Anzu settled into the stables with plenty of food—the griffin wasn't too happy to be left behind, but he was finally starting to get used to it—and made their way to the entrance of the estate.

"An invitation from Royalty isn't an easy thing to deny, I would much rather spend the day with you than trapped in a box with three Princes, especially since two of them despise each other," Leon said. He was completely honest, if Valeria wasn't going to be there, then he would've happily gone to the games with Elise.

Elise hugged Leon and pressed her lips against his. When they parted an instant later, she smiled and said, "I suppose it all worked out in the end, we were able to find someone to give your ticket to."

"Oh? Who?" Leon asked. He knew that Elise didn't have many close friends other than Valeria and Asiya. There were plenty of people she was friendly with, but actual friends were difficult things to come by for someone in her position.

Coincidentally, just as Leon asked his question, the estate servants escorted Alix through the front door.

Elise happily smiled and ran to give Alix a quick hug.

Leon smiled, then walked over. "It's good to see you," he said in greeting.

"And you, Sir," Alix replied.

"Drop the 'Sir'," Leon said. His rank of Tribune hadn't been restored, so he didn't outrank Alix anymore after she had been knighted. In fact, from a purely technical viewpoint, since she was now ranked as a Prefect, she outranked him.

"That's... still going to take some getting used to," Alix said with an ecstatic grin. Minerva had been running her ragged with her duties and ensuring she was properly trained, so she hadn't had much time to spend with Leon and Elise in days.

"Take as much time as you need, you certainly earned it after following me around for more than a year," Leon responded with a self-deprecating smile.

"It wasn't that bad," Alix replied.

Leon shrugged. He didn't think he could have ever done what Alix had done, that being to follow someone she barely knew to the other side of the Kingdom and becoming their subordinate.

"To each their own, I suppose..." Leon said.

“Less talk, more walk!” Elise cried as she started pulling Alix and Leon toward the door. They had about an hour and a half to reach the arena, and even with her Heaven’s Eye carriage, their journey would take at least an hour.

“Is Lady Emilie not coming?” Alix asked as they climbed into the waiting carriage out in the long driveway of the estate.

“My mother has work to do, though she’ll attend a day or two of the games,” Elise explained. Since the games would last a week, no one would miss much if they skipped out on a few days.

The three then took off toward the arena. They made good time, at first, but as they approached their destination, the roads became more and more crowded, leaving the carriage with little room to maneuver. Most people who attended the games would walk, but there were a few others like Elise who took their carriages.

By the time they finally arrived at the much less crowded private entrance, there were about twenty minutes left until the opening ceremony. The entrance itself was much like the main entrance, with a massive stone archway acting as a frame for a set of double doors almost fifteen feet high. The atrium behind it was all marble, white stone, and red carpet, with all the statues, painted walls, and tile mosaics that Leon had come to expect from Bull Kingdom decoration.

Despite buying private box seats once before, this was Leon’s first time using the private entrance. The hallway that connected most of the boxes also connected to the main areas, as the private entrance was mostly for people of sufficient social status to use.

“I guess this is where we part ways,” Elise said with a sad smile.

“I guess it is,” Leon replied. “I’ll see you after the games.”

The two lovers embraced, and then Elise and Alix made their way toward the back of the atrium, toward the doors that would lead them to the hallway that connected all the box seats.

Leon, however, went in a different direction. To the side of the atrium was an enormous stairway, and after climbing to the top, Leon found himself in a smaller atrium, with a desk, a set of majestic doors, and about three dozen security officers, all of whom glared at Leon as he appeared at the top of the stairs. None of these security officers were stronger than the fifth-tier, though, so Leon had little trouble walking over to the desk despite their threatening attitude.

“Can I help you, Sir?” the beautiful receptionist politely asked.

“I was invited to the Royal box,” Leon replied. He’d been told he didn’t need the invitation to be allowed in, but he still felt a little awkward just walking up and saying he was invited.

“Your name, Good Sir?” the receptionist inquired.

“Leon Ursus.”

The receptionist didn’t bat an eye at Leon’s last name, and he quickly realized why: she had a short list of everyone invited to the Royal box, so she knew he was coming.

In the end, though, he still had to present his I.D to be allowed in.

When he entered, he found the Royal box as opulently appointed as he expected, with perfect temperature control, glass enchanted so that those on the other side couldn't see inside, and enough furniture to seat about twenty people. Seven people had arrived before Leon, all of whom he recognized. The Chief Steward, the Chancellor, and the Spymaster didn't react much to his presence save for some curious looks, but any thoughts they may have had to question his presence were quickly dispelled when August paused his conversation with Trajan, Roland, and the Brimstone Paladin to greet Leon.

"Ah, Sir Leon, I'm so glad you were able to come!" the young Prince said as he walked over to welcome Leon into the Royal box.

"Leon, good to see you didn't ditch this," Trajan said sarcastically. He didn't actually expect Leon would refuse to show up, but he also wouldn't have been surprised if Leon had done just that.

"I was invited, Your Highness, couldn't refuse," Leon tersely stated. He was already closing up being in the presence of so many powerful and important people. He could feel the three ministers staring at him in curiosity, and Roland was smiling at him in a way that he didn't appreciate—he guessed the Paladin was just trying to be friendly, but Leon wanted none of it.

"Yes, yes you were..." Trajan muttered as he glanced at August. He still didn't know why the younger Prince had invited Leon, though he had made it perfectly clear to August what would happen if he were to reveal Leon's identity. The Fourth Prince had, in response, told him that that wasn't his intention.

Trajan hadn't gotten a clear answer as to why August wanted Leon there, and August hadn't told him. The younger Prince knew that if Trajan knew the real reason, he'd lose his mind over how petty it was.

*'Octavius made such a big deal about Leon being in the council chambers, I can't wait to see him react when he sees Leon here in the box with us!'* August thought in anticipation as he glanced at the clock and waited for Octavius to arrive.

## **Chapter 316: Two Princesses**

"Wow, I never thought I'd be watching the games in a place like this," Alix said in wonder as she and Elise walked down the extraordinarily well-appointed hallway toward their private box.

"This place caters to a specific crowd, so they have to decorate accordingly," Elise said, to which Alix nodded in understanding.

"Makes sense if they want to get ready for someone like you showing up," Alix replied. "They're certainly not getting all fancy for my common ass."

"Really?" Elise asked with a teasing smile. "Are you certain about that, *Dame Alix*?"

To that, Alix had no answer, so the two continued with only Elise's light laughter ringing in their ears.

The two quickly arrived at their destination, a relatively spacious box with half a dozen extraordinarily comfortable seats within. Alix almost screamed in delight as she rushed around the box, taking everything in. The box itself was temperature controlled, there was a long rectangular container along one of the walls filled with snacks, and in case that wasn't enough, there was an attendant waiting just outside the door ready to fetch whatever the ladies wanted.

"This place is amazing!" Alix said, her voice almost dripping with joy.

"Have you never been to the games before?" Elise asked as she elegantly walked across the room and took a seat.

"No," Alix replied as she sat down next to Elise. She then glanced at the other seats and asked, "Will there be other people joining us?"

"Yes, two of my friends, Valeria and Asiya," Elise answered.

"I can't wait!" Alix said with a radiant smile. The prospect of watching the games had put her into a decidedly friend-making mood.

"So, how have things been over the past week?" Elise asked.

"Boring as all the hells," Alix replied. "Nothing but paperwork, and paperwork, and *more* paperwork! Practically everything that Prince Trajan does has to have a stack of papers to record and verify it. I don't think His Highness can even piss without half a dozen notarized records... if you'll pardon my language..."

"That sounds incredibly tedious," Elise said in a sympathetic tone. She, as the daughter of the Tower Lord, was no stranger to paperwork. "And don't worry, I'm no stranger to harsh words."

"With all that said, I've been incredibly fortunate to have been assigned to Dame Minerva," Alix continued. "She's made sure that my training hasn't dropped in intensity, and she's been having me accompany her as one of her assistants, so that I can learn what her job entails."

"I daresay you're being groomed for higher ranks," Elise observed.

Alix didn't agree out loud, but her smile of pride told Elise all that she needed to know.

At that moment, the door was practically flung off its hinges to reveal a beautiful young woman with bronze skin, dark brown hair, and loose bright yellow clothes.

"Asiya!" Elise said in a surprised greeting. "I hope you didn't break the door!"

Rather than laugh about her entrance or shooting a sarcastic barb back at Elise, Asiya just smiled at her friend and looked around the room. Her gaze lingered on Alix for a moment but didn't otherwise acknowledge her presence.

"No Leon?" Asiya asked.

"He had to sit with Prince Trajan," Elise explained.

Asiya clearly wasn't expecting that answer, and she almost reeled from the shock of Leon being invited to the Royal box. However, she recovered in an instant and then hesitantly asked, "No other boys are going to be here, right?"

"Not unless you're bringing them," Elise said with a smile.

Asiya smiled back, said, "Good, I wasn't looking forward to kicking him out..." then ducked back out of the box to wave into the hallway behind her. She then stood to the side of the door and slightly lowered her back into a short bow.



Walking in an instant later was a tall woman with wavy light brown hair, a robust fifth-tier aura—though it was utterly lost on Elise and Alix—and a dull green dress trimmed with gold. She was, in a word, gorgeous, with sparkling brown eyes, full lips that were curved in an almost perpetual smile, and a perfectly oval face. Her hair was done up in a loose ponytail, tied back with a bright green flower with dozens of small, tightly packed petals.

“Your Highness!” Elise exclaimed in surprise as she stood up, for the visitor was none other than Princess Stefania, King Julius’ eldest daughter.

“Please, don’t rise on my account,” Stefania said with a smile that seemed to brighten the entire room. “I’m not going to stay, I just wanted to escort a certain *someone* to this box...”

From behind Stefania emerged another young woman, much shorter than the First Princess but dressed in much the same attire. She was exceptionally cute, with much rounder facial features than Stefania’s sharp, defined, regal face. Her shiny hair was as black as the night sky, and her eyes, hesitantly sweeping around the room, were a soft, light brown.

“Princess Cristina!” Elise cried as she rushed forward to greet the young Princess.

For her part, Alix had all-but frozen in her seat. She wasn’t expecting the Kingdom’s two Princesses to suddenly walk into the box, and she wasn’t entirely sure how to handle it. Fortunately, she had the experience of spending time around Trajan, so she quickly overcame her shock and managed to rise and make a short bow.

“Please, no need for that, we’re all friends here, aren’t we?” Stefania asked when she saw Alix bending a knee in a sharp genuflection.

Alix wanted to say that they weren’t as she had never met either Princess before, but she at least recognized that this wouldn’t be the brightest of moves.

“How did you get out of the harem?” Elise asked as she wrapped her arms around Cristina’s shoulders and pulled the young Princess into a tight hug.

“My sister helped to smuggle me out,” Cristina said with a gigantic grin on her face, any anxiety she may have felt gone now that she and Stefania had reached their destination.

“It wasn’t easy, those knights that my father has guarding the harem are *very* serious about their jobs,” Stefania stated with a sigh.

“That was nothing more than a challenge,” came a third voice from the doorway. Elise looked up and saw Valeria standing in the door, waiting for everyone to clear out so she could enter as well. “Her Highness wanted to come and watch the games, and we weren’t going to stop her from doing that. As her guards, all we could do was to make it as safe and painless as possible.”

“Is that why the attendant that’s supposed to be outside is gone?” Elise asked with a knowing smile.

“And why the knights you two have been assigned to aren’t here as well?”

“I... *encouraged* the attendant to find somewhere else to be for a while...” Asiya responded, sending a wink Elise’s way.

“And I did something similar to the knights,” Stefania said as she smiled at Cristina. “My little sister has been cooped up in that place for too long, I had to get her out for a while.”

“Do any of the Princes know about Princess Cristina being here?” Elise asked.

“My brothers and uncle would likely not allow this, my little sister has yet to be officially presented to the Royal Court, after all,” Stefania said, letting her warm smile slide into a proud and excited grin to match Cristina’s. “We decided it was best not to tell them, better to ask forgiveness than permission and all that.”

“Well I’m glad you came here,” Elise said as she steered Cristina toward the seats. She then turned around and said, “And Stefania, please feel free to stay here for a while, you don’t have to go to the Royal box right now, do you?”

Stefania looked around at the private box, briefly making eye contact with Alix, Asiya, and Valeria, and she saw no hostility in any of their gazes. However, it was Cristina’s entreating gaze that convinced Stefania to stay.

“I *suppose* I could stay for a little while, but I did tell my uncle that I would stop by the Royal box, so I can’t stay for the entire time...” Stefania said as she looked out at the Royal box to their left. The glass covering it could be retracted, but it hadn’t been yet, so it was still impossible to see within. Their private box had no cover for it, but in the sea of people that was the arena, there was little chance that anyone in the box would be noticed unless they were actively being sought.

“Sooo, who’s this?” Asiya asked Elise, looking at Alix. Since it was Elise’s friend who was here, it fell to Elise to make formal introductions.

“This is Dame Alix, she’s a knight in the service of Prince Trajan. She’s currently working directly under Dame Minerva, one of Prince Trajan’s most trusted knights,” Elise said.

She then turned to Alix and began to introduce everyone else, but she went slow so that Alix could have a few moments to process the names and associate them with their faces.

“This is Princess Stefania of House Taurus, the First Princess of the Bull Kingdom. This is Princess Cristina of House Taurus, the Second Princess of the Bull Kingdom. She is Asiya of House Samarid, a squire serving a knight guarding the Royal Harem, and Valeria of House Isynos is a squire serving a knight in the same unit. They went to the Knight Academy together at the same time as Leon.”

“Oh? You know Leon Ursus?” Asiya asked as she took a seat at one end of the row of six chairs. Valeria took the seat at the other end, while the two Princesses sat down in the center. Alix sat between Asiya and Cristina, while Elise sat between Stefania and Valeria.

“Alix squired for Leon while they were at the Bull’s Horns,” Elise said. Her tone was light and without emphasis, so it took a moment for what she said to completely register with her friends.

“Oh, that’s amazing,” Asiya said automatically. Once what Elise said fully clicked in her mind, though, her head whipped around to stare at her red-headed friend and she almost shouted, “Wait, Leon was *knighted*?!”

"He was..." Elise said with a proud smile. She also happened to notice Valeria subtly start at the mention of Leon's name. She already suspected that Valeria had a bit of a crush on Leon, though she had never confronted her friend about it.

*'Hmm, maybe something to keep in mind...'* Elise thought as she smiled and shot her silver-haired friend a look out of the corner of her eye. It seemed Valeria didn't notice, though, as the shock of what Elise said resounded through her mind.

She and Alix then began to take turns explaining everything that happened after Leon left the Knight Academy, though not in great detail. The two especially left out the part where Leon was almost killed on the galley as he was heading toward the fort where he met Alix.

By the end of their story, Asiya and Valeria were both speechless. In a little more than a year and a half, Leon had ascended to the fifth-tier, been knighted by the Consul of the North, accepted into Trajan's retinue, and fought in two large conflicts.

Valeria frowned, feeling slightly inadequate with her own achievement of reaching the fourth-tier by the time she was eighteen. Slowly, though, her face began to warp into the wicked grin of someone supremely confident in their skills presented with a great challenge. And it was one that she intended to win.

*'I can't slack, now!'* she thought to herself. *'When I get home, I'm going to undergo some hellish training to catch up!'* After getting over her shock, she could feel her heart beating like it was trying to escape her chest.

Cristina stared at Valeria's strange expression. "Val...?" the Princess nervously asked.

"Don't worry about her, Your Highness," Asiya said. "She's a training freak, I'm sure she's just fantasizing about how to catch up to and surpass Leon Ursus. Or, *Sir* Leon Ursus, now... Whatever, Val's fine, no need to worry."

"If you say so..." Cristina said as she turned away from Valeria, leaving the silver-haired lady to her own fantasies.

"Still, though, I don't blame her for zoning out like that," Stefania whispered. "How old did you say this boy was? Nineteen?"

"Eighteen, he won't be nineteen for a couple weeks, yet," Elise said.

"Eighteen... That's quite the accomplishment for someone so young. I didn't even reach the fifth-tier until I'd reached thirty!" Stefania mumbled in thought. "I must admit, my curiosity is piqued about this young man. Even more so because he's caught *your* eye, Lady Elise. I hope to meet him, someday."

Elise felt her face almost split in half from her smile of pride. "I will find some time to do so, Your Highness, though I must warn you that he's not that social of a person..."

"Don't forget that I have two brothers who are hardly social, I have plenty of experience dealing with these kinds of people..." Stefania confidently stated, her deep chocolate brown eyes glistening in anticipation.

"Should I be worried about your tone?" Elise asked with a playful smile.

“No, I have enough husbands,” Stefania replied, laughing at the hidden look of concern in Elise’s eyes that only she could see.

“And how are they doing?” Elise asked, moving the conversation along.

As they were chatting, a number of arena workers were running around getting the tracks ready for the opening races. As with most of the triumphal games, the opening ceremony would begin with chariot races, followed by whatever the client wants, and then ending with gladiator matches. In this case, the schedule for the opening ceremony had the races and gladiator fights separated with a naval spectacle.

**“Hear me, citizens of the Bull Kingdom and people of the capital!”** came a booming voice from a small stage on the northern side of the arena. An announcer was standing there with a long metal pole that had a large pearl on the end, powering the enchantment that allowed his voice to be heard throughout the entire arena despite more than a hundred thousand people filling the seats.

Everyone quieted down as the announcer began to speak, and the crowds rippled as the people took their seats.

**“It is time for the games to begin!”** the announcer cried, and the crowd almost exploded, screaming in excitement loudly enough to shake the entire arena.

### **Chapter 317: No-Name Knight**

The games had yet to begin, and Leon stood around, not really knowing what to do with himself. He wasn’t particularly comfortable being in the Royal box, but it got him away from Valeria and that’s all that he had wanted when he accepted the invitation. However, now that he was here, and the attention of the five men who arrived before him was on him, the only thing he wanted to do was to leave.

For his part, August hadn’t invited Leon for any respectable reason; he didn’t want to use Leon’s hidden nobility, he didn’t want to ingratiate himself with a powerful mage, and he didn’t do it to show respect to Trajan by inviting one of his uncle’s knights. Rather, after Octavius made such a big deal about a Valeman being in the council chambers, August invited Leon to the Royal box simply to spite Octavius.

Petty, he knew, but August just couldn’t help himself.

Noticing his knight’s discomfort, Trajan waved Leon over and said, “Take a seat, boy.” The Prince waved toward the seat next to him, and Leon gratefully took it, though this did nothing to redirect the others’ attention away from him.

In fact, Roland walked right on over and took the seat on the other side of Leon.

“Good to see you, Sir Ursus,” Roland said with a wide smile.

Leon fought the urge not to snap back at the Paladin. He didn’t want Roland next to him, not in the slightest. At the least, though, that same sentiment could be divided between Roland, the Brimstone Paladin, and Prince August, as they all knew his identity. However, Roland in particular, given his connection to Adrianos Isynos, Leon had no desire to speak with.

Fortunately, before Roland could start any conversations, Tacitus, the Chancellor, sat down right behind Leon in the second row and asked, “So, Sir Ursus, you’ve been here a good long while, right? How have you found the Bull Kingdom so far?”

Happy to speak with anyone except Roland, Leon turned in his seat and answered, "It's certainly different from the Vales."

"Different in a good way?" the Chancellor asked, his face breaking out into a wide smile.

"Very much so," Leon replied, letting all of his usual reticence to speak melt away so that he wouldn't have to talk to Roland.

If he were honest, he was reasonably certain that Roland hadn't anything to do with his father's death, but that last kernel of doubt was enough for him to want nothing to do with the Paladin.

But that didn't mean that Roland wanted nothing to do with him.

"That's great to hear," Roland said as he joined the conversation. "It's always a great thing to see talented people come to our land and add their skills to ours."

"Indeed," the Chancellor agreed. "And from what I understand, our Kingdom has greatly benefitted from your presence."

Leon fought the urge to stand up and walk away, but that would've been incredibly rude, and these were some of the highest ranked people in the land.

As his actual response, he just nodded in as neutral a manner as he was able. Fortunately for him, Trajan spoke up so he wouldn't have to.

"Sir Leon has done a great many things to strengthen our Kingdom, we're lucky to have him," the Prince stated. "It's just a shame about his reckless streak, if only we could get rid of that, then he'd be a stellar knight..."

Leon silently grimaced, and Roland said, "Reckless, huh? Sounds just like you, Leon."

"You speak as if you know our Valeman friend well, Sir Roland," the Chancellor observed.

"He and his father provided me with crucial assistance during my expedition north to retrieve Heartwood Amber," Roland explained. "I can't even imagine how long my mission could've taken had they not helped me out."

"Ah, is that why you decided to come south, Sir Leon?" Tacitus asked.

He was doing nothing more than making friendly conversation, but it was touching upon subjects that Leon had no intention to talk about. In fact, there was little he wanted to do less than talk about his father to high officials of the Kingdom, as he was certain it would leak to his enemies in no time if he were to do so. His father had made a mistake when he told Roland his true identity, and it was one that Leon didn't want to repeat.

Of course, that hadn't stopped knowledge of his identity from spreading, but there was nothing he could do about that now.

"That's as good a reason as any," Leon stated.

"I... suppose it is," Tacitus replied, a little put off by Leon's answer.

"I have to ask, does your father have any plans to come south?" Roland inquired with a friendly smile.

"No," Leon simply replied with as controlled a tone as he could manage. If he tried for a longer answer, he doubted he could've stayed as respectful as he did.

"That's a shame, I think he could do a lot of good down here," Roland said. "I understand why he wouldn't want to come down here, though. I think if I were in his position I'd stay where I was, as well."

At that moment, the door to the Royal box opened once again, and in walked Octavius, with the Sapphire Paladin, the Earthshaker Paladin, and the Consul of the Central Territories close behind him. Octavius' eyes swept the room, but when they landed on Leon, they narrowed just a bit. What that indicated, Leon couldn't say. Nor did he even care that much.

"I see everyone else is here," the Second Prince stated, his mouth slightly widening into a light smile when he found that he was the last to arrive. It was the privilege of those in charge to make everyone else wait on them, and Octavius greatly enjoyed exercising that privilege.

"Nephew," Trajan said, nodding to Octavius.

"Uncle," Octavius replied, his tone light and carefree.

The other greetings, however, weren't as chill. The Earthshaker Paladin glared at Trajan like he was trying to kill the Prince with his gaze, while Octavius and August pointedly ignored each other, though August kept sneaking glances at his elder brother as if he were waiting for something.

Octavius proceeded to walk across the room and take a seat on the other side of Trajan, right in the center of the front row where the King would sit when he attended the games. This wasn't lost on anyone present, but since this was expected, no one said a word. What wasn't expected was Octavius' followers then sitting down next to him, leaving no room for August except at the end of the front row.

Trajan rolled his eyes and said to the Sapphire Paladin who was sitting right next to Octavius, "It is inappropriate to sit in the center when there are members of Royalty who have yet to take their seat."

Sapphire glared back at Trajan, but Octavius put his hand over hers and nodded. Reluctantly, she rose and moved down, with Earthshaker and the Consul making room for her.

Sitting between the Sapphire Paladin and Octavius was one place that August didn't want to be, but since Trajan had made the room, he quickly sat down. He had a bad feeling that these games weren't going to go well for him, and that made him anxious, which was the only reason he hadn't sat down sooner.

"So," Octavius began as he turned in his seat and stared directly at Leon, "Sir *Ursus*, why don't you tell me a bit about where you come from? I'd love to hear some stories from the Northern Vales from a Valeman."

Trajan's eyes narrowed as he recognized what Octavius was doing by asking that question. The Second Prince was emphasizing the fact that Leon was foreign to the Bull Kingdom, probably as a way to get back at Trajan for making Sapphire move.

Leon couldn't help but frown, but he couldn't exactly refuse the Prince the requested information.

"What does Your Highness wish to know?" Leon asked as politely as he was capable of.

“Who’s in charge over there? I believe we just sent some diplomats into the eastern Vales, but I’m not entirely sure who they’re going to be speaking with...” Octavius said.

Leon thought he detected more than a bit of scorn in the Prince’s voice, and he guessed that the Prince thought this information below him, like the leaders of the Valemen weren’t worthy of his attention. Still, he was asked a question, and Leon had little reason not to answer.

“In the easternmost inhabited Vale is the Brown Bear Tribe, led by Torfinn Ice-Eyes...” Leon began, and he quickly furnished Octavius with as complete a picture of the current political situation in the Northern Vales as he could, though as he had been gone for a while and the death of Hakon Fire-Beard had no doubt shaken things up, Leon had was certain that his information wasn’t the most reliable anymore.

“Mm, fascinating,” Octavius muttered once Leon had finished his short spiel.

Leon had to fight the urge to roll his eyes at how fake the Prince sounded.

“I have to say, Sir Leon,” the Chief Steward said as he took a seat next to the Chancellor, “You don’t sound too enthused about talking about where you come from...”

“Yeah, I’d love to talk about the Northern Vales all day,” the Chancellor said. “Such an isolated place with such strange customs, I don’t know how anyone could be hesitant to talk about them...”

“I grew up in the Vales, but not around other Valemen,” Leon reluctantly explained. “I lived in a small compound far away from anyone else, I was hardly a part of ‘Valeman’ society...”

“It’s true,” Roland said. “When he and his father assisted me, they took us over to the Vale they lived in, and I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if they were the only people who lived within.”

“You were *that* isolated?” the Chancellor asked.

Leon slowly nodded, his hesitancy making it clear that this was a topic that he wasn’t comfortable discussing. Before anyone could ask any more questions, Trajan growled, “You don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.”

The elder Prince’s statement instantly curbed any desire the officials may have had to talk about the strange and strangely fascinating Valemen, and the Chancellor apologized.

“I’m sorry if I offended you, Sir Leon, it’s just that the Valemen are a truly fascinating people, I apologize if my enthusiasm to learn more about your people offended you...”

“It’s... fine, I guess,” Leon whispered, barely getting the words past the giant nervous lump in his throat. He wanted nothing more than to change the topic of conversation and for everyone to just stop trying to talk to him. He wanted to leave and sit in a dark room where no one could see him, and he could relax. But he couldn’t, he had to stay here in this box and talk to this high-ranking people. Leon’s frustrations were growing fast, and there was little he could do about it other than keep talking and hope that no one pressed too hard against things he didn’t want them to know about. “I’ve gotten a lot of questions about the Vales since coming south, but it’s still not something I’m used to. Besides, who wants to talk about me, anyway? I’m just a nobody from nowhere, not worth any consideration.”

His last statement was laced with more than a bit of sarcasm, but the Chancellor could tell that it was more serious than it appeared.

“Sir Ursus, Prince Trajan claimed you as one of his knights in the Royal Court, and you’re in a public relationship with the daughter of the local Heaven’s Eye Tower Lord. I hope you’re not laboring under the delusion that you’re not someone that people find interesting, or that you’re someone insignificant and below the notice of the powerful people in this city,” the Chancellor whispered.

Leon grimaced, and most of the others in the room chuckled or smiled at him. Octavius’ people didn’t though, they barely even glanced in his direction as they waited patiently for the games to begin, which mercifully happened only a scant few minutes later. Leon was certainly grateful, and he enjoyed the reprieve that the opening ceremonies brought him from having to speak with curious people he didn’t trust.

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*‘So this is the arena? Doesn’t seem like much...’* Justin Isynos thought as he took a seat in his private box.

He was roughly on the other side of the arena from Valeria, and he could see her quite easily if wanted to look, but she wasn’t a child anymore and he was happy to let her be alone with her friends.

Justin wasn’t alone, either, he was accompanied by one of his followers, a man with youthful features and a short, stout build. He was just as unimpressed with their surroundings as Justin was.

“Just bear with it, we can blow off the rest of the games later, but it would’ve been an insult to the Royal Family not to at least attend the opening ceremony...” Justin muttered.

The two sat back in their chairs and tried not to look too bored as the opening ceremony began.

### **Chapter 318: The Games Begin**

**“It is time for the games to begin!”** the announcer cried, to the ecstatic cheering of the crowd. They were so loud that they just about shook the arena, and Leon in the sealed Royal box thought that the sound could be heard in every corner of the capital.

As the chariots for the opening races began taking the field, the enchanted glass sealing the Royal box retracted, opening it up for the entire arena to see. Instantly, Leon felt the weight of more than a hundred thousand people looking at him and the others in the box.

Being used to this kind of attention, the three Princes stood up, walked over to the edge of the box, and began waving to the crowd and otherwise playing to the crowd, which only grew louder with the reveal of their Princes.

Octavius enjoyed the hell out of the attention, waving, smiling, and even blowing a few kisses to the ladies in the crowds. August was more modest, merely waving and smiling and trying not to make a production out of it. Trajan was even more subdued, only smiling and waving when he made eye contact with one of his knights sitting in the boxes.

Leon remained seated, as did the others in the Royal box, but he was still able to make eye contact with Elise, and the two shared a quick smile. Leon struggled not to look at Valeria or the other ladies sharing



Elise's box, but Asiya was waving at him so energetically that he couldn't pretend not to notice, so he waved at them.

One thing that piqued his interest was the presence of two ladies who he'd never met before in the same box. One of them had risen to her feet and had buried her face in the snack cabinet, while the other blatantly waved at the Princes with a wide smile on her face. She was beautiful with light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, and Leon thought he saw Trajan pause for a moment in shock when his eyes finally made their way in her direction.

During this entire time, the announcer was extolling the virtues of the Royal Family, talking shit about the Talfar Kingdom, and praising the Royal Legions that fended off their invasion. The four chariots that were taking part in the first race were slowly riding around the perimeter of the arena, their passengers hyping up the crowd while their drivers got a feel for the course.

The crowd cheered mostly for the Blue and the Green teams, which Leon knew were the teams that most represented the commoners. The nobility was represented mostly by the Reds and the Whites, whose chariots were obviously much more expensive and durable. The horses pulling the Red and White chariots were also clearly of better quality, being more muscular and having shinier coats.

Once the opening speech by the announcer was over, the Princes returned to their seats.

"Stefania is here," Trajan said as he slid back into his chair.

"I noticed," August said. "She's not required to be in the Royal box, if she wants to spend time with other noble ladies, then who are we to tell her not to?"

"She's Royalty, she's *above* them!" Octavius complained, but he didn't send anyone to bring Princess Stefania to the Royal box.

A few minutes later, the race began. There were fences, enchanted plates that erupted into flame at set intervals, earth enchantments that created ramps and moving barriers, and even a small artificial river flowing around the track that constantly changed course. All in all, even Leon, who had little investment in the races, could understand why the crowds were so enamored with it, as it was quite the spectacle.

About halfway through the race, the Reds and Whites were predictably in the lead, with the passengers in both chariots constantly hitting each other with training spears and the drivers ramming their chariots into each other, when Leon happened to notice one of the White passengers pause and glance into the Royal box. He then turned back to the Red chariots and stabbed at the wheel, causing the entire chariot to be ripped apart, to the simultaneous cheering and groans of the crowd.

It was an absolutely spectacular crash, though the Red driver, passenger, and horses all seemed to be fine and quickly walked off the field so they wouldn't be hit by the other three chariots as they went around the track. Still, Leon heard a disappointed sigh come from August and a triumphant chuckle from Octavius.

"That Red chariot came apart with just *that* love tap?" the Chancellor bemoaned.

"Mm, doubt it," the Spymaster said.

"What do you mean?" Octavius politely asked as he turned around to face the Spymaster.

Publius simply shrugged in response. Octavius seemed to take a deep breath as if he were getting ready to shout at the Spymaster, but he seemed to think better of it and turned back around to watch the end of the race.

No one else said a word, but Leon felt a current of killing intent come from both the Spymaster and Trajan, and he thought he knew why.

When the White spear made contact with the Red chariot's wheel, he barely managed to see a brief flash of light, as if the spear had been activating an enchantment. The chariot was then ripped apart by its own horses immediately after, right in front of the Royal box.

Given their reactions, Leon knew that both Trajan and the Spymaster had seen the same thing that he had, though they said nothing about it. It didn't seem like many others saw what happened, though.

To the surprise of no one, the White team won the race, though the crowd didn't care. It wasn't until the Blue team crossed the finish line before the Greens that the crowd began to cheer in victory rather than encouragement.

After that, the obstacles were changed around, with some taken out and others added in. Twenty minutes after the first race ended, the second began with a completely different track. Technically speaking, they were different teams from before, as every city with a racetrack had dozens of chariot teams. However, every team belonged to one of the four national factions.

Despite being a completely different team from a different city on the other side of the Kingdom, the Red chariot broke again under pressure from the White team, and just like before, it happened right in front of the Royal box. As the Red chariot broke apart, the crowd went quiet. The chariot teams kept going, but with the overwhelming pressure of the silent crowd, the other three teams slowed down immensely.

There was no denying foul play at this point. One chariot falling apart could be easily explained away, but two was the beginning of a pattern. And yet, despite this obvious cheating, Octavius only quietly chuckled as the Red team limped off the track with significant injuries; the first Red team had gotten off light with bumps and bruises, but the second suffered broken bones, though they were still at least ambulatory.

"Seems to me like the Reds need better drivers," the Central Consul said with a shit-eating grin.

August, being a fan of the Reds, had to fight the urge to get up and slap the Consul across the face.

"I *hope* that nothing like this happens again during the remainder of the games," Trajan growled. "If there are, then there might be *investigations*..."

"I'm sure this was nothing, Uncle," Octavius stated. "Just a poor showing on the part of the Reds."

"That had better be the case," Trajan said in a dangerous tone as his killing intent began to leak out more noticeably, causing Octavius to visibly grow paler.

Again, the Whites won the race, with the Reds not finishing and the Greens beating the Blues. While the third race was being set up, Octavius got up and made to get himself something to eat and whispered

something to the Earthshaker Paladin as he did so. Earthshaker then left the box for about ten minutes, returning just in time to catch the third race.

There were no more 'accidents' involving the Reds, but they were only able to win three races during the rest of the day, out of a total of nine.

Following the races, there was an hour break as the arena was prepared for the naval spectacle. First, pieces of a pair of small war galleys were taken out and assembled in the sands. The arena was then flooded with water about thirty feet deep, rising to just about five feet from the edge of the stone stands.

Given the sheer size of the arena, this was a gargantuan amount of water, and Leon couldn't help but marvel at the magical engineering required to flood the place so quickly. Since there were gladiator fights happening afterward, it was also clear that the arena would be drained at least as fast, and he was looking forward to seeing it.

The galleys floated in this water quite comfortably, and gladiators began to be ferried over to them in rowboats. There weren't any rowers among them, though, as the galleys were propelled with weak water enchantments that could only work in such a confined space. If the same enchantments were applied to boats and ships plying the waters of the Gulf of Discord or the Naga River, then they would utterly fail to do their job.

Once the arena filled back up, the naval spectacle began. The two galleys circled the arena once before barreling toward each other at terrific speeds. They rammed into each other again and again until the rams on their prows had been all but destroyed. The galley in better condition then rammed the other again, allowing their gladiators to board the more damaged ship and begin fighting on the deck.

All in all, more than two hundred gladiators took part in the fight, and it was quite the sight to behold. He didn't have much context for who the combatants were or who they represented, but Leon could at least respect the combat prowess shown, as the gladiators were armed with training weapons so that they didn't have to hold back to stop from killing the others.

The naval spectacle lasted for about forty-five minutes, and then the water was quickly drained. A drain opened up in the center of the arena, and most of the water was gone within ten minutes. Heat enchantments then dried out the sand while workers disassembled the ships and took them back into storage. Less than an hour after the spectacle was over, it was time for the more traditional gladiator battles.

These started off as large-scale conflicts, with teams of twenty or thirty gladiators pitted against each other. No one stood out all that much, but the crowds ate it up anyway. Throughout these fights, the shenanigans with the chariots were largely forgotten, as Leon and the others lost themselves in the grand display.

After these team battles came individual matches, where more well-known gladiators faced off against each other. For these fights, their nonlethal weapons were taken away, and they could fully let loose with their powers, assuming they were strong enough to do so. Much like the last set of games Leon attended, these fights were carefully choreographed to play on the crowd's desires, with the gladiator that received more cheering eventually coming out ahead—usually, at least, there was a still a bit of

spontaneity if a gladiator just didn't want to throw the match. But the crowd made their choices well known, and the entire capital seemed to shake whenever the crowd's favorite won, and that was a hard thing for any gladiator to pass up, making it easy for Leon to predict most of the fights.

Finally, the last fight rolled around as the sun began to set.

"To honor our most noble of Princes, we have arranged for a great match!" the announcer said as he gestured to one end of the arena. His voice was much softer than it had been earlier in the day, and starting to get a bit hoarse, but he was still full of energy. "In one corner, we have Antonius Agrippa, the Golden Man!"

The announcer kept lavishing the gladiator with praise as he took to the sands. Leon recognized the man, with his golden hair and golden armor. He'd seen Antonius Agrippa fight once before, and Leon had a poor impression of the man—the fact that Elise had reacted to his incredible looks hadn't helped, either.

The crowd erupted in cheers as the gladiator walked out. Antonius Agrippa played right to them, waving, winking at ladies, and smiling at everyone. Leon saw his head turn in the direction of Elise's box—not that Leon could blame the gladiator since the box had six beautiful women sitting within, including Elise and Princess Stefania, two of the most prominent noblewomen in the capital—and blatantly blow a kiss toward all the ladies within.

Leon almost turned the armrests of his wooden chair into splinters, he was gripping it so hard in irritation. However, when he glanced in Elise's direction, he saw her looking back at him, and she giggled and winked at him. With a deep breath to keep control over himself, Leon slowly relaxed his grip on the chair.

Antonius Agrippa arrived at the center of the arena, and he turned toward the Royal box and bowed low.

"FOR HIS HIGHNESS, PRINCE OCTAVIUS!" he bellowed, and the crowd only cheered louder.

August managed to prevent himself from grimacing, but he'd had to eat quite a bit of humiliation already when his favored chariot teams had been sabotaged. Still, he managed to keep his Princely demeanor, and he simply smiled down at the gladiator.

The opposing gladiator entered the arena a moment later, dressed from head to toe in thick black armor. In one hand, he wielded a massive black sword, while the other crackled with fire magic. His entrance was not greeted with the same enthusiasm as Antonius Agrippa's, leading Leon to doubt whether the match would be as spectacular as the announcer claimed.

Antonius Agrippa smiled almost mockingly at his opponent, and as soon as the match began, he swung his sword and launched a beam of light at the other gladiator. This light beam splashed over his armor, pushing him back several feet but failing to penetrate. The black-armored gladiator then charged, hurling a fireball as he did so.

However, he just wasn't fast enough to pin the Golden Man down. After a five minute chase, Antonius Agrippa managed to trip him up, knock off his helmet, and rest his blade against his throat.

It was a decisive win, and one that was almost quick enough to anger the crowd. But their Golden Man had won, and so the crowd cheered, though perhaps not as enthusiastically as they might have if the match had lasted longer.

Octavius clapped in congratulations, and while August also clapped, he was much less enthusiastic about it. For his part, Leon had wanted to see the Golden Man eat sand, and he was incredibly disappointed.

In the early days of the Kingdom and in the years before the land was united, the final match of games of this scale had been fought to the death. As time went on and long after the First Bull King unified the region, the reigning Bull King would sometimes grant mercy to the defeated gladiator. These acts of mercy were eventually made the norm, and by now, no gladiator had been deliberately killed in the arena in almost a millennium.

But the King wasn't present to 'pardon' the defeated gladiator, so that duty fell to his Regents.

As was, by now, tradition, August gave the signal for life, giving Antonius Agrippa and his defeated opponent a thumbs up. The black-armored gladiator had fought well, even if he had been defeated relatively quickly, and so the crowd cheered in support for his being granted life.

However, the Golden Man did not retract his blade. The gladiator didn't even look at August. Instead, Agrippa stared at Octavius, his mouth curled in a tight, sinister smile.

Octavius smiled back, extended his arm, and gave the gladiators a thumbs down, the signal for death.

### **Chapter 319: Thumbs Down**

The entire arena descended into an eerie silence. Octavius' thumb pointed down, signaling to Antonius Agrippa to kill his defeated opponent in defiance of almost a thousand years of tradition of no gladiators being intentionally killed on the sands of the arena. So shocked was the crowd that no one made so much as a noise as they watched and waited for something to happen; this was the first time that the tension and disagreements between August and Octavius had been put on display outside of the realm of the high nobility and top Kingdom officials, and seeing the two Prince-Regents in such stark disagreement certainly added to the people's shock and confusion.

August and Trajan, too, stared at Octavius in disbelief. It wasn't until Antonius Agrippa began to move toward the black-armored gladiator that August suddenly came to his senses and said in a panic to no one in particular, "Stop him... Stop him!"

Trajan was the first to respond, but all he said was, "Ursus."

Antonius Agrippa was already standing over his defeated foe, his sword raised and his face smiling at the Royal box, savoring every moment that the crowd was watching him in bewilderment. The black-armored gladiator had fought reasonably well, and there wasn't a soul in the stands who thought that he deserved death.

Still, there was no time for thought, no time for hesitation, no matter how much Leon may have wanted to. He was arguably the fastest mage in the Royal box, with the sole exception of maybe Roland, but it was Leon, not Roland, that Trajan had called out. The younger knight immediately rose and called upon his magic.

Lightning surged out of his soul realm and flooded his body, causing sparks and arcs of lighting to appear near his joints. By the time he reached the edge of the Royal box, he was already a blur.

Antonius Agrippa, seeing Leon sprinting toward him, hesitated to swing his blade for a split second, but as Leon leaped over the barrier of the Royal box and into the arena, he began to swing his sword down. Having been paid by Octavius to follow his instructions and ignore August, he wasn't going to stop here even if he hadn't expected such an order.

But he was still caught off-guard, and that cost him time. Even with his lightning magic, Leon knew he wasn't going to make it to melee range, but Antonius Agrippa's hesitation bought Leon enough time to summon a lightning spear in his right hand and hurl it with as much force as he was capable of. The bolt of lightning flashed across the arena and exploded on the Golden Man's armor, tossing him backward away from the black-armored gladiator like a ragdoll.

Fortunately, the lightning bolt didn't seem any less golden as usual despite Leon lacking his armor that he'd enchanted to help conceal his silver-blue lightning.

Leon didn't slow down just because he'd gained a few seconds, though, and he kept sprinting for the defeated gladiator. He arrived barely a second later and stood over the man with his sword drawn and giving Antonius Agrippa a look that would've killed him if looks were capable of killing.

He kept his lightning magic flowing through his body, and though he felt some stiffness and stinging pain in his left shoulder, he did his best not to show it.

Antonius Agrippa rose from the sand where he'd landed and stared back at Leon, a wide grin on his face as if he were proud of what he'd just attempted to do.

"Well, isn't *this* interesting..." the golden gladiator said as he brandished his own sword at Leon. They were both fifth-tier mages, but Antonius had never lost a match, and his confidence was staggering. Adding to that was the fact that, due to his armor, he hadn't taken any significant damage from Leon's lightning bolt.

As he prepared to charge at Leon, though, Trajan's booming voice filled the arena.

"STAND DOWN!" the elder Prince roared, his voice alone shaking the ground upon which Leon and Antonius Agrippa stood.

—

Elise stared in horror as Leon charged across the sand, hurled a lightning bolt, and stood opposed to Antonius Agrippa. She'd never actually seen Leon fight, and neither had she ever wanted to. Her hands were covering her mouth, barely keeping her from screaming in anger and fear. And yet, there was a harsh edge to fear, as, in the back of her mind, she knew that she would utterly obliterate everyone responsible if Leon were to be seriously injured again.

Beside her, Asiya and Valeria silently watched as well, neither able to say a word as the reality of Leon's power hit them, while Alix fought the powerful urge to leap down into the sand and assist Leon.

"I have to go..." Stefania whispered in shock as she stood up and immediately made for the door.

Cristina, too, stared, her eyes wide in horror, confusion, and muted fascination. The games had been delightful, but she had never thought she'd see real violence before. Such a profoundly alien experience for a girl who had never left the Royal Harem before meant that she couldn't look away, no matter how much she wanted to.

—

Far away from either Elise's box or the Royal box, Justin watched the games with only mild interest. He could appreciate a good gladiator match as much as the next person, but the magical feats put on display were far below what he considered intriguing, let alone impressive.

However, all that changed when Leon leaped down from the Royal box and hurled his golden lightning bolt. Justin froze in his seat, his eyes wide and wild, his heart racing from the sight. By all accounts, Leon's power wasn't too visually distinct from any other lightning mage, but Justin's eyes weren't so easily deceived, especially when Leon wasn't wearing his armor that contained the enchantments that helped him to conceal his power.

*'That power...'* he thought to himself as he saw Leon take his place above the black-armored gladiator. *'It can't be...'*

"That boy..." Justin whispered to his comrade beside him. "I want to know everything about him. *Everything.*"

"Understood," the stout man replied.

—

Trajan's voice echoed through the otherwise silent arena, and there was enough power and killing intent packed into his roar that there were no thoughts in either Antonius Agrippa's or Leon's head of disobedience. Leon relaxed, though he kept his sword at the ready and his eyes on the golden gladiator. After a beat, Agrippa lowered his weapon.

"No hard feelings, pal, I was just following a Royal command," he flippantly said, shrugging his shoulders as he did so.

Leon just glared back and released his prodigious killing intent. Antonius Agrippa was just a gladiator, a sports fighter, and though he certainly had startling killing intent compared to others in his line of work, he couldn't compare to the killing intent of Leon, who had spent his childhood killing and had continued to do so almost three years into his adulthood. For the Golden Man, being submerged in Leon's killing intent was like being dropped headfirst into a freezing lake, and his body immediately felt weak and he began to shake.

The gladiator channeled his own fifth-tier magic throughout his body and just barely managed to fight off the worst effects of Leon's killing intent, but even then, his knees felt weaker than he would ever care to admit. In his own heart, Antonius Agrippa was quietly thankful that he hadn't attacked Leon before Trajan had ordered them to halt.

Despite the golden gladiator's obvious fear, Leon didn't step away from the defeated gladiator in black armor, and he had no intentions of backing away from the golden man until Trajan ordered him to do so. In fact, he didn't even take his eyes off the man, as there was something about his smile that rubbed

Leon the wrong way. He got the impression that Antonius Agrippa would have no qualms about stabbing him in the back, and from the way the gladiator had fought before, Leon knew that he was no man of honor.

Up in the Royal box, Trajan turned and glared at Octavius.

“What were you *thinking?*” the elder Prince demanded to know.

“Watch yourself, *Your Highness,*” the Earthshaker Paladin growled. “You’re speaking to someone who outranks you!” The intimidating effect Earthshaker was going for was slightly ruined by his wide, expectant smile, as if there was nothing he wanted more than to visit violence upon Trajan’s person.

Trajan responded by glaring at the Paladin and whispering in a dangerous tone, “Matters of the Royal Family do *not* concern *you!*”

The Earthshaker Paladin didn’t respond, but Trajan could see him starting to lean forward into a more aggressive sitting position as if he were preparing himself to lunge out of his seat and attack Trajan. Joining him in taking more aggressive stances were the other three Paladins, with both Prince-Regents between them. The Royal Box was quickly becoming a hotbed of magical energy as their auras became wild in anticipation of a battle.

Suddenly, the door to the Royal box burst open, revealing the furious figure of Princess Stefania. She walked right in without a word, her anger plain for all to see.

“Everyone who is not a member of the Royal Family, *get out,*” she snarled.

The three high officials glanced at Trajan, and when he nodded, they immediately got up and made for the door, much to the consternation of Octavius. The Paladins, meanwhile, slowly rose one-by-one, starting with Earthshaker.

Earthshaker and Sapphire glared at Roland and Brimstone, and it almost seemed like they were about to come to blows right there in front of the entire Kingdom. Those that could see into the Royal box from their seats could only watch in terror at what seemed to be going on among the most powerful members of their society.

August, seeing that a fight could very well break out between their two sides, said, “It’s all right, we’ll be fine.”

Roland gave his Prince a questioning look, but the order was not rescinded.

“We’ll be waiting outside,” Brimstone said as he started following the Spymaster, Chancellor, and Chief Steward.

Seeing little alternative, Octavius nodded to his two Paladins, and they, too, began to walk toward the door. Neither side took their eyes off the other for longer than a second.

Once the door slammed shut behind Earthshaker, Stefania did something that she realized she should have done immediately and walked over to the runic circle that controlled the glass window and brought it back out, sealing the Royal box off from the rest of the arena. Had she been calmer, she would’ve done so as soon as she walked in, though the same could possibly be said of everyone else in the room.



Down in the sand, without any further instruction from Trajan, Leon simply helped the defeated gladiator up off the ground and waited for whatever would come next while keeping an eye on Antonius Agrippa. He doubted the Golden Man would do anything at this point, but it paid to be cautious.

Or so he heard, anyway; at this point, Leon would readily admit that he had a history of being reckless and not thinking things through.

The four members of the Royal Family stared at each other, or rather, August, Trajan, and Stefania stared at Octavius like he had just killed a puppy in front of them.

"What were you thinking, boy?" Trajan demanded.

"I don't answer to you," Octavius responded, barely even looking at Trajan as if the elder Prince were beneath his notice.

"You contradicted me in public and went against a millennium of tradition!" August shouted at his older brother.

"Did you even see the reaction the crowd had to you?! Stop looking so damned smug!" Stefania shouted. "That man in no way deserved death, and you are not the King! You do not hold the power of life and death in this Kingdom! Only Father does!"

"And Father is gone!" Octavius suddenly howled back. "With Father's infirmity, it is his Regents that have supreme power!"

"So you're just going to ignore me?! I'm a Regent too, and my command is no weaker than yours!" August indignantly shouted.

"You're a peasant, barely more than a bastard," Octavius growled. "Your word is dirt."

August's face went red from fury. For the first time, Octavius had told him to his face what the older Prince's opinion of August was, and it infuriated August so much that he couldn't think of a response. His brain just locked up from anger and humiliation, and he just sat in his seat staring at his older brother, who considered it a victory and smirked.

But August didn't need to respond. Stefania stepped forward and slapped Octavius across the cheek, the sound of her hand on his face like a thunderclap in the sealed Royal box.

Octavius looked up at Stefania in shock. Never had he been seriously hit before, except maybe when he was first learning the various martial arts expected of a Prince when he was a child. He stared at his older sister as speechless as August, until he rose from his seat a moment later, shouting, "You bitch!"

But before Octavius could take a step towards his sister, Trajan stepped in between everyone and roared, "YOU ARE FAMILY!"

"Then he should act like it!" Stefania replied.

"YOU SHOULD ALL ACT LIKE IT! ALL OF YOU! YOU ARE NOT CHILDREN, STOP BEHAVING LIKE YOU ARE!" Trajan shouted, causing the Royal box to shake. His killing intent filled the box, causing the other three to shiver in fright, and pressure of his aura forced Octavius back into his seat.

“Uncle...” August said, hoping to calm Trajan down a bit and relieve some of the pressure he was putting upon the siblings.

*“Not a word...”* Trajan growled. He walked right up to Octavius, looked the younger Prince in the eye to impress upon him how serious the mistake he’d made was, and said, “You *will* come back and retract your order. Such an order is not worthy of one who carries the blood of the Sacred Bull, our Honored Ancestor. Have I made myself clear?”

Octavius felt like he was being crushed into his seat and barely managed to nod his head. It was only when he did so that Trajan retracted his aura and let the Second Prince rise.

“Open the box,” Trajan said to Stefania. He then glared at Octavius to drive home just how displeased he was with this event.

Octavius pushed himself up to his feet and shaking off the last remnants of fear that Trajan’s aura had caused him and confidently strode over to the edge of the box as the enchanted glass fell back down into the wall and opening the Royal box back up to the rest of the arena.

Every set of eyes in the arena that could see him were locked on Octavius, and apart from some anxious whispering, most of the arena was still just waiting in silence.

Octavius stood there, surveying the crowd, then casting his gaze down to the sand. There, Antonius Agrippa stood, waiting for Octavius’ next order. Opposing him was Leon, and behind Leon was the black-armored gladiator, injured enough that he was barely able to stand.

*‘I am the Prince-Regent here, not him!’* Octavius bitterly thought as he thought about Trajan giving him commands. *‘He’s not my Father, he’s not the King! Where does he get off ordering me around when I’m of higher rank! He’s just a Prince, I’m the Regent! His orders are nothing to me!’*

With his face carefully controlled to show nothing but benevolence and kindness, Octavius made eye contact with Antonius Agrippa and shouted, “My order stands! Bring death to the defeated!”

### **Chapter 320: The Lion and the Gladiator**

“My order stands! Bring death to the defeated!” Octavius roared, further stunning the already shocked crowd.

Leon immediately released his magic senses to keep an eye on Antonius Agrippa while his eyes stared at Trajan. He sought further instruction from his Prince, but he wasn’t going to do so at the cost of giving the gladiator an opening.

Trajan, however, stared at Octavius in disbelief. The elder Prince had no idea what to do now, as Octavius was, in fact, higher ranked than he was, even if the high officials deferred to Trajan more.

But August wasn’t going to take this lying down. He immediately rose from his seat and shouted, “That is an illegal order! There is to be no blood spilled in this arena!”

Leon grimaced at the sight of the Princes disagreeing so publicly, and his expression was mirrored in thousands of faces around the arena. Most of the spectators were commoners without a shred of magical power, and since King Julius had reigned for more than eighty years, they had never known a

time when the Kingdom hadn't been directed by a single will. The sight of their Princes at odds with each other was terrifying at an almost existential level, to the point that the arena was dead silent.

"Isn't this interesting?" Antonius Agrippa said to Leon with a tone so smug that Leon almost attacked him right then and there. "It seems our leaders aren't on the same page. What a shame. Well, anyway, I have been given a Royal command to slay that man behind you, Sir, but in the interest of common courtesy, I'll grant you time enough to get out of my way..."

Leon glared at the gladiator and didn't say a word. He carefully began to retract his killing intent—Antonius Agrippa had already managed to use his fifth-tier magic to throw off the effects of Leon's killing intent, so there wasn't much need for him to keep projecting it. Besides, Leon was already strategizing how to put the golden gladiator down if he were to make a move, and he had a few time-tested opening plays in mind.

Up in the Royal box, Trajan finally decided that he was done playing politics and saving face for his nephews. He stepped forward, grabbed Octavius by the shoulder, and hurled him back into the seats, much to the Second Prince's surprise. Trajan then glared at August, and the Fourth Prince got the idea and sat down next to his brother.

Turning back to the arena, Trajan saw Antonius Agrippa taking an aggressive stance, and recognizing that if the gladiator was going to go this far even after hearing August's order to stop, then Agrippa wasn't going to listen to him. Regardless, he had no illusions about what the result would be of the sports fighter challenging Leon.

"Sir Leon," Trajan shouted, "do what you must, but Antonius Agrippa is not to lay a finger on that man behind you!"

That was all Leon needed to hear. He blocked out just about everything else, so he didn't notice the glass cover of the Royal box closing as Trajan turned back around to face the Princes, he didn't see Elise, Valeria, Asiya, and Alix watching with expressions of mixed horror, disbelief, and excitement, all he saw was the gladiator in front of him.

In that moment, nothing else mattered except Antonius Agrippa and how to defeat him.

Calling upon his magic, Leon prepared himself for battle. However, right before he began, he whispered to the black-armored gladiator behind him, "Make for the exit."

The black-armored gladiator was about to say something about how he'd assist Leon, but before he got the words out Leon's killing intent exploded out of him once again, taking Antonius Agrippa completely by surprise. Leon's killing intent had been retracted slowly enough that the gladiator hadn't realized it, and so quickly got used to not being under that kind of pressure. As before, Leon's killing intent hit him like a brick wall, and he instantly froze in primal terror.

Leon charged, ignoring the bewildered stares of the crowd. Many people had risen to their feet and started heading for the exits after everything that had just gone down, but most people were still in their seats, watching in horrified fascination.

Lightning surged through Leon's veins, raising his speed to the point that Antonius Agrippa didn't even see Leon approach. That lightning then flowed into Leon's left arm, where he began to form a golden

lightning spear that he intended to slam into Agrippa's torso, but just as that magic flowed past his shoulder, he was instantly wracked with pain. It wasn't enough for Leon to stop what he was doing, but it was certainly enough to slow him down for a moment.

Still, with lightning coursing through the rest of his body, that moment wasn't enough for Leon to miss Agrippa. He lunged forward with the lightning spear, stabbing at the golden gladiator's breastplate. The armor was well-enchanted, but Antonius Agrippa was tossed back like a leaf in the wind.

But then, the gladiator pushed himself up from the sand without missing a beat. He had armor, and Leon didn't. He could already see himself winning the battle for that reason alone.

Leon, in contrast to his usual fighting style, assumed a more defensive posture, brandishing his sword in front of him while he quietly tried to use his magic to dull the pain in his left shoulder. Unfortunately, that only aggravated his pain, so he quickly stopped.

*'I guess I'm just going to have to fight through it...'* Leon bitterly thought. However, he never once regretted agreeing to Elise's proposal to use her Meligaent's Obsession to regenerate his arm, for even with the pain, having the arm was better than not.

"That was pathetic," Antonius Agrippa said with a tone of disappointment. "I thought that since you were a knight, you would bring more power to the table. Unfortunately, you're just a boy, aren't you? Not yet a man!"

Antonius Agrippa lunged forward, his light magic carrying him right to Leon, and the gladiator thrust toward the knight's chest, aiming for his heart. However, Leon wasn't so slow that such a simple and direct attack could threaten him, and he twisted his body out of the way, letting the gladiator's blade taste nothing but air.

Leon continued his momentum, spinning away from the gladiator before sending a slash straight toward the back of Agrippa's knee, his family's sword lit up with golden lightning. Agrippa managed to lift his leg and avoid a severe injury, but Leon just continued his assault, raining blow after blow upon the gladiator that Agrippa could barely stand against, even with his armor—Leon had switched back to his usual hyper-aggressive style.

Agrippa was a gladiator, a sports fighter, and he wasn't used to fighting the kind of battle that Leon was. Leon struck with purpose, aiming to kill, or failing that, to injure or to maim. There was no hesitation in his blade. Agrippa, on the other hand, fought for entertainment, and as such was used to taking a more casual approach to battle. Oftentimes, gladiators would only exchange two or three blows before separating to trade insults and play to the crowd. Because of this, Agrippa lost the initiative.

As he pressed against the gladiator, Leon conjured another lightning bolt in his left hand. His shoulder again flared up in pain, but Leon ignored it and brought the bolt into being anyway. Just as Agrippa blocked another sword slash, Leon widened his stance and slammed the bolt into the ground. He already knew that Agrippa's armor was too strong to be penetrated by his blade directly, and it could resist a direct hit with his lightning bolts, so he decided to go for an area-of-effect attack instead, hoping to cause some damage to the gladiator's head or other exposed body parts.

As soon as the bolt was driven into the sand, the two fighters were enveloped in a sheet of lightning. Hundreds of golden arcs of electricity dancing between them, melting the sand beneath their feet. Leon,

of course, was unharmed, but the same couldn't be said for Agrippa. Lightning surged through the air and scorched his perfect, perpetually-smiling face, burning the skin and drawing blood. More lightning ran through the ground and up through his legs, though his armor prevented any noticeable damage on that front. But that armor couldn't protect Antonius Agrippa everywhere, and a few small arcs of lightning forked into the gladiator through his joints, where there were gaps in the golden metal plates.

What was more, the thunder that accompanied Leon's lightning resounded in Antonius Agrippa's ears, deafening him for the time being and putting him off-balance.

But Leon wasn't done. It was in his nature to not stop once he got going until his enemy was defeated, and despite Antonius Agrippa's mounting injuries, the man was still on his feet.

Leon, realizing that he wouldn't be able to use much more magic using his left arm without pain, passed his sword from his right hand to his left, freeing his right for blasts of magic. He was still competent enough in his swordplay to use his left hand, though he preferred using his right.

Calling upon his magic once again, Leon swiped aside Antonius Agrippa's sword with his own, then let loose with a huge gout of flame with his right hand, enveloping the gladiator in magical fire. Since Agrippa's armor seemed to be protecting him fairly well against lightning, Leon tried using the other element in which he was well-practiced enough to use in combat.

The fire worked like a charm, or at least, much more effectively than Leon's lightning did. Agrippa's golden hair caught alight, his armor was scorched and blackened, and the intense heat from the flame caused the gladiator to instinctively drop his blade and cover his face. His clothes underneath his armor began to burn, and the heat built up in the metal plates, making Agrippa feel like he was being cooked within his own armor.

Antonius Agrippa desperately tried to defend himself enough to retake the initiative, but Leon gave him no openings that he was skillful enough to exploit. Leon made this a real fight, and Agrippa wasn't prepared for it.

"I sur—" he began but was cut off. After realizing that he could very well die before the entire arena the gladiator tried to get Leon to stop—he hadn't been paid enough by Octavius to endure this kind of beating—but the young knight didn't even let him get the words out before closing with Antonius Agrippa and slamming his shoulder into his armored foe.

Even with all of his armor and the padding and clothes beneath, Antonius Agrippa felt that impact. He was lifted off his feet with a huge dent in his breastplate, then tossed to the ground, his back hitting the sand hard enough to force all of the air out of his lungs.

Completely stunned, the gladiator was unable to stop Leon from kicking the sword he dropped earlier and sending it flying across the arena. In a last-ditch attempt to salvage his dignity and prevent further injury, Antonius Agrippa finally called upon his own magic, and his eyes began to glow with golden light.

But Antonius Agrippa was slow, his habit of using flashy and inefficient moves coming back to bite him when Leon sank his sword into his lightly-armored armpit before he could conjure a single mote of light magic, the gambeson beneath his armor doing little to stop the aged and venerable blade.

Antonius Agrippa let loose with a blood-curdling scream, and his right arm went slack. Leon had cut the nerves running through his shoulder, nearly severing the arm completely. The gladiator's blood and mana spilled into the sand, and Antonius Agrippa ceased to move. At this point, it was obvious to even those most inexperienced in combat within the arena that the gladiator couldn't win. He'd been beaten so completely that he half hoped Leon would finish the job right there and end his humiliation.

Instead, seeing the defeat in the gladiator's eyes and unwilling to kill before the entire arena, Leon stepped back and waited for further instructions from the Royal box. However, the Royal box remained closed and he could feel almost every set of eyes in the stands upon him.

Every second that he stood there in the sands felt like a lifetime. The weight of tens of thousands of eyes was upon him, the din of thousands of people finally finding their voices and whispering to each other about what all they had just witnessed pressing upon his ears, and nowhere could he look without feeling awkward and self-conscious. This would be the talk of the town as soon as the arena was emptied, assuming it wasn't already, and Leon regretted ever coming back to the capital with every fiber of his being.

'Come on...' he bitterly thought, wanting Trajan to show himself and take charge so that Leon could get out of the spotlight as soon as he could.

"I surrender..." Antonius Agrippa finally groaned, but he was injured enough that Leon barely spared him a single thought, only paying him enough mind to be sure the gladiator wouldn't try to get up off the sand and continue the fight.

Another minute passed, every excruciating second of which Leon wanted to vanish. He desperately hoped that by the time he got back to Elise's estate his ring of invisibility would finally be repaired and waiting for him—had he still had it, he would've used it already regardless of the consequences of showing it off to the entire city. During these seconds, a team of healers rushed out onto the sand and sprinted for Antonius Agrippa, their arms filled with healing spells. They were always waiting in the wings just in case there were any serious injuries during the games, though since most of the participants were mages, it took quite the emergency for them to act.

As he watched the healers quickly prevent Antonius Agrippa from bleeding out and carry him out of the arena, Leon ran out of patience. He made for the exit, intending to make his way back to the Royal box the long way instead of waiting where everyone could see him.

It wasn't until Leon disappeared from view that the arena started to regain a sense of normalcy. The last fight had been fought, and then some. The people were now quite willing to get out of the arena as fast as they could, and the air was filled with nothing but voices discussing everything that had just happened. Once everyone started talking in earnest again rather than simply whispering amongst themselves, the arena regained the lively atmosphere it had had before the final match.

Despite all of this, though, there was no movement from Elise's box; all five ladies who were still within made no moves to leave.

Similarly, in Justin's box, Justin Isynos didn't get up from his seat. Instead, he sat back, his eyes unfocused as he tried to process everything he had just seen, particularly Leon's lightning. It wasn't silver-blue, but Justin just *felt* that it was similar to the power of House Raime that he had witnessed and

fought against when he killed Kyros Raime. The stout man who had accompanied him to the games, however, had left long ago. Justin wanted to know everything about Leon, and the stout man was going to do his best to deliver.