

Storm King 361

Chapter 361: Blood of House Taurus

Searing pain filled Trajan's mind. He wasn't dead, but the spear in his chest had done extreme amounts of damage. His armor and ribcage had kept him alive, despite the titanic power packed into that attack, diverting the tip of the spear away from his heart and into a lung instead. It was still a serious injury and he was in danger of bleeding out if he wasn't given time to administer first-aid, but Trajan could still fight, at least for a little while.

In an instant, Trajan suppressed the pain he was feeling with a swift application of magic power, while also kickstarting the healing process. He could vaguely hear the sounds of screaming and fighting from outside and knew that the fifteen knights he'd left outside were in just as bad a situation as he was, so he had no time to lose. He had no time to dig around in his soul realm and apply a healing spell or drink a healing potion, either.

Struggling back to his feet, Trajan glared at the Earthshaker Paladin, the man who had thrown the spear and killed the other four knights Trajan had taken into the warehouse. The Paladin himself stood there, watching Trajan summon the strength to stand.

"Come on, old man," the Paladin taunted, "that's not all the fight that the great and mighty Consul of the East possesses, is it?"

"Petrus Duronius," Trajan growled with as much disgust as he could express. "The bait with Leon Ursus, that was false, wasn't it?" Trajan asked, his tone low and dangerous. He ripped the spear out of his chest and stood upright, the blood flowing from his wound already beginning to slow. If he could keep the Paladin talking for just a few more minutes, Trajan would be in a much better position to fight; he needed every moment to prepare himself that he could get if he was going to win in a duel with a seventh-tier mage.

"Of course it was, no one seriously cares about some savage from the Northern Vales!" the Paladin said. "But his name had a surprising use: it was already known that you would do just about anything for a knight under your command, but when it comes to that boy, it seems you have a particular soft spot. That made it easy enough to lure you out here with minimal guards."

Trajan breathed a silent sigh of relief. He didn't think that anyone would willingly go after Leon and risk provoking Heaven's Eye, but such a threat hardly mattered much to vampires who weren't an active part of society to begin with. Now that he knew that his enemies *were* a part of the Kingdom, it meant that Leon was about as safe as he could reasonably be under these circumstances. Still, they used his name, and that brought Trajan here.

Normally, in a situation like this, Trajan would've wanted at least a few hours to prepare. He'd have needed overwhelming force to take down a seventh-tier mage, as most had enough power that pinning them down and bringing that force to bear upon them was quite difficult. Rare was the mage who made it to the seventh-tier without damn fine skills in battle, though as the Bluefire Guild founder proved, not unheard of.

The Earthshaker Paladin was most definitely a seventh-tier mage who had reached his position through training and battle—though Trajan knew for a fact that there was more to the story than that.

Regardless of how he got the power, though, to Trajan it only mattered that Earthshaker had the power and the skill to use it. He prepared himself as best as he could, hardening his skin into stone and letting the power of the Sacred Bull flow through him. Trajan felt his muscles inflate and energy course through his body; his strength surged with the power of the Sacred Bull, and his already incredibly impressive musculature became even bigger.

At this point, the Earthshaker Paladin was done waiting. His smiling face turned sharp and he darted forward with speed greater than what his earth magic would imply, slamming his fist into Trajan's breastplate. It seemed to rain fingernail-sized wyvern scales in the warehouse as Trajan's armor bent inward. Trajan himself was thrown back, though he managed to keep his feet beneath him even as his chest wound was ripped open again.

Earthshaker paused again, grinning at Trajan like a madman, clearly enjoying every second of this.

Trajan scowled—not even he could've put such a huge dent in his armor, and beyond that, the armor was beyond expensive. To see it so quickly battered was disheartening, to say the least.

"Why don't you lay down and accept your death?" Earthshaker suggested. "That would make things a lot easier, though I would personally prefer it if you were to resist a little..."

"Julius should've made you a head shorter back then..." Trajan growled, and he stomped a foot onto the stone floor of the warehouse. A massive stone spike burst from the ground in front of the Paladin, but it immediately flattened and halted on its journey toward Earthshaker's chest as if it had hit an invisible wall.

But that new wall of stone was large enough to block Trajan from the Paladin's view, and in the instant that Earthshaker dismissively caused the flattened spike to shatter and collapse into sand, Trajan waved his hand and ripped up a chunk of the floor and hurled it at the Paladin. Again, the Paladin easily froze it in front of his face, but the chunk of stone, perhaps half the size of the Paladin's head, had gotten quite close to smashing in his nose.

And then it exploded less than a foot away from the Paladin, penetrating the Paladin's casual defenses and showering him in stone shrapnel.

The Earthshaker Paladin screamed, but when the dust cleared, he was revealed to have only sustained superficial wounds; a few scratches on his face, some torn clothing, barely enough to draw blood.

But Trajan wasn't waiting around, he knew that in terms of magic power, he was completely outclassed. Rather, he used these two attacks to close with the Paladin, trusting in his prodigious strength enhanced by the power of the Sacred Bull to carry him through at least to survival, if not to victory.

Trajan's armored fists fell upon the enraged Paladin. Earthshaker wasn't armored, but his skin hardened just as Trajan's had, and he raised his arms to block as he planted his feet and assumed a defensive stance, lowering his center of gravity.

The first of Trajan's punches was aimed at Earthshaker's jaw, and his right fist bore down upon the Paladin like a meteor. The Paladin stepped back, avoiding the blow. Trajan continued with an uppercut with his left, but again, Earthshaker nimbly stepped back and avoided it. The Prince then threw himself

forward, intending to shoulder-bash Earthshaker, but the Paladin twisted out of the way and kicked Trajan behind the right knee.

Fortunately, Trajan remained standing, but pain lanced through his knee. Still, as he worked himself up more and more, his muscles seemed to vibrate with the power of the Bull flowing through them and Trajan's fury grew deeper—the Prince barely felt pain in his current state. Frost was already forming on many surfaces of the warehouse from the sheer amount of killing intent both combatants were emitting, but now the force of their auras began to have a physical effect upon the world, pushing away dust, small wood splinters, and little bits of debris like powerful wind.

Not that Trajan noticed any of this happening. His blood burned, and he began to lose his reason. He charged at Earthshaker, not intending to let the Paladin retake the initiative. A seventh-tier mage was always going to be stronger than a sixth-tier mage, but Trajan had the blood of the Sacred Bull on his side. This fight was more even than the Earthshaker Paladin would ever admit.

Trajan sent another punch rocketing towards Earthshaker's face, and as the Paladin raised an arm to block, Trajan suddenly opened his fingers and grabbed the Paladin's forearm. Instantly recognizing the danger he was in, Earthshaker pulled back, anchoring his feet in the ground with earth magic and yanked hard on Trajan's arm. The Prince didn't budge, though he was forced to release the Paladin's arm to avoid being thrown over Earthshaker's shoulder and onto spikes that were rapidly forming behind them. But twisting like that took a moment or two to recover from, and Trajan once more charged the Paladin.

The Prince hit the Paladin like a ton of bricks, slamming into his midsection and lifting Earthshaker off the ground by about a foot or so. Trajan kept charging, crashing through the spikes behind the Paladin and hurling him into the wall with a tremendous crash, almost knocking the stone wall down with the force of Earthshaker's impact.

But Earthshaker fell from the impact point, landed on his feet like nothing happened, and conjured a small palisade of rock spikes to keep Trajan at bay.

"Not this time!" he roared, and he snapped his fingers, causing every piece of metal in the warehouse to rise up into the air, hover for a moment, and fired them all at Trajan.

Trajan found himself assaulted on all sides, but with the Sacred Bull's power coursing through his veins, it was all he could do to maintain the presence of mind to keep his stoneskin active. He did nothing else to defend himself from these attacks. Instead, he projected his magic into the stone floor and tried to take control of the ground around Earthshaker and the wall behind him. However, the Paladin's magic power was already there and easily fought him off.

Trajan grimaced as nails, hinges, and other bits of metal began to tear into him, the dulled pain bringing some amount of clarity back to his mind. He acted quickly, taking control of the ground around him rather than around the Paladin and instantly shattered the stone into sand. With a wave of his hand, this sand rose up and began to spin around Earthshaker's stone palisade in an attempt to rip away the Paladin's stony skin. Earthshaker's defenses were up, though, and the sand spun uselessly around him, not even blinding him with the Paladin's magic senses also projected.

"NOT GOOD ENOUGH, OLD MAN!" the Paladin roared in glee.

Trajan roared something utterly incomprehensible as his rage grew with tiny injuries piling up. His stonesskin held, his battered armor did its job, but neither were perfect, and Earthshaker was powerful. A nail here and a sliver of iron there would get through, leaving Trajan bleeding from a couple dozen small cuts. None of these injuries would be even remotely life-threatening on their own, and given Trajan's power, many of them instantly scabbed over and began to heal, but Trajan could do little to stop them from continuing to add up.

The wound in his chest, on the other hand, continued to leak blood like an open faucet, and blood loss was already starting to take its toll on the Prince, severely weakening his magic power.

"I can't tell you how happy this makes me, Trajan!" Earthshaker called out from within the cyclone of sand that still swirled around him, looking for any weakness in his defense. "After all these years and all these enemies we've fought, it's *me* who gets to kill you!"

Again, Trajan could make no noise other than a harsh, guttural roar with his blood so stimulated. The Bull within him was raging to the point that he didn't even notice that the screams and the sounds of fighting outside had quieted. All he saw was the Paladin in front of him, and the only thing he could think about was his all-consuming desire to rip Earthshaker apart with his bare hands.

Trajan charged one more time, completely disregarding the stone palisade around the Paladin. His massive frame crashed into the stone spikes, obliterating many of them, but Earthshaker simply jumped right out of his defensive line. Trajan's sand followed him, but Earthshaker didn't let his defenses lapse and the sand still couldn't get close enough to him to start doing any real damage.

The Paladin landed on his feet and crouched down to grab something, while at the same time Trajan burst out of the remains of the palisade and barreled toward him with all the fury and power of a raging bull. He was like an unstoppable machine, and there was the briefest of moments when his killing intent got to Earthshaker and the Paladin fully believed that nothing would stop Trajan.

However, Earthshaker's powerful aura and killing intent reasserted itself but a moment later, and he stood back up with his spear back in hand, the tip still red with Trajan's blood.

'This is it, you old bastard,' Earthshaker thought with satisfaction, and he stabbed forward with the spear less than a second before Trajan would've hit him.

Trajan's momentum was enough that he wasn't thrown back, but he was completely stopped in his tracks. There was no pain, but the Bull's blood rage faded from his mind and his gaze fell from the smugly grinning Earthshaker Paladin and down to the spear sticking out of his chest.

At such close range, the spear had about as much trouble tearing through Trajan's already damaged breastplate as it would've through a single sheet of paper. It penetrated the wyvern scales, the metal, and the cloth gambeson, tearing through the already damaged enchantments that had been designed to stop such a thing from happening. It pierced Trajan's stonesskin like it was still soft flesh and it broke through Trajan's ribs, the last true defense the Prince had in its way.

And it impaled the Prince's heart, the gateway to Trajan's soul realm.

Trajan's legs were the first to give out. He collapsed onto the floor, barely able to hold himself upright. He limply grasped the upper haft of the spear, but even with the strength of the Sacred Bull, Trajan couldn't pull it out. He'd simply lost too much blood, and he hadn't the strength anymore.

His soul realm was gone. The instant the spear impaled Trajan's heart, it had been utterly destroyed, with his magic body still within.

Trajan felt cold and began to shiver. It was a feeling that he hadn't felt in a long time, a true chill that seeped into his bones. He tried to summon some magic power to fight it off as his surroundings seemed to fade away, but his body wasn't responding as it should.

His mind began to grow cloudy once more, but this time it wasn't rage that was the cause, it was... something else that he wasn't quite aware of, everything just felt too detached. His body didn't even feel real anymore.

His vision went dark, and images began to flash through his mind's eye. He thought first of his father, Julius Sextus, dead for almost ninety years by now. He had been strong and fought off a great number of enemies, both internal and external. He had ruled over a golden age that Trajan had known he lacked the skills to preserve if he were to succeed his father.

Time began to bleed into itself, and for a moment Trajan thought he was there in the throne room the day he made the single best decision of his life: renouncing his claim to the throne. It had been done with a light heart and absolute certainty that what he was doing was the right thing. He knew that his younger brother would make a better King, even if Trajan was a better warrior. And even that was to later be called into question as his younger brother, Julius Septimius, passed him by in the arts of magic to ascend to the seventh-tier.

Trajan wished he could speak with his brother again and consult with him about the challenges he was facing in the Eastern Territories, but for some reason that he couldn't quite remember, that wasn't an option anymore.

Another face flashed through his mind, that of Dame Minerva. She was an intelligent woman, had a wonderful grasp of the Bull Kingdom's bureaucracy, and was strong on top of that. If he hadn't vowed to himself to support his brother in all that he could and never begin a cadet branch of House Taurus that might challenge the claims of Julius' children, he might've had a thing with Minerva. However, they never tried, and right now, Trajan couldn't help but feel some amount of regret.

At least, he thought, they had been friends.

Many more faces went through his mind, those of friends both long dead and those who still walked in the land of the living, including Kyros Raime, Constantine, Aquillius, and the Bronze and Penitent Paladins. However, the last face he saw in his mind was that of a young boy, the spitting image of a younger Kyros.

Leon.

Trajan had always supported House Raime just as House Raime had always supported his family. It had been a terrible blow to Royal authority when one of their most powerful supporting families had been wiped out, and an almost crippling blow to King Julius. Thinking of both Kyros and Julius, Trajan felt

shame, regret, and immense loss. Two of the closest people to him in life had been lost so close to one another, and they could never be replaced.

And then into his life walked Leon, one of the last connections the old Prince had to his younger days, to his glory days when the Bull Kings were strong and the Bull Kingdom's power was unquestioned. Now, so many things had changed, he was leaving so many things undone. He was terrified about what might happen to Leon with him gone. They hadn't known each other for very long, relatively speaking, but Trajan already loved that boy like the son he never had. Perhaps it was overcompensation on Trajan's part due to some guilt that he felt for the death of Leon's family, but Trajan could no longer say, his days of reflection and self-examination were over.

Trajan slumped over on the ground, no longer possessing the strength to remain upright. His fingers feebly twitched a few times, and he fell still.

The last feeling Trajan ever had was regret and fear. Regret that he couldn't do anything more for Leon and House Raime, and fear that without him, the Bull Kingdom would soon break into civil war.

He could only hope that August was up to the task, that Leon could prove himself a worthy heir to House Raime, and that Justin Isynos—or whoever had been responsible for the murders of Kyros, Alexander, Artorias, and so many others who served House Raime—was brought to justice. He had done what he could, and he knew it wasn't enough.

It wasn't nearly enough.

Trajan's mind went dark.

He took his last breath, then died.

Chapter 362: A Coming Storm

The Sapphire Paladin diligently cleaned the blood from her blade, not even looking at the rest of the Legion knights around her. However, she bathed the surroundings in her magic senses, just in case. Dealing with someone like Trajan wasn't the easiest prospect, and she wanted to be sure that the months of planning that had gone into this ambush wasn't wasted by a few moments of negligence.

The plan itself was quite simple: lure Trajan away from the Royal Palace, and then kill him as quickly as possible. It was finding enough knights who were loyal enough to Octavius to go through with the plan that was the primary issue, as two seventh-tier Paladins wasn't enough, at least according to most of the advisors that Octavius had let in on this plan. The Central Consul, though, had managed to find enough knights and transferred them to the 1st Legion, where they could be of service to Octavius in this endeavor.

The city was quiet under the watchful gaze of the Sapphire Paladin; it seemed that no one had been alerted to the fighting in this part of the city. Trajan's knights were killed in short enough order, none of them able to stand against so many knights from the 1st Legion and a seventh-tier Paladin. Perhaps if Trajan had shown up with three or four times as many knights, it would've been a different story, but he only arrived with nineteen knights in tow.

And now they were all dead at the Sapphire Paladin's feet. Not even a single drop of blood had fallen upon Sapphire's bright blue turquoise armor, glittering even in the low light of the relatively deserted

district, more than a few gleaming sapphires adding to her armor's luster. She could've worn the silver Paladin armor that she had been given upon her ascension to the seventh-tier, but she preferred her own gear.

Still, it was best not to linger long, and she quickly ordered the 1st Legion knights to get packed up and to scrub the area of any sign they were there. When the bodies were discovered in the morning, there had to be no physical evidence of any kind that she and the 1st Legion had been there.

To that end, Sapphire flipped her long blonde ponytail over her shoulder and began to walk toward the warehouse. She wasn't in court and had even just gotten out of a battle, but she didn't let her noble demeanor slip for even a moment; she walked with grace, her back straight, her face impassive, and her head held high. She could've been walking through the gardens in the Royal Palace for all her attitude betrayed her, not through the scene of a massacre of knights loyal to a Prince.

When Sapphire entered the utterly trashed warehouse, she found Earthshaker still there, standing over the fallen corpse of Trajan, re-buttoning his pants. Upon the air Sapphire detected the faint smell of ammonia, making it clear that her colleague had just urinated on Trajan's body. Scattered around the warehouse were five more corpses, four of them being the knights that had accompanied Trajan inside, while the last dead man was the messenger who led them there to begin with, either killed accidentally in the fighting or deliberately by Earthshaker after silencing the Prince.

The lady Paladin curled her lips in disgust; the Prince had already fallen, his head had been severed and his heart skewered, anything more was needless.

"What?" Earthshaker shamelessly asked once he realized she was standing behind him. He turned and smiled at the Sapphire Paladin and let his eyes wander up and down her body without bothering to hide his gaze.

"Worthless filth," Sapphire said with a caustic tone, her eyes locked onto Earthshaker's. "Enemy or not, that is a Prince!"

"I don't care," Earthshaker responded. "He infuriated me, he tried to have me executed! I promised myself long ago that I would piss on his corpse, and that is not a promise I was going to let go unfulfilled!"

"I shouldn't have to explain to you why what you just did turns my stomach, do I?" Sapphire asked, glaring at the other Paladin.

"Please do, I'd *love* to hear it," Earthshaker responded with a provocative smile.

Instead of indulging the vile Paladin, Sapphire walked forward, her killing intent spiking so quickly that even her fellow Paladin could feel his hair standing on end. "If you ever disrespect House Taurus again, I will take your head myself!" To emphasize her point, she drew her blade and rested it upon Earthshaker's shoulder.

Earthshaker was silent for a moment, seemingly testing Sapphire's resolve, but his smile was clearly frozen on his face. He didn't truly think she'd follow through on her threat to kill him, but *maiming* him on the other hand...

“... Consider your point made,” he said, gently raising his hand and pushing the blade off his shoulder and *far* away from his neck.

“Good,” Sapphire said, her expression of anger suddenly and jarringly turning into one so happy and pleased that it practically radiated sunshine. “Octavius will be pleased that we succeeded in our task!”

With that, she turned around to leave, but Earthshaker hung around for a moment longer, simply watching her go. His eyes drifted downward and, again, he made no attempt to hide this from her.

“Yeah, go run back to His Highness, I’ll bet you can’t wait to ride his cock like a good little whore,” he muttered under his breath. He either thought she couldn’t hear him, or he thought that she wouldn’t turn around after already turning to leave. He found how wrong he was when her fist materialized as if out of nowhere and slammed into his face, sending him reeling back like a ragdoll.

When he managed to right himself, Earthshaker instinctively prepared himself for battle as blood flowed from his lip and a couple of his teeth felt loose. However, Sapphire continued to stroll toward the exit as if nothing had happened—as much as she didn’t much appreciate Earthshaker, his power was real, and her lover, Prince Octavius, needed it greatly. Beyond that, he was Octavius’ maternal uncle, and she couldn’t bring word back to her Prince that *two* of his uncles were dead instead of only one. That simply wouldn’t do.

Earthshaker shook his head, spat on the ground, and then made to follow Sapphire. If he had his way, he’d chain her up and make sure she never moved again while he had his way with her body. However, she was Octavius’, and that made her effectively out of reach. If Octavius ever tired of her, however... well, Earthshaker could only hope he was there to offer to take her off the Prince’s hands.

As he passed the corpse of Trajan—which he’d recently beheaded—Earthshaker took one last moment to spit on the fallen Prince, and then proceeded to leave.

By the time both Paladins came outside, the knights of the 1st Legion were ready to go. They were the sort to participate in an assassination attempt on a Prince, but that didn’t make them sloppy or undisciplined. The large group left, leaving nothing in their wake save for a ruined street and the corpses of Trajan and the knights that had followed him.

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Leon woke up relatively early. He’d slept quite deeply, at least for him, and though he was typically loath to rise any earlier than he had to, he decided to get up. He had a great deal of work he wanted to get done, and though he loved his sleep, once he was awake, his plans started popping back into his head and prevented him from slipping back to sleep.

Carefully, Leon extricated himself from the tangle of limbs that he, Elise, and Naiad had become during the night. He wasn’t too worried about either waking up, as both were heavy sleepers, but he took as much care as he could, regardless. Once he was up, he quickly dressed and went out to his enchanting workshop. It was so early that the chef Elise typically had come in to make their meals hadn’t yet arrived, and Leon had to resist the temptation to grab a quick snack.

It was still dark out, with the sun barely beginning to peek over the side of the plane in the east, but Leon couldn't see it, for the sky was completely overcast with dark storm clouds. He could smell rain in the warm air, the wind was picking up, and Leon could hear the rumble of distant thunder.

To anyone else, this would've had the makings of a terrible day, but to Leon, storms were something to look forward to, and he enjoyed them immensely. He was too strong now for them to have the effect they once had—stimulating his blood and all-but forcing him to train—but he still felt energized and deeply comfortable during a raging storm.

And yet, there was something ominous in the air, something that gave Leon a slight feeling of dread. It wasn't enough for him to be fully aware that he felt it, but it was still more than enough to prevent him from smiling at the sight of a cloudy sky.

Upon entering his workshop, Leon immediately went over to the corner where the boxes of arrows were. Most of his recent attention had been taken up by his efforts to figure out viable flight, but that wasn't his only goal in the past year.

Leon had many spells that he could tie to arrows and fire at his enemies, but with his recent advances in magical knowledge from the Thunderbird and his own efforts in learning enchanting skills, he knew he could do better than that.

Most spell-arrows were used similarly to how he used his, by simply tying spells to arrows. This was the most cost-efficient way to use spell-arrows, but the spells themselves were limited by the material that they used. Spellpaper was a sturdier kind of paper that could take the magic coursing through them without being shredded, which normal paper couldn't. It also had the advantage of being flat and malleable enough that an entire enchantment could be inscribed and rolled up without loss of effect.

However, paper was still paper. It was relatively fragile, weakened in rain, and the paper flapping in the wind of the fired arrow could slow it down or make it less accurate. In cases of hurried crafting, the paper could even be ripped off the arrow before reaching the destination.

To counter these shortcomings, Leon had been trying to adapt the enchantments to the arrows themselves, inscribing the spells upon the far more durable shaft and arrowhead—being more durable, the arrows could then handle more magic power, thus making the spells stronger.

One of the most useful things a spell—and, more generally, enchantments—could do was to enhance the magic power that was channeled through it, either by amplification, more efficient use, or some other similar manipulation of that power.

This is how Leon was able to use his own relatively meager fifth-tier powers to use his Thunderblast spells so liberally during the war with the Talfar Kingdom despite having to supply those spells with his own power. Most utility enchantments could use charged gemstones for power—and, in fact, Leon was hoping to use a few charged gems to power his future flight suits, and perhaps even get some power-enhancing stones put into his armor—but most spells had to have power channeled into them by the mage using them. More durable materials meant more power could be channeled into them, which *greatly* increased the power of a spell.

However, spellpaper was light, very cheap, and easy to produce, while the arrows were more expensive and had significantly less surface area. Inscribing enchantments over such a small and uneven surface

area was difficult and time-consuming—two more reasons why spells attached to arrows was preferable—but Leon kept at it. It would probably always be faster, more economical, and more flexible to continue using spellpaper tied to the arrows, but this was a good way for Leon to get his mind off of other things and approach them with fresh eyes later while still using his time productively.

Besides, it was something to practice and challenge himself with, and he greatly enjoyed the work. So into his work was he, in fact, that he didn't even realize that Elise had come into his workshop until her arms wrapped around his neck in a loose hug as he sat at his drawing board, quill in hand as he scratched at the paper in front of him drawing hundreds of runes with an arrow next to him for reference.

"How's it coming?" she asked.

"Not well," Leon answered. "I've had some success with fitting small, mostly useless spells onto my arrows, but every spell useful in combat that I come up with is too big or symmetrical to fit on the uneven surface of an arrow. Still, I'm refining the design, and I have confidence that I'll get it right eventually."

"If it was easy, everyone would use arrows like that," Elise added. "However, I have faith you'll figure it out."

"Thanks, love," Leon responded as he allowed Elise to pull him away from the drawing board.

"Come on, breakfast is ready. I think Naiad will even join us, today!" Elise said happily.

"Really?" Leon asked, an intrigued expression on his face. Naiad rarely ate—as an eighth-tier equivalent being, she didn't strictly need to. Still, decades of life and millions of years of ancestral instinct that demanded food were hard things to overcome, which is why most mages continued to eat and breathe long after their bodies no longer needed to.

Elise nodded, and Leon quickly followed her back inside the main villa.

Naiad was waiting for them at the dining table, mercifully fully clothed with the chef still in the villa—since she hardly left the villa, she could go days at a time without wearing a single stitch of clothing—and with a slight smile blooming on her face as Leon and Elise walked back in through the door.

[About time,] she said into their minds. [I was getting impatient and was about to drag the two of you here.]

"Really? That might actually be kind of fun," Elise said with a wink that sent a hint of red into Naiad's bronze cheeks.

[I probably wouldn't be so gentle, either,] Naiad replied, leaning forward and resting her elbows on the table.

"I don't mind if it gets a little rough," Elise countered as she took her seat.

Leon sat down between them, though he remained silent, simply enjoying the playful atmosphere they were creating as they bantered back and forth. Neither were particularly antagonistic in their tone, and he took their good-natured back-and-forth as a good sign that Elise was accepting Naiad into their home.

As for him, he'd already decided that Naiad could stay as long as she wanted. They'd been together long enough that he had started growing attached to her, and he knew it. Still, he couldn't quite bring himself to speak with Naiad directly about her intentions at this point. If she said she still wanted to leave as soon as she was pregnant, he wasn't quite sure how he might react.

At this point, right before he started to turn down a dark path of contemplating what he would do in that case, there came the pleasant, but loud sound of a ringing bell echoing through the villa just as the chef was bringing out the first breakfast biscuits.

"I'll see who it is," Leon said as he rose from his seat, letting his two ladies continue their banter.

Walking to the front door, he projected his magic senses and saw Alix at his front gate, looking absolutely terrified and frantically pacing back and forth in front of the gate. Leon wasted no more time and pressed another runic circle by the door which remotely opened the gate, then went outside to greet his former squire.

"Sir Leon!" Alix shouted as she came sprinting toward him as fast as her third-tier legs could carry her, squeezing through the opening gate as soon as she had enough space.

"What is it?" Leon asked, his concern growing more and more as her panic became more apparent the closer she got.

"Sir!" she called out again once she'd closed to a more comfortable speaking range and came to an almost skidding halt. "Prince Trajan has been attacked in the city! Word came back that he was killed in the fighting!"

Chapter 363: Disbelief

Time seemed to stop as Leon tried to process the words that Alix was saying. His heart rose into his throat, his blood thundered in his ears, and he asked, "What was that?"

"Prince Trajan has been ambushed by... *someone*!" Alix said, her voice quivering in anger, grief, and a thousand other related emotions. She then took a deep breath under Leon's steady, but rapidly darkening gaze, and said as calmly as she could, "Leon... he's been killed..."

Leon's face began to twitch—his facial muscles not quite sure what expression they should settle on—and his eyes began to burn. He managed to keep his eyes dry, but he stumbled back toward the door, poked his head back into his villa, and shouted, "Elise, something's happened to Prince Trajan! I-I... I have to go see what's going on!"

Elise's hesitant, slightly confused voice responded moments later, "Um, all right, should we wait for you?"

"No!" Leon curtly responded as he turned back to Alix. "Where?!"

"This way!" Alix almost shouted as she turned back toward the gate and began to run as fast as she could sustain out into the noble district, Leon hot on her heels.

From within the villa, Elise watched with concern etched into her face, a deep frown carving its way down toward her chin. Leon had left so quickly that he hadn't even closed the door or the gate, which for someone as private as he was, said a lot about his current state of mind.

“Something happened to Trajan...?” Elise softly muttered to herself as she watched Leon and Alix quickly vanish into the rolling hills of the noble district. She closed the door and the gate behind Leon, then, with a terrible dread settling into the pit of her stomach, she returned to the dining table where Naiad was waiting.

The river nymph had heard everything, and her gaze was deadly serious.

“Can you see anything?” Elise asked. She’d grown quite a bit closer to Naiad over the months, and the two were now quite comfortable being around each other. Not quite as much as either would be with Leon, but they were easily at the point of being relatively close friends, even if neither would openly admit to it.

Naiad paused a moment, letting her magic senses sweep over the entirety of the city. There were many places she couldn’t see as they were warded against magic senses, but she could still see quite a bit—enough that it was impossible for any single person, even someone as powerful as she, to parse the wealth of information at her fingertips.

[I... cannot, not without more information,] she quietly responded. It was a city of millions, there was no way she could find what she was looking for without narrowing down the scope of her search.

“Can you sense the location of any members of the Royal Family?” Elise asked. “Or perhaps the Paladins, the seventh-tier mages in the city?”

[It seems all those who carry the blood of the Sacred Bull are in warded locations, they cannot be seen,] Naiad said. [As for seventh-tier mages, I can only see two, and neither are Paladins.]

“Who can you see?”

[Members of local magic guilds,] Naiad explained. [Two old women, neither particularly capable of much given their advanced age, I’d say.]

Elise nodded in understanding. The capital had many magic guilds to see to the magical needs of the city, and some were quite powerful. She was acquainted enough with them through her duties with Heaven’s Eye to know who Naiad was speaking of, the leaders of the two most powerful local guilds, and knew that they weren’t involved in politics in any meaningful way, despite their power.

It was the long-standing policy of the Bull Kingdom to recruit all seventh-tier citizens of the Kingdom into government positions, but exceptions were always made if the mage wasn’t fit for such duties. People like these two women—and Caecilius, the founder of the Bluefire Guild before them—who ascended late into their lives and weren’t overly skilled in combat were usually left to enjoy the fruits of their labors during their twilight years without such obligations being forced upon them.

“Keep an eye on Leon, then,” Elise said. She twisted the emerald ring on her finger, contemplating going after Leon, but she decided against it. She was in no danger, and though she was concerned, she was also patient. She didn’t have to be around him all the time, and if things got violent, she knew she wouldn’t be of much help. Naiad, on the other hand...

As if she could see Elise’s thoughts, the river nymph said, [If anything were to happen to Leon, I’ll go to him immediately. No power in the city can touch him while I’m here.]

Elise's frown lightened up a bit at this confident statement, but she knew that it wasn't entirely true. The Paladins working together could likely take Naiad, and there was the matter of the man she tangled with during Leon's ambush against Tiberias. Naiad's power brought them a great deal of safety that not even Heaven's Eye could provide, but it didn't make Naiad, Elise, or Leon untouchable.

Leon and Alix tore through the streets, their mage limbs propelling them onward through the early-morning crowds on their way to the place Trajan had fallen. Leon himself was recognizable enough within the city after his appearance in the triumphal games, so no one was foolish enough to get in their way, even as they pushed through crowds or simply jumped up to and ran across rooftops if that was the faster choice. Much of the city wasn't built on a grid, so running over buildings and jumping over entire streets was rather common, made even more so since the route Alix took them on crossed through older, more densely inhabited, and less well-laid-out residential and commercial zones.

It was also illegal, but Leon hardly cared about that, though. All he cared about right now was seeing with his own eyes what Alix was too shaken up to describe to him. He had to bite back a bit of frustration at the speed they were going, but there wasn't much he could do with Alix only being third-tier. He simply clenched his teeth and kept putting one foot in front of the other.

Eventually, they found their way to a section of the city that had been completely locked down by the Royal Legions, with hundreds of soldiers in battle dress keeping the civilians away or otherwise analyzing the site of the ambush. All it took to get past them, however, was a quick flash of Alix's Legion ID and Leon to release a bit of killing intent, and the soldiers let the two through without hassle.

The scene was an absolute mess—the street had been torn apart by powerful magic, armored bodies were strewn about all over the place, and the surrounding buildings had been trashed, likely by the same magics that had destroyed the street. All of the bodies were of people that Leon at least vaguely recognized as Trajan's knights.

Leon couldn't help but do his own bit of evaluation as he took in the sight while Alix pulled him onward toward the nearby warehouse. Most of the damage to the surrounding buildings had been concentrated on the upper floors, indicating the attack had come from there. That he could neither see nor sense other bodies around clearly indicated who had won in the encounter, even though Trajan's knights had clearly managed to retaliate—assuming they hadn't attacked first. Given the level of damage surrounding the knights in the street, Leon felt it unlikely. The warehouse was probably the site of the main ambush, though, since his magic senses couldn't penetrate its wards.

His evaluation was cut short as Alix led him into the warehouse, equally trashed as the street outside, and filled with even more Legion knights. Leon recognized many of the people inside, including the Paladin Roland, several ministers under the three high officials, a few nobles that he'd seen in the Royal Palace, and a number of knights in Trajan's service, including Dame Minerva.

Leon started walking right over to Minerva, but it wasn't until he got close that he realized she wasn't paying any attention to what was going on around her. The cleanup of the warehouse, the removal of the other handful of knights, and the movements of various Legion investigators all went unnoticed by her, for her attention was taken up by something on the ground.

Something that Leon could see was human-shaped, though it was quite large, almost seven feet long and almost inhumanly muscled.

Leon's heart grew heavy as he slowed down. His heart rate, already accelerated from the run over, began to beat even harder as it became clear exactly what had so captivated Trajan's second-in-command. It was Trajan himself.

Numbly, Leon approached Minerva and stared down at the fallen Prince. Every second that went by brought new memories to the front of his mind of when he and Trajan had trained, of Trajan's anger when he returned from his foolish solo attack on the Talfar army, of when Trajan had taken Leon aside to try and instill in him some measure of restraint for their enemies. To kill his enemies was all well and good, after all, but there was a place for mercy. Such was true for the rioters in the Guild district of Ariminium, at least.

Trajan lay on his back, his armor shattered and scattered all over the warehouse, his blood pooled beneath him, dark red and without a trace of magic power. The Prince had been dead for hours; his body was cold, his skin stone grey, and his once handsome face was stuck in an expression of grief, reluctance, and wrath.

It brought back to Leon's mind uncomfortable memories of the last couple days of Artorias' life. He'd never quite felt about Trajan as he did about his father, but Trajan had provided some structure, some responsibility to Leon's life.

Now, there seemed to be nothing, and the more Leon stared down at Trajan's lifeless body, the more that hole seemed to grow. What little loyalty Leon had for the Bull Kingdom was entirely couched in his loyalty to Trajan, the man who had taken the young knight under his wing and gave him purpose other than simply to gain power enough to seek revenge. That purpose had been to make the Bull Kingdom a beacon of light, peace, and prosperity, to bring safety to its people, to wet his blade in the blood of the monsters who would disturb that peace.

Leon hadn't internalized that purpose too well—and, with Trajan's body at his feet, Leon felt more than aware of that—but he'd done what Trajan had asked when he could. Trajan had promised to help him with whoever wiped out House Raime, but their relationship wasn't transactional; the Prince had accepted Leon into his retinue and essentially took the younger man as his apprentice. Leon had been expecting he'd be serving Prince Trajan in his retinue for years more, and even with the hunt for his family's enemies and his desire to find his mother, Leon hadn't been too opposed to staying in the Bull Kingdom for a while longer to learn from the Prince.

"What... happened?" he heard himself croak. It hadn't been his conscious intent to speak, but it was a question on his mind anyway. Even with Trajan right there, it still didn't seem real.

"I... don't know," Minerva said, her voice as hoarse as Leon's. "I got word that the Prince was out investigating word of an attack on you, but he never returned to the palace... We found him a little over an hour ago..."

For the first time, Leon glanced over at his fellow sixth-tier mage. Minerva's fine, sharp features were clouded and stoic, her black hair fallen around her face, and her aura was calm. For all intents and purposes, she appeared solemn and grieving, but not so much as to invite wild speculation. However, to

Leon's eyes, she appeared to be little more than a husk. She wasn't a passionate person by nature, but she had always moved and behaved with purpose and energy, at least in Leon's experience, nothing like the shell that now stood before him.

"We have to find who did this, we have to..." Leon mumbled, not entirely sure what he was saying. He was just talking to talk, to try and distract both himself and Minerva from what they were staring at.

Minerva didn't respond, she just stared down at Trajan, her eyes glazed over as if she wasn't truly there.

And then, from within the remnants of Trajan's armor, a dull red light began to shine. It was very dim, so much so that only Leon and Minerva were able to see it.

"You needn't speculate about who did this, I heard the whole thing," whispered a soft, familiar voice, barely audible enough for the two knights to hear.

Chapter 364: Action

The voice Leon and Minerva heard emanating from Trajan's clothes stunned them completely. It also took them right out of their fugue states, and as soon as they recovered, they subtly glanced at each other, knowing exactly who that voice belonged to.

Minerva jerked her head toward the rest of the warehouse—the *very* crowded warehouse—and Leon briefly nodded. The two then glanced back at Trajan's body for a moment before Leon stepped back, an expression of anger and confusion upon his face. He averted his gaze, took a few pacing steps back and forth before stopping a few feet behind Minerva. Conveniently, he happened to block her from view from just about everyone else in the warehouse.

For her part, Minerva took a deep, steadying breath, then kneeled in front of the Prince, completely disregarding the blood she was getting on her pants as she did so. She laid a hand on Trajan's chest, right below the hole where his sternum and heart used to be, and then leaned in to whisper something in Trajan's ear.

If anyone else in the warehouse were paying any attention to Leon and Minerva at this moment, they would've seen nothing except Leon looking furious and Minerva whispering to Trajan. With those distractions, it would be incredibly difficult to notice Minerva's hand momentarily slip in and out of Trajan's breast pocket, and the briefest flash of light as something was pulled into her soul realm. Given how many people were in the warehouse, Minerva thought it likely that someone *was* watching them, thus the need for the deception.

Once she had taken the object, she quickly stood back up.

"Let's go," Minerva said to Leon, and the younger man followed the older woman toward the door. As they went, the other knights in Trajan's retinue that were present noticed and followed them out, including Alix.

Both Leon and Minerva were dead quiet, and none of the knights were going to break that silence. None of them had seen what their leaders had, not even Alix. Instead, they took Leon and Minerva's silence as shocked grief, rather than subdued anger and curiosity.

Neither were going to be succumbing to grief anytime soon. There was a time and a place for that, and once they recovered from their initial shock, they knew that their circumstances were too dire to waste on grief.

'Trajan wouldn't have wanted us to lose our lives to grief, anyway,' Leon thought as he glanced back at the warehouse as he and the rest of the knights exited. Perhaps it was his imagination—though he didn't think it was—but he felt more than a few pairs of eyeballs on their procession as they left the ambush site.

Almost coincidentally, as they were walking away, a carriage happened to fly past them, one bearing the sigil of House Taurus. Whether it was August, Octavius, Antonius, or Princess Stefania within, no one stopped to see. Instead, they continued walking away without a word.

It was only once they had broken the cordon that the Legion had established around the ambush site that Minerva broke their silence, and even then, it was only to whisper a quick question to Leon.

"Have you finished those defensive wards you were going to put up around your villa?" she asked.

"I did," Leon simply replied.

"Then we'll go there. Mine isn't so fortified," Minerva replied, to which Leon nodded.

They made for a strange sight walking down the streets and into the noble district. They were a group of about a dozen relatively strong mages practically parading down the streets with military discipline and grim expressions. No one got in their way, but they attracted more than a few stares.

They noticed this, especially Leon with his head on a swivel as he did his best to try and see if they were being followed. He didn't notice anything of note on that front, but he did happen to pick up on a slightly familiar aura. It was faint and nearly imperceptible, but he had been immersed in it long enough that it was unmistakable: he could sense Naiad's power, and he knew she was keeping an eye on them from afar.

It irked him a bit to be watched, but since it was Naiad, he let it slide, especially given the circumstances. He knew that he'd be in for a great deal of questioning from Elise if his first lover were still home, which he thought was quite likely.

The walk home was, itself, uneventful. No one stopped them and Leon was unable to pick up on any obvious tails. However, Leon didn't feel secure until their group finally approached his gate, which opened automatically to admit him entrance. Leon was particularly proud of that little feat, though it did require him to study a bit about blood magic. He'd had to preserve a drop of his blood in a hollow glass orb and keep it in a small storage closet that he'd retrofitted into the control center for the villa's enchantments. As he approached the villa, his drop of blood in the ball would subtly vibrate, activating the enchantment, and thus, opening the gate.

There were certainly other applications for such enchantments, including remote control of the enchantments in his villa, but Leon had yet to figure that out—from what he'd been able to glean so far, taking advantage of this phenomenon was easy, but actively controlling it was another matter entirely. By his own estimation, it would take a *long* time to figure out how to remotely control enchantments.

The gate was an experiment. It could automatically open when he arrived, but he'd have to close it himself. When he left, he also had to open and close it himself. Still, that he got this far was remarkable to both Xaphan and the Thunderbird, the closest things he had to proper instructors in the arts of enchanting.

Upon leading the troupe of knights into his home, Leon found both Elise and Naiad waiting for him. Both were dressed to impress—likely because Naiad had been watching them the entire journey back—and were ready to play host to their guests.

Given the seriousness of the situation, though, Leon didn't waste time on pleasantries.

"Were we followed?" he asked Naiad.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Naiad answered with a sly smile. With her at his side, Leon had already learned that the villa was constantly being watched by various people, but so far, he hadn't been able to follow up on that information. Not even Naiad could track them too far within the city, and with the likelihood of them working with the man who had fought her to a standstill, Leon wasn't confident in directly confronting them. It aggravated him, but his villa was secure, and it was private. They could only track his comings and goings, not what he did within his own home. At least, as far as he knew.

But at least it seemed that no one besides the usual people were watching them.

It was a bit suspicious to the rest of the knights why Leon was asking her, since they couldn't perceive her power level, but Alix knew about how strong Naiad was and Minerva could see that the river nymph was stronger than her; no questions were asked, and all simply went along with it when Minerva seemed to accept Naiad's answer.

Minerva wasted no more time, sitting down at Leon's dining table. Leon, Elise, and Naiad sat down with her, while the rest of the knights stood by, politely refusing Elise's offer of drinks or seats.

With a wave of her hand, Minerva revealed what she had retrieved from Trajan's corpse that had so affected her and Leon that it had jolted them out of their shock at the Prince's death. To neither her nor Leon's surprise, it was a small but brilliant ruby set into an onyx plate.

It was the vessel that held the magic body of Caecilius, the founder of the Bluefire Guild and seventh-tier mage that had died centuries ago.

Naiad, Elise, and the rest of the knights, on the other hand, were quite shocked at her behavior. Trajan had kept his possession of the Bluefire Guild founder quite low-key, and few knew that he had the gem.

"Explain," Minerva curtly demanded of the gem.

Everyone else's confusion about the immediate situation was quickly answered when, seemingly from within the depths of the ruby, came a clear, if aged, voice.

"His Highness was lured away from the palace, and he was ambushed by elements of the 1st Legion led by Petrus Duronius!" the voice said.

Leon's rage surged, but he kept his cool. Glancing at Minerva, he could see his anger mirrored in her eyes, but like him, she kept it under control.

The waiting knights, conversely, were a bit less restrained as they swore and cursed under their breath.

“Are you sure of this?” Minerva quietly and seriously asked, instantly quieting down the members—or, at this point, *former* members—of Trajan’s retinue.

“Prince Trajan identified him by name, and I saw with my magic senses a few knights who wore the insignia of the 1st Legion,” Caecilius responded.

“... Who is this?” a very confused Elise quietly asked Leon.

Leon quickly filled her, and the rest of the knights by proxy, in on who Caecilius was and how Trajan came to possess his gem.

[Interesting little trinket...] Naiad absentmindedly whispered into Leon’s head, and he saw something that might have been envy flash across her stoic and disinterested face.

Fury passed through the faces of the waiting knights. One of Octavius’ followers killed their Prince! It was unthinkable, it was borderline heresy in the Bull Kingdom to harm one with the blood of the Sacred Bull.

And yet, their Prince was dead. It was almost impossible to fathom, but all had seen Trajan’s corpse. He was gone.

Containing his own rapidly rising anger, Leon took a deep breath and asked everyone present, “What do we do now?”

“There’s going to be an investigation, we take this ‘Caecilius’ testimony to whoever is leading it!” one knight vehemently advocated.

“If a Paladin was involved in our Prince’s death, then there’s definitely more going on, no way there’s going to be a clean investigation!” another knight denied.

“Then what do *you* suggest?!” the first knight demanded.

“That we respond in kind!” the second responded. “They murdered our Prince in cold blood! We should do the same! Earthshaker is Octavius’ creature, so let’s go to wherever he is and show him that his actions have consequences!”

“One Prince is dead,” a third knight chimed in, “and you would suggest we kill another?!”

“Why not? Prince Trajan is allied... *was* allied with Prince August, if we kill Octavius, then are we not fulfilling Prince Trajan’s will?”

“Murder is not the solution to murder!” a fourth knight spoke up.

“We must let the courts decide,” added a fifth. “Revenge is all well and good, and that will always be an option, but we must give the Arbiters their day. Prince Trajan fought all his life for peace and justice in this Kingdom, and I, for one, do *not* believe that rampaging through our Kingdom’s capital killing his family fulfills his will!”

“I agree,” a sixth knight said. “However, if justice does not prevail, then it is our duty to bring it to those responsible.”

“The murder of a Prince already indicates that justice is long lost to us,” the second knight bitterly stated. “However... I *suppose* I can agree with giving it a chance.”

Leon remained silent during this debate. For his part, he fully agreed with the second knight, at least to an extent. His first instinct was to gather together Trajan’s old retinue, find where the Earthshaker Paladin rested his head at night, and then slay him in his sleep. However, it seemed that most of the other knights had other intentions. They had internalized Trajan’s ideals better, and the way they were speaking made it seem like Leon wasn’t going to see his revenge on that front anytime soon.

In fact, it brought some amount of shame when he considered the fact that they were actually *right*; Trajan would not want such wild violence wrought against these people, especially not against his young nephews. He was a man who responded quickly to threats and wasn’t averse to using force, but his desires were for peace and justice, not blood feuds and lawlessness—those were among the things he had worked his entire life trying to eradicate.

Minerva, during all of this, remained quiet and stoic, simply listening. Her face was inscrutable, her opinion unreadable. She didn’t seem ready to speak, so Leon decided to throw in his two cents first.

“Waiting for the courts is one thing,” he said, his deep, smooth voice instantly quieting the room, “preparing for what seems inevitable is another. To kill a Prince is serious, and no doubt there is more to whatever it is they’re planning. We must be ready for anything, and we must prepare for every eventuality. I, for one, do not believe that we’ll find much justice for Trajan in the courts, and so if we are going to wait for the Arbiters to weigh the evidence and make their judgments, then we should use that time to prepare for the eventuality that things do not go our way.”

“What are you suggesting, specifically?” Minerva asked, her voice quiet but carrying immense weight.

“We look into this matter ourselves. See if we can dig up something more substantial than the word of a dead man.”

“My word is as good as gold!” Caecilius loudly declared, but Leon ignored him and continued on regardless.

“We find whoever it is who’s responsible, and prepare to act against them if this investigation isn’t clean. We also prepare for any further moves against us.”

“And not just us,” Minerva said, giving voice to her own concerns for the first time, “we should also assume that something will happen with August. Prince Trajan was his biggest supporter, and with him gone, Prince August will be left vulnerable. Someone will try to exploit that vulnerability, regardless of how involved they were in Prince Trajan’s murder. We must decide how to deal with Prince August moving forward, whether to ally with him or not.”

The knights all nodded their agreement.

“So, here’s what we’re going to do,” Minerva said as she stood up. “We’re going to prepare for war, while hoping for peace. I want all knights loaned that are out to other units recalled. We should have twelve hundred of Prince Trajan’s knights here with us in the city, another three hundred or so helping with peace keeping efforts. The remaining five hundred of the retinue are back at Ariminium. We recall everyone here, send word to Constantine at the Horns of what just happened and to be ready for

trouble. We also need to ensure that Prince Trajan's body is guarded round-the-clock. We've already left it unattended for too long...

"And another thing, I don't want anyone attacking Octavius! Without irrefutable proof, doing so would lead to nothing more than charges of treason!" Minerva's eyes darted between the knights, but they lingered for just a moment longer than everyone else when they turned in Leon's direction. "Even if we succeeded in bypassing Octavius' entire retinue and *two* Paladins, the Kingdom would be honor-bound to send you to the headsman for the murder of a Prince! No one kills Royals without severe consequences!" The knights nodded, with even Leon agreeing to this demand, at least for the time being.

With an understanding established, Minerva rapidly began to give out more orders to the knights, sending the four sixth-tier knights she had with her to return to Trajan's side and guard his body until a more permanent guard detail could be established. The rest of the knights, including Alix, were deployed as messengers and sent to those who could recall all of Prince Trajan's retinue back to the city, to ensure they had the capacity to respond to any aggressive moves.

Lastly, after everyone else had left, she turned to Leon.

"Ursus," she said, looking at Leon very intently. The two were calm, focused, and sharp as blades. Fury was mirrored in their eyes, as was intense determination. "I want you to stay here. Lady Elise, if you could, I would like your help to ensure that Sir Leon doesn't do anything reckless and stupid while we wait for things to happen."

"He'll stay here for the time being," Elise said, nodding to Minerva.

"I have to speak with Lapis, at least," Leon protested, though since he understood where Minerva was coming from, he didn't push too much. "Having a stone giant ready to fight with us would be an immense help.

"Do that, but do no more," Minerva said. "If possible, I'd like to use your villa as our meeting point. I don't think any of our other estates are as well defended as yours is right now..."

"Works for me..." Leon said, looking to Elise and Naiad for their opinions. Elise nodded her assent and Naiad shrugged noncommittally, so it was essentially an agreement all around.

"Good. We need to see what happens now, and be ready to respond accordingly," Minerva repeated. "I'm not sure if I can keep the retinue together, but we have to do what we can to avenge His Highness..."

"Out of curiosity, what are you going to do?" Leon asked.

"Keep us organized. Keep us together," Minerva said. "The knights followed His Highness, not me, I don't have the resources to pay them as Prince Trajan could. I have to find a way to keep all of us cohesive if we are to effectively deal with Earthshaker, Octavius, and whoever else might be involved. It shouldn't longer than a couple of weeks to consolidate our forces, but even that might be too long. Just in case, be ready for anything that might happen before then."

Leon nodded in understanding, and with nothing more to discuss, Minerva took her leave. It was going to be an *interesting* few days, and she had to get as quick a start on it as possible.

Chapter 365: What Are We

Leon's villa was silent as a grave once Minerva, Alix, and the rest of the knights took their leave. Neither Elise nor Naiad wanted to break the silence, they simply remained quiet and waited for Leon to say the first word. After all, neither of them had just lost a mentor.

For his part, Leon slid back a little bit in his chair and closed his eyes in thought. Trajan had been remarkably good to him, helping him to train and even trying to teach him to be better than he was, to remember that mercy had its place in battle and that violence wasn't always the best option.

From the way Leon handled the Tiberias situation, he was well aware that Trajan's lessons didn't really take. With the Thunderbird on his other shoulder advocating for more violent, more *permanent* solutions to his problems, Trajan's more idealistic teachings didn't stand much of a chance.

Still, Leon greatly respected the Prince. Much of what Trajan preached, such as ensuring that peace and justice reached every citizen of the Bull Kingdom, resonated with Leon's own values. Leon didn't like seeing people abusing their power, though he didn't go out of his way to do much about it or to even examine himself through that lens too deeply. What Leon wanted was for everyone to just respect each other and to keep to their own business, to not pry into their personal lives or force themselves and their own beliefs upon other people.

Much more cynical than Trajan's own values, but hardly dissimilar on a fundamental level.

What was more than that, though, was that Trajan and Leon had struck up a genuine level of trust and friendship during Leon's time at the Bull's Horns. They trusted each other, with Trajan going so far as to open an investigation into a potential threat on Leon's word alone, and Leon performing the tasks asked of him by Trajan.

Now that Trajan was gone, Leon felt a pit in his stomach that had opened when Artorias had been killed grow just a little bit larger. He was hungry, and the only thing he could think of that might satisfy that urge was the blood of his enemies.

And yet, he languished there at the dining table, paralyzed by indecision. He wanted to rampage through Octavius' ranks in retribution, but he knew that neither Trajan nor Artorias would've approved. He doubted that any of his other friends and family members would approve much, either.

Elise supported him killing Tiberias, but he was sure that that support wouldn't extend to killing innocents. Naiad, though, Leon felt was probably comfortable with just about anything, though he wasn't planning on testing that.

On a more practical front, he doubted it was even possible without Naiad's assistance, and while he wasn't averse to getting her to help him, he needed to clarify their relationship first. Such a drastic action as killing a Paladin and a Prince wasn't something he wanted to do without absolute certainty in those who would accompany him.

'No, it's better to sit and wait, think of some other, better plan, one that doesn't rely on Naiad,' Leon thought to himself as he desperately tried to stop himself from doing something stupid.

He didn't give the law a shot when dealing with Tiberias, but if Minerva and the rest of Trajan's retinue wanted to try the law right now, Leon would go along with it, even if it lacked the catharsis of running Octavius and the rest of his people through with a sharp piece of metal.

Leon opened his eyes and glanced at Elise and Naiad, his golden eyes meeting their emerald and lazulite eyes.

Elise smiled at him, appearing to Leon's eyes like the sun. Naiad, on the other hand, was quiet and stoic, but she radiated the confidence of the ocean as it slowly ground the rocks on the shore into sand. Whatever lingering ambiguity may have existed in their relationships with him and with each other, both were a great comfort to Leon, even if they said nothing. He'd descended into a shocked stupor in the wake of Artorias' untimely fall, but with these two here with him and the weight of almost four years of experience behind him, Leon wouldn't fall into the same state again.

"Things are going to get hectic around here very soon," Leon said, slowly enunciating each word as if it took great willpower to break the room's silence.

"We're ready for it," Elise said. "Whatever comes, we'll get through it."

Naiad nodded in agreement, the corners of her lips even turning up in anticipation, which Leon noticed. He may no longer have the backing of a Prince, but he still had Elise and Heaven's Eye. Naiad, though, he was less sure about, despite her seeming confidence.

"Naiad..." Leon began, pausing for a moment as he searched for the right words to use.

Naiad leaned forward, her attention fully on Leon. She clearly anticipated that he would ask her to spill some blood with him, which she was more than eager to do.

After a few moments of thought, Leon decided that since she was so blunt and forward, he would act in kind. Besides, with Trajan dead and further violence almost guaranteed in the near future, Leon didn't have the time to dance around the issue. He needed to know where they stood after a year of sleeping together and little else.

"What are we?" Leon asked, his face set with uncharacteristic determination. "Are we lovers? Are we friends? How far does our relationship go? In ten years, what will we be to each other? What am I to you?"

Each question hit Naiad like a sack of bricks, and by the end, she was sitting back in her chair almost as low as Leon was, any trace of anticipation that had graced her face moments before crushed beneath Leon's questions.

"Love, I don't think we need to-" Elise began, but Leon glanced at her and silenced her with a quick shake of his head.

"We need to hammer this out," he said. "No more remaining quiet and simply enjoying the way things are. Nothing remains the same forever, and I expect that the civil war that Trajan's been trying to avert for the past year will break in a matter of months. We can't... I can't continue on this course if I don't even know where we stand."

"So, Naiad, I *need* to know, what am I to you?"

Leon stared at Naiad, his eyes seeming to bore holes into her. However, he didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he decided to give her a few moments to think by answering the opposite question.

"I think I love you, or at least, the potential for it is there. I mean, after so long being together, how could I not feel something for you? If we were to work at it, I think I could love you as much as I love Elise, and that the three of us could be happy together. But I need to know what you want, what your plans are for the future, if you're *willing* to give this a shot. If you want us to be more than just base mates."

Naiad remained quiet in the wake of Leon's words. She dropped her gaze down to the table, all confidence that she exuded now gone. Her heart felt tight, and while she definitely felt *something* for Leon, she had no way to put it into words. Whether it was love or a more mundane sense of attachment, she didn't know.

But she couldn't explain anything to Leon, not when the shock and panic of him dumping all of this onto her so suddenly had caused her mind to lock up.

"I would like an answer, but I can wait until you're comfortable enough to give it," Leon said, alleviating some of Naiad's sudden anxiety. "Just, please think about it. I... If possible, I would like it if we could be more than just sex partners, but it's entirely up to you."

With that, Leon stood up and immediately turned around and made for his enchanting workshop. He wasn't intending to do any work, he just needed to get away for a few hours, to mourn in private for a little while. Besides, the shock of Trajan's death may have emboldened him to ask Naiad those questions, but he was still shaking from nervousness about how she would respond. When she seemed reluctant to answer, Leon had happily jumped on that excuse to delay her response for at least a little while.

For her part, Naiad numbly sat at that table watching him exit through the backdoor.

"I..." Elise hesitantly began, not quite sure what to say after all that Leon had just said. However, she was still the daughter of the Heaven's Eye Tower Lord, and she quickly recovered. "I think I would like it if you joined our family," she said with a tone of unmistakable seriousness. "I think Leon put it quite well when he said that he wasn't sure if he loved you or not, but that he could love you if you two put in the work. I would like to echo that sentiment. I like you, not quite to the point of love, but I don't want you to go. If we were to try, I think I could love you, but it needs to be reciprocal. We need to know what you think, how you feel about this. We're patient, though, and we'll be ready to hear your answer whenever you're comfortable enough to give it."

With that, Elise got up and started to get ready to head over to the Heaven's Eye Tower to help her mother get ready to deal with the firestorm on the horizon. Leon had a great deal of work coming up, and so did she.

Naiad was left alone at the dining table, almost paradoxically lost in deep thought and unable to focus her thoughts enough to come to an answer.

Barely even realizing what she was doing, Naiad rose from her seat and quickly retreated to the privacy of her guest rooms. She needed to think and right in the middle of the living room was not the place to do so.

Upon entering her room, she turned off all the lights, drew the curtains, and threw herself down upon the bed. Not even five seconds later, she was so completely lost in her own mind that she had practically checked out of reality.

What did she think about Leon and Elise? She didn't know for certain, beyond the simple, base pleasure that being with them brought. It was sexually fulfilling to be with them, and for Naiad, that was enough to stay.

However, Leon and Elise made it clear enough that that kind of relationship wasn't enough for them. Fun for a while, perhaps, but they wanted her in their family—or, at least, they didn't think they could continue as they had been for the past year without more open commitment. For all the fun they had sleeping together, for all that Naiad was willing to kill Leon's enemies, it still wasn't enough for them.

To an extent, Naiad thought she could understand, even with her inexperience with human culture. She treated everything casually and primally. Leon was her mate, and he had to be protected until he provided her with a child. She had killed for him, but it wasn't out of love or genuine concern for his wellbeing—as far as she could tell, at least.

She didn't love either of them, at least not in their eyes. She didn't know where she stood on that front herself, as she had never taken the time to really examine her own thoughts on the matter. She was getting a child and having fun doing it, beyond that, she hadn't bothered to think about her situation.

When she thought about Leon, her heart beat faster and she felt happy. She loved to watch him work and reveled in the passion he showed when training and studying his enchantments. She had never felt such passion for anything before, and it was exhilarating to experience it vicariously through him—and to experience it physically when they slept together.

But love? She didn't know if she loved Leon. Her symptoms seemed like love, but she had never experienced it before, nor had she ever had real friends or good acquaintances. Her relationships thus far had been solely with her subordinate river nymphs, and they weren't intelligent or self-aware enough to be truly close to her, despite their human-seeming appearance.

All of this was equally true with Elise, though without the added benefit of the reproductive instinct. Wanting Leon's blood was an important part of her attraction to him, and that element was missing with Elise. Still, the young woman worked very hard at Heaven's Eye, from what little Naiad could see when she was out of the enchanted walls of the tower—not to mention the work the young woman put into the study of nature enchantments in the villa's garden. Elise gave her work her all, and she genuinely enjoyed working there.

Again, Naiad had never felt so passionate about anything before, her life up to the point of her lesser nymph bringing Leon to her was spent largely in Saron or in the underground lake where she and Leon met. Nothing, save for perhaps the borderline mania she had when Leon was brought to her and presented as a desirable partner to stave off gorgonism with, had aroused the same enthusiastic passion in her that enchanting did for Leon, or Heaven's Eye did for Elise. Not even training on her island, which while beautiful, had little in the way of entertainment or amenities that even Leon and Elise's relatively small villa possessed.

At the very least, Naiad didn't want to go home quite yet, not after getting a taste of human material culture, and especially not after everything that Leon and Elise had done to her in their bed over the past year.

Still, she'd have to work out what she felt about Leon and Elise before she could stay, that much was made clear enough to her. However, she didn't feel like she could do so alone. She needed to consult with someone who wasn't involved, someone who had more experience in these matters than what she had.

She needed to go and speak with her mother. She needed to return to Saron, the city of the water nymphs, and see the Empress of her people.

Chapter 366: Negotiating for Position

Leon sat in his workshop alone, silently contemplating what to do next. Trajan was gone, and with him, any obligation Leon felt toward the Bull Kingdom. However, he wanted to stay a while longer so he could help Minerva bring his killer to justice.

After that, well, he didn't know.

'Still have that whole Isynos thing to deal with...' Leon thought to himself. He truly didn't have that many connections to the Bull Kingdom that were preventing him from leaving. He was sure that if asked, Elise would come with him to the central Empires, where there were ruins from the Thunderbird Clan that he wanted to explore, and more resources that he might utilize to achieve Apotheosis, so with that in mind, he honestly couldn't think of much that would keep him in the Bull Kingdom long-term.

There were his family's archives in Teira to think about, though, as well as the ruins in the Forest of Black and White that Leon wanted to explore, but these weren't things that he necessarily had to remain attached to the Bull Kingdom for. All told, Leon could think of little but gains if he were to leave the Bull Kingdom, and yet, the decision to go wasn't one that he could lightly make.

Trajan had made him swear to do what he could to bring peace and justice to the Bull Kingdom. With the Prince now dead, the current peace was tenuous at best, and Leon knew that Trajan considered it his duty to keep the conflicts between August and Octavius from escalating into civil war. If Leon wanted to honor Trajan's legacy, then he had to stay and fight for justice and peace any way he could.

Of course, in Leon's mind, getting revenge against Trajan's killers and bringing justice to the Bull Kingdom were conveniently essentially the same thing. It made his desire to leave the Bull Kingdom and move on to greater things that much more difficult.

It took him mere minutes to think of all of this, but in the end, these thoughts were simply distractions from his grief. Trajan was dead, completely and irrevocably gone. Leon could think of revenge and what would come after all he wanted, it wouldn't change the fact this his mentor was gone.

He sat in his dark workshop for a long time coming to terms with that. Leon wasn't the sort to cry in grief, but there were a few moments where he wished he was, if only to be able to express and vent what was going through his head.

Three hours or so after entering his workshop, Leon was about over the worst of it. He wasn't quite done grieving, but the shock of how sudden it was and the work ahead of him helped him come to terms

with the reality. There was a lot to be done, and even if he wasn't going to be involved in much of it from a political standpoint, he was still going to be ready for whatever was about to come down.

Leon pushed his thoughts of Trajan out of his head for the time being and got to work. His first item was to visit Lapis. If violence was going to break out, and Leon was of the opinion that it was, then the stone giant would have to be ready, for Leon wasn't going to ignore it anymore.

After that, he had a lot of work to do in his workshop while Minerva made what moves she could. Whenever she needed him, he'd be ready.

—

Octavius smiled as he looked out of a window of his office into a courtyard in the Royal Palace. His uncle was dead, and with him, an enormous amount of his brother's support. August had clearly awakened his blood, increasing his standing among Bull Kingdom loyalists, but Trajan had still, by far, been his greatest pillar of support. Without the Consul of the East, he wouldn't be able to control the Eastern Legions.

"How's it coming along?" Octavius asked the room.

Behind him stood a small number of his closest supporters. The Earthshaker Paladin, Sapphire Paladin, and the Consul of the Central Territories were among them.

"Quite well, Your Royal Highness," the Consul said with an obsequious smile, nakedly attempting to curry favor with the Prince by appending the 'Royal' to his official title. Normally, only the acknowledged heir would receive that honor, which Octavius wasn't, making it somewhat inappropriate for him to use.

But Octavius quite liked it, and no one else had a single thought about castigating the Consul for using the term.

"When can I expect the next phase to begin?" Octavius asked, doing his best not to show his impatience on his face even if his asking the question in itself betrayed his state of mind.

"In a few days, Your Highness," the Consul immediately answered.

"We have to let the investigators look into things before we come forward with our evidence," said the Countess of Lindinis, an elderly woman with an excessive sense of personal pride. "If we come forward too soon, then it would be too obvious what we did for the Arbiters to ignore. However, if it seems like the proper procedures were carried out, then we'll have an easier time leading the Arbiters to the conclusions we want them to reach."

"Either way, this is something that will likely require the Assembly to sign off on," the Consul continued. "We should send out word right now for our allies to come to the capital and prepare to be summoned."

Octavius nodded. The greatest decisions the Bull Kingdom had to make were reserved for the King, and in the absence of him, the Assembly. Not even the Prince-Regents could make certain decisions, such as going to war or revoking hereditary titles of nobility. Having another co-regent imprisoned and executed for murder, kinslaying, and treason was absolutely among those decisions.

As a result, the inevitable trial that would follow the investigation would take place before the Assembly, a conclave of the highest powers in the land. Powerful nobles, high officials in the

government such as the Chancellor and certain former Exarchs, active and retired Legates and Consuls, representatives from Lineage Hall, and members of the Royal Family all made up the Assembly.

Things were going to kick off soon, and Octavius had to be ready. He'd been planning this for months, though, and he was not going to miss the opportunity he'd created with his killing of Prince Trajan.

The Second Prince turned his attention back out to the courtyard where he could see a great many people in the palace scurrying around with almost panicked haste. The entire palace complex was in an uproar after the death of Prince Trajan, and it gave him some amount of pleasure to see so many common-born officials in such states of panic after his order was carried out.

It made him truly feel like a King. In a matter of weeks, he knew that he'd be a King in name, too.

—

When Leon returned home from speaking with Lapis, he paused by the front door and glanced to his right, toward the guest rooms. Naiad wasn't a noisy person, but for some reason, he felt like the villa felt just a little bit too empty. He doubted Naiad would mind if he checked in on her given their activities during the past year, so he released his magic senses for a brief moment, targeting her room.

It was empty, devoid of any river nymphs.

Leon was taken completely by surprise, and he hurried over to her guest rooms and walked right in. There, his eyes confirmed what his magic senses had seen: a lack of river nymphs in Naiad's guest rooms, and no indication of where she went.

Leon couldn't stifle a sigh of disappointment. Naiad leaving didn't just severely weaken him, but it also spoke volumes about their relationship.

'I guess it was just sex after all,' Leon dejectedly thought, leaving Naiad's rooms and shutting the door behind him. First Trajan, then Naiad. It had been a bad day, so far.

—

The next few days passed in a flash, with practically the entire capital either frozen in shock or bursting at the seams with activity. Prince Trajan was dead, and the civilian population largely kept their heads down and did their best not to step on any toes. Many even fled the city, remembering the public conflict between Octavius and August during the triumphal games and wanting to get somewhere safe before things kicked off.

The nobility, on the other hand, was far more active. Many nobles on both sides began to assemble their military forces, but since Octavius' nobles were both far more numerous and had been assembling their retinues, levies, and mercenaries for weeks, August was at a clear disadvantage.

He needed allies, dependable allies. To that end, he kept the Brimstone Paladin and Roland around him at almost all times. They couldn't stop August from being arrested, but August would at least be safe from any additional assassination attempts.

August also tried his best to secure allies in the palace, to varying degrees of success. Many investigators from the Arbiters had started calling his people in for questioning, and word was that the High Arbiter herself was personally involved, making his position incredibly tenuous.

—

“Who’s pledged to serve you?” Minerva asked in a deadly serious tone and with an expression to match. She gave away nothing, not even anger at Trajan’s still very recent death.

August hesitated to answer, knowing that it wouldn’t make him look good, but Minerva kept quiet and glared at him until he answered.

“Not many,” August finally admitted. “Even in the East, where my influence is strongest, after Trajan’s murder I’ve had many nobles who had pledged themselves to my cause back out. At this point, I fear even my uncle’s Legions may abandon me...”

“And that’s why you called me here? To talk to the Legions in the Eastern Territories?” Minerva asked.

“You’ve done a fantastic job keeping my uncle’s retinue together so far,” August said with a friendly and congratulatory smile. “I’m sure that keeping his Legions loyal to his memory would be fairly straightforward for someone as well respected as you...”

“His ‘memory’?” Minerva asked, raising an eyebrow in a dangerous show of interest. “And why would they need his memory? Are they going to war for him?”

“I would hope they would,” August frankly stated. “It should be no secret at this point that my brother wants me gone. Probably dead. I would like to keep on living, and I would also like it if my mother and little sister could do the same. I can’t do that if Octavius wins.”

August paused for a moment, hoping Minerva would respond positively, but she kept her expression somewhere between neutral and vaguely disinterested, dashing August’s hopes.

“Let me be completely upfront about this,” he continued, “I get how this looks, with what my people being questioned right now. But I can assure you, I had *nothing* to do with my uncle’s death! When I get my hands on those who *are* responsible, though, you can be sure that I’ll do to them a thousand times worse than they did to my uncle!”

“Are threats supposed to endear you to me?” Minerva asked.

“I have spoken no threats,” August countered.

“Not to me, but you’re threatening those who have the capacity to assassinate a Prince,” Minerva shot back.

“They’re hardly threats when they’re certain,” August argued.

“You haven’t the capacity to follow through,” Minerva responded, killing August’s argument with a vicious riposte. “If you had that sort of power, you wouldn’t be here asking me for my help. So, I ask you once more, *who’s support do you have?*”

August frowned, but after a few long moments of thought, he admitted to half a dozen high nobles in the Eastern Territories, plus about two dozen more minor noble Houses. “... and all told, I’ve gotten assurances and pledges of loyalty from them all, which would bring my own forces up to about forty thousand if push came to shove.”

"Forty thousand untrained peasants and knights so worthless they serve minor castellans?" Minerva asked, barely able to keep the look of disdain off her face.

"... Yes," August hesitantly confirmed.

"So, in effect, the only *real* support that you have is from the Aeneas family and your two Paladins," Minerva bluntly stated. "Maybe five thousand worthy fighters amongst them, if you're lucky..."

"Yes," August once again said. "But if you can give me the Legions in the Eastern Territories, that would give me one hundred and fifty thousand trained and blooded soldiers, men and women who've cut their teeth on *real* combat, not just subjugating monsters and rebel mage guilds!"

"I'm well aware of the strengths of the East," Minerva said, almost disinterestedly glancing away and looking around his office, and, in general, making a big deal out of thinking over the problem she faced.

August knew what she was doing. He'd been constantly trying to gather support and jockey for position since he reached his majority and formally took over the duties of a Prince-Regent, and Minerva's show to him was just that: a show. Under normal circumstances, he might've indulged a bit in her politicking, but with Trajan gone, his position was now almost cataclysmically weak, and he hadn't the time for these games.

"I will do everything I can to help find my uncle's killers and bring them to justice," August solemnly declared. "If I have to sacrifice all the Legions in the East to do so, I will find those monsters and make them pay in blood."

Minerva cocked an eyebrow, then said, "A bold declaration." She was a serious person, and her words carried great weight, but now a corner of her lips was beginning to turn upward in an awkward half-smile, so she continued before it became too apparent. "And how can I know that it wasn't you who killed Prince Trajan? Prince Octavius seems to think it was you from what I've gathered after speaking to a few of his knights, something about a falling out between the two of you regarding his support for your claim?"

"If you truly believed those rumors, then you wouldn't be here," August drily stated. "I don't know you too well, Dame Minerva, but I know *of* you. You're rather famous for being one of my uncle's most trusted knights, and from what I've heard, you've earned every ounce of his trust. Had you put much stock in rumors about me possibly killing my own uncle, then you would not be here now sharing words with me."

Minerva lost control of her face and the smile she was suppressing began to creep across her face, slowly growing wider and wider until it was almost unhinged and sadistic.

"I will find the man who killed my Prince," Minerva said as killing intent began to pour out of her, "and if I don't kill him immediately, then I will give him to the headsman to make him a head shorter! If you can deliver on your threats, then I will support you to the best of my ability. Prince Trajan's retinue will support you, and I believe that the Legions of the East will, too."

"Do you know who did it?" August asked, his voice straining from his own attempts to contain his curiosity, desperation, and shared anger.

"I do," Minerva said as she pulled Caecilius' ruby out of a pocket. "I even have a witness..."

Chapter 367: Confirming Position

It had been a week since Trajan died and Naiad left. Leon hadn't done a damn thing of worth, to his immense frustration. He and Minerva were friendly enough, even more so now that they shared a determination to bring justice to Trajan's killers, but he and her weren't nearly so close as Trajan was to the both of them. As a result, Minerva wasn't as willing to use Leon as Trajan might have been, trusting him less than the Prince did.

Leon could understand, to an extent. Under any other circumstance, he wouldn't follow Minerva very far. He could respect her power, but she didn't have the political power that Trajan did, and she hadn't trained with him for more than a year as Trajan had. In short, Leon didn't quite respect Minerva's authority, though he still respected her much more than just about anyone else in the Kingdom.

Under his current circumstances, he deferred to her, trusting her wrath and her dedication to Trajan more than anything else. She'd expose Trajan's killers and have them all made a head shorter, that much he was confident of, even if her methods weren't quite in line with his own preferred courses of action.

And yet, she had told him to stay home while she put out fires and kept Trajan's retinue together. It was a little insulting, and more than a little aggravating, but again, Leon could understand. He had no political clout she could use, as save for his rank of Legate, he had no official title or position in the government at all, let alone one that could be useful in the current circumstance. What was more, Minerva didn't have the authority to move him around as Trajan did, so she couldn't even leverage his rank as much as she might've wanted to. Leon's entire worth in this case was in his home, in his personal power, and in his loyalty to Trajan.

In other words, there was little that occupied Leon's time during the week following Trajan's murder, despite how momentous an event it was. Even his typical routine of visiting Lapis and monitoring the investigations that had been running under Trajan had to stop, as those investigations were put on hold and Minerva didn't want him taking risks by walking into the lion's den, despite his own protestations.

To take up some of that newly-freed time, Leon stopped by the Heaven's Eye Tower a few times and took a few walks into the city—he wasn't prone to cabin fever, but he felt useless at home and needed to stretch his legs for a couple of hours a day. He played with the idea of inviting Alix or Elise along on these walks with him, but both had a lot more work to do in the wake of Trajan's death than he did, which only added to his frustration.

On his walks through the capital, he found the place a lot less lively than it normally was. It made some degree of sense, since a Prince had been murdered in the city and no one felt safe anymore. Making matters worse, it reminded everyone of the conflicts between August and Octavius, and many of those that could leave the city did so.

Leon passed no judgment upon them. Had it not been Trajan who died, he might've even envied their freedom to leave in such a situation.

To take up even more of his time, he threw himself into his enchanting work, and in his desire to take his mind off recent events, he made a great deal of progress in his construction of a flight suit.

At the end of the week, he'd finished a new prototype. It was a similar design to his last prototype, relying on a leather vest, gauntlets, and boots, but he'd refined the enchantments a bit to give him much finer control over their output. Finally, he also added a few padded pieces of clothing just in case he ate dirt again.

Donning the garments and a helmet, Leon ventured outside and began to test the new design. First, he fed a small amount of power to his boots, activating the wind enchantments. Not enough to start to fly, but enough that he felt some amount of force pushing up on him.

He slowly began to crank up the power, and he rose a few inches off the ground. The wind generated beneath him was strong enough to create a small cyclone of grass, leaves, and dust around him, but he didn't care. All he cared about was that he had gained some lift.

However, this kind of design had brought up questions for him in the past, such as what would happen to the stuff on the ground beneath him while he was flying. He'd need to fly quite high for the wind necessary to keep him aloft to not disrupt the people beneath him.

'A concern for later,' he'd thought at the time. He could further refine the design and find other ways to propel himself later, but right now his priority was to simply get off the ground and fly for short distances without breaking his face.

And it seemed he'd accomplished that much, since he was now hovering about half a foot off the ground without issues. The enchantments on his vest were doing their job keeping him stable, his boots kept him off the ground, and if all else failed, he had his gauntlets to steer and keep himself righted if he started to tilt.

Even with all that had happened over the past week, Trajan's death and Naiad's sudden departure, Leon couldn't help but feel a deep sense of child-like glee as he hovered there in the air. Perhaps it was his descent from the Thunderbird, but the sky called to him and he was going to answer.

He started to raise the power he was feeding into his boots and gain some height. This also kicked up a lot more dirt, but he knew that would die down after reaching a certain height. Assuming he could even reach that height.

There were a few heart-stopping moments as he climbed where he felt like he was about to lose his balance, but fortunately, his stabilizing enchantments held out, and he remained upright. He drifted a little bit over his villa, but the wind coming from his boots, while strong enough to lift him into the air, weren't strong enough to cause any damage.

His experiment was cut short when he glanced down below and saw an alerted Anzu, who had been lounging in the sun in his front yard, and Minerva, Alix, and a few other of Trajan's former knights waiting at his gate. They were all staring at him, and it suddenly struck him just how strange he appeared to be, hovering in the air like he was—not that he cared much when he was so far from the ground.

Reluctantly, Leon slowly cut power to his boots and he drifted back down to the ground. He pulled off his gear as quickly as he could and returned to his villa to let them inside.

“Leon!” Alix excitedly called out as she ran forward, letting her dignity as a knight in Trajan’s service — now Minerva’s, it seemed—slip. “How did you do that?!”

Leon was waiting for them at his front door, and he simply smiled and ushered them inside the villa proper without explanation. Anzu had been roused from his relaxation, and he trotted over, too, curious to see what was happening. Unfortunately, the griffin was now too large to come inside through the front door, but he was smart enough that when Leon pointed to the side of the villa, he happily scampered around toward the back.

A small addition Leon and Elise had made was a sliding floor-to-ceiling window in the main living room, right next to the dining table. Anzu was a bit too big to be let loose into the villa itself, as it was likely he’d break things, but he had a place to sit on the back porch and he could come inside through the sliding window if Leon was there to monitor him.

In this case, he obediently sat down next to Leon as the other knights took their seats at his table. Even then, he towered over everyone present and had to lower his head for Leon to comfortably rub it.

“So, what’s going on?” Leon asked as Anzu began to purr. He glanced around at the knights sitting at his table, first at Minerva, then Alix, and then at the remaining five knights.

“First of all, Sir Leon,” Minerva began in a solemn tone, “I want to know where you stand with us. Prince Trajan never gave you any official roles or units to command, but you are still a part of his retinue. Or *were*, I suppose...” Her final sentence brought out a brief but noticeable mournful frown to her usually stoic face.

Leon smiled and took a few moments to think before giving his answer. He’d already given his assent to let Minerva use his home as a base for planning things with the retinue, though he hadn’t seen her since. He supposed it was natural to seek confirmation before making anything official, since he figured his own lack of trust in Minerva was mirrored in her regarding him.

“I would like to think that I’m with you,” Leon eventually stated, choosing to be as direct as he could so there would be no confusion. “However, that would depend on you. I don’t have much connection to the Royal Legions without you, so if you don’t think you need me, I can just as easily go my own way...”

He saw Alix’s eyes go wide in surprise, but Minerva simply nodded in understanding. “Bold and direct,” the elder lady knight said appreciatively. “I like it. I would think of you as a comrade, if possible. We can’t let a sixth-tier mage of your caliber run wild, that would be disastrous for the entire Kingdom I should think.”

Leon chuckled a bit at her estimation of his abilities. He’d already intimated to Minerva that he would be with the rest of the retinue if they’d have him, but it seemed that she needed to hear him confirm that.

“That works for me,” Leon replied, but added, “so long as we’re going to do everything we can to make the Earthshaker Paladin a head shorter.”

A few of the knights looked a bit perturbed at such a direct statement, but Minerva brushed it off and said, “That’s what I want, too. To that end, I would like to offer you an official position in our structure, with your current rank of Legate intact.”

Leon's quiet smile faltered a bit. He'd gone through waves of wanting a command and not wanting one, mostly based on his mood of the day. On the one hand, it would represent a real, tangible amount of power that he'd wield that wasn't borrowed from Trajan, but on the other hand, it would give him far more responsibilities than he desired at the moment. If Minerva or Trajan had floated this possibility before the war with the Talfar Kingdom, he would've jumped at the chance, but in his current mind-set, he was a lot more reluctant.

Still, he didn't outright reject the proposition.

"What do you have in mind?" he asked.

"That would depend on what you want," Minerva responded. "You're well-known enough that some of Prince Trajan's lower ranking knights would follow you, perhaps even enough to form a battalion. However, I think you have the skills and the will necessary to be a staff officer, and assist me in commanding the retinue as a whole. What do you want to do?"

That much was easy enough to answer, at least right now, so Leon didn't hesitate.

"I want to concentrate on killing my enemies," he said. "I want to find who they are and put a sword through their throats. I'm not entirely sure that my attitude would gel well with direct command, but I'll defer to your wisdom in that regard."

"No, that might be a bit of a problem," Minerva said with a severe smile. She had the same mindset as Leon, but her responsibility and loyalty to Trajan's ideals and the laws of the Bull Kingdom prevented her from acting too much on it. "Very well, I think I'll make you one of my staff officers, someone who can fill in where he's needed."

"Am I needed right now?" Leon asked, his voice dripping with anticipation, but his eyes darted outside toward his workshop. He'd just gotten his flight suit working, and his primal instincts were telling him to fly.

"Not today," Minerva said. "But I want to make it official in three days."

Leon froze up a bit when she said that. Trajan's funeral was in three days.

"... Got it," he said quietly.

Minerva nodded, gave him a couple of seconds to compose himself, then continued. "I've decided that we're going to throw in with Prince August. He's in a bad place right now without Prince Trajan, and he's desperate for allies. What's more, he *isn't* Prince Octavius."

"How much is Prince Trajan's own pledge of loyalty factoring in?" Leon asked.

"That's certainly something to consider," Minerva thoughtfully said. "From what I understand, Prince Trajan got Prince August to commit to certain policies and goals to weaken the nobility. An admirable goal, but right now what I want is justice and blood, not laws. Do you disagree?"

"I don't," Leon said. "If Prince August can give us some revenge, then I would agree with supporting him."

"*Justice*, not revenge," Minerva reminded him. "We're civilized folk, after all, not savages."

"I think there are more than a few in this city who disagree, at least where I'm concerned," Leon said with a wry smile.

August knew Leon's identity, and Leon felt it wasn't particularly wise to openly oppose him, if only for that reason. Not that he was going to tell Minerva that, of course. On a personal level, Leon didn't much care about August one way or the other, he simply didn't know the Prince well enough to have formed much of an opinion.

"Ma'am, there have been some rumors that August was responsible for Prince Trajan's death," one of the knights spoke up. He was a sixth-tier man, one of Trajan's highest ranked knights, but he was hardly in what could be called Trajan's inner circle. Still, he was powerful and high-ranking enough that after the casualties sustained during the war with Talfar and in the ambush that killed Trajan, he got a promotion, of sorts. "It may not be the best decision to openly support Prince August..."

"We won't do so openly," Minerva said. "If I had to guess, those rumors were put out by *someone* who wants to isolate Prince August, first by assassinating his biggest supporter, then by blaming him for the deed."

"What do the rumors say?" Leon asked the other knight.

The other knight glanced at him, sneered at Leon in a way that he must've thought subtle, then explained in an almost condescending way, "That there had been a disagreement between Prince Trajan and Prince August over the direction they were to take. That Prince August wanted to do various illegal things—the specifics depend on the person passing the rumor along—and in doing so secure for Prince August the throne. Prince Trajan *apparently* wanted nothing to do with it and was killed by August for it."

"Hardly believable," Leon said, ignoring the knight's dismissive attitude toward him. As a 'Valeman', he was rather used to it at this point.

"It's hardly believable because you knew Prince Trajan," Minerva countered. "Not a lot of other people did, and that lack of familiarity makes the rumors believable. It's only been a week, but there have already been a lot of nobles who used to be friendly with him starting to distance themselves from what they see as a sinking ship."

"So then what are we going to do if we're not openly supporting him?" Leon asked.

"I'm still working on that," Minerva admitted. "For now, I expect that we're going to be getting some visitors from Octavius' side soon. I'll make a decision when we know what they want, and if they don't come to us, then I'll make a decision after the funeral."

"Got it," Leon said.

All of their expressions were now quite somber. Discussing the Prince's death was hard, even if their other business demanded that they move on as quickly as they could.

"There was something else I wanted to ask you, Sir Leon," Minerva said, and she glanced meaningfully at the rest of the knights. There was a momentary pause, and then everyone started to get up and make for the front door.

Leon cocked an eyebrow at Minerva, but she simply shook her head and remained quiet until everyone else was waiting outside and they were alone.

"Yes?" Leon asked once the door was closed, not feeling particularly up to indulging in these games.

"Is there anything we can expect from the others in your... *faction*?"

"Faction? What faction do I have?" Leon asked in something akin to disbelief.

"Heaven's Eye and that woman that was here the last time I stopped by."

"Ah," Leon whispered. Naiad hadn't returned and Heaven's Eye was bound to be politically neutral, so his answer wasn't going to be what Minerva wanted to hear. Still, he took a moment to think over how to phrase things so as not to back anyone into corners or make decisions on their behalf. "I'm afraid that Heaven's Eye won't support August—or us, for that matter—any more than they can support anyone else. They won't lock us out of business, but they won't be going out of their way to provide us with aid."

"And that other woman?" Minerva inquired.

"Expect nothing from her," Leon said, offering no more explanation.

Minerva sighed in disappointment. "I thought as much, but I hoped. We're very weak right now. Vulnerable. I don't like being vulnerable."

"Neither do I," Leon said.

Minerva nodded, and the two sat there in silence for a long couple of minutes. Neither had anything more to say.

After she grew tired of it, Minerva rose from her seat, held out her hand to Leon, and said, "I shall take my leave. Thank you for your hospitality, Sir Leon, and I will see you in three days."

"Thank you for coming, Dame Minerva, my home is open to you at any time," Leon said as he stood up and shook Minerva's hand.

Together, the two walked toward the front door.

"Shall we go to Prince Trajan's funeral together?" Minerva asked.

"That works for me," Leon replied.

"Then I will come pick you up three hours before," she said, smiling at Leon as he opened the door.

"I'll see you then," Leon said, holding the door open for her.

Once Minerva and the rest of the knights were gone, Leon sighed as he glanced around at the main room of the villa. His heart was heavy and his mind was frustrated, though both were brightened a bit when his eyes fell upon Anzu, who was staring at him expectantly.

Leon laughed quietly, then walked over to his griffin and took him back outside. Anzu was nearing the boundary of what would be the fifth-tier for humans, which meant that he was getting very close to making his wings more than simply cosmetic. He was also quite large, more than half a ton at this point,

with a lean, muscular body and standing seven feet tall at the withers. His white fur was bright and almost sparkled in the midday sun, while his feathers gleamed with obvious health.

He'd grown up magnificently, and thanks to the training from the Heaven's Eye beastmaster, he was essentially ready to become a proper mount and war beast.

The sky called to both Leon and Anzu, and it would only take a little bit more time before they'd be able to enter the firmament together.

Chapter 368: Funeral I

The three days between Minerva's visit and Trajan's funeral passed by in a flash. Leon spent most of that time working on his flight suit, testing its limits and how much control he had over it.

As it turned out, it wasn't the perfect flight device that Leon wanted, but it was an immensely important step forward.

First of all, it was a severe power hog, running Leon ragged in minutes. Pushing himself, Leon estimated that he could fly using it for perhaps fifteen minutes before he needed rest.

Secondly, it was too bulky to be worn beneath his armor, meaning he couldn't easily use it in battle. Even if he were to use his soul realm to change in a flash, then he'd be relatively easy pickings for archers and mages capable of ranged magic. With that in mind, he'd have to engage any potential enemies at extreme ranges or refrain from using the suit in battle.

Lastly, it was a lot more difficult to control than Leon gave it credit for. The stabilizing enchantments had been engineered to keep him balanced and upright when gaining height and were a bit underpowered for when he wanted to go horizontal—which he had to do if he wanted to do more than simply gain and lose height. He had to use his leather gauntlets to keep himself from nosediving, and that limited his maneuverability since the gauntlets were supposed to be how he steered himself.

What was more, he needed to learn an entirely new way of moving around, using the boosters on his feet to propel himself while using the rest of his enchantments to keep his balance and posture, and then steering on top of that. It wasn't something he could get used to in just three days, but it did give him some valuable insights into what needed further work—which mostly meant his stabilizers since his boots and gauntlets seemed to be working just fine if a bit inefficiently.

The only thing he was truly disappointed by was the stabilization issues, he hadn't yet been confident in taking the suit beyond his property, and as such hadn't tested its speed capabilities. At the very least, though, he knew that he could move at about thirty or forty miles per hour, which was how fast he managed to get during his tests.

The tests themselves were an exhilarating experience, far beyond the relative let down of flight in his soul realm. Out in the physical world, he could feel the magic around him, the wind rushing through his hair, and gravity jealously pulling him back down. In his soul realm, his power of flight was more like weightless floating. It was fun enough but flying out in the physical world was what truly got his blood joyfully pumping.

But for all that finally liberating his feet from the ground brought him, it couldn't completely distract from the reality of the current situation. The morning of Trajan's funeral saw Leon's villa submerged in a somber and melancholic atmosphere.

A funeral wasn't a place to be flashy, so Leon dressed in a simple black tunic without any adornment with a matching pair of trousers. He couldn't care less if the nobles in attendance were offended by his humble attire, he wasn't trying to show off. Elise dressed similarly, in a plain black dress that covered essentially everything from ankle to collarbone—though, as she always did in Leon's opinion, she absolutely killed this more relatively plain look.

About an hour or so before Minerva was scheduled to arrive, Leon sat down in his living room, unable to focus his mind on much of anything. Trajan had done good by him, even if it wasn't perfect. It hurt to see him gone, so much so that Leon hadn't even tried to go and see the Prince while he laid in state in the throne room during the past week. It was much like losing his father all over again, and Leon hadn't been quite up to seeing the Prince off like that, just yet.

But there was a time for everything, and this funeral would be his last chance to say goodbye.

"How are you doing, love?" Elise asked from a nearby doorway. She had just finished doing her hair, pulling the sides into braids that connected into a ponytail at the back, but her face was contorted in concern as she stood in the doorway, looking at Leon.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose," he whispered just loud enough for Elise to hear.

She walked into the room and took a seat next to Leon on the couch, resting her head on his shoulder and pulling his hand into hers. She didn't say anything, she just wanted to be there for Leon. She wasn't that close to Trajan, after all, and so his death didn't hit her as hard as it did Leon. In fact, if it weren't for Leon or her family's political connections, she probably wouldn't even attend the funeral.

But she wasn't about to express that out loud. She didn't much care for Trajan one way or the other, but she could see how much it weighed on Leon that the Prince had been killed. Leon wasn't a person prone to crying—or even being overly emotive, for that matter—but he had been quieter than usual and almost concernedly taken with his training and enchantment work. She could see him disappearing into what he enjoyed to avoid thinking about Trajan.

On top of that, Naiad had vanished without notice or a trace, not even leaving the clothes that had been bought for her. Elise wanted to believe that Naiad wasn't gone for good, but they had suddenly put her into an emotional corner, demanding some kind of commitment from her. Elise didn't think what she did was wrong, as she didn't believe their relationship would last much longer anyway without some kind of commitment on all sides, but she was almost surprisingly mournful about its result. For all the anger and hatred she felt toward Naiad when the river nymph first entered her and Leon's lives, Elise no longer wanted to see the river nymph gone.

She understood why Leon was only 'as well as could be expected' and that there wasn't a need to try and get him to talk—at least, not yet. For now, she just wanted him to know that she was there for him, just as she knew that he would be there for her. To that end, while she didn't follow up on Leon's statement, she remained snuggled up next to him until Minerva arrived outside their gate.

“Time to go...” Leon said, his voice hoarse and reluctant. He turned to look at his lover with an apologetic gaze, disinclined as he was to leave her side right now. He didn’t want to be alone, and neither did he want to be surrounded by thousands of people at the funeral, most of whom he was certain would be faking their grief.

“I’ll follow in a few minutes,” Elise said with a reassuring smile, knowing what was going through his mind. They’d only be apart for a few hours, they were both more than strong enough to survive without the other for that short of a time.

Leon squeezed her hand, gave her a light kiss, and then got up from the sofa. He spared Elise one last reluctant look, then he stepped out of the villa and made his way over to the waiting Minerva.

Minerva was dressed much as Elise was—all in black, very conservative with showing skin, and all-around just not flashy. Her expression matched her subdued attire, with a dour expression and little make-up. This wasn’t a day to show off.

Without a word, Minerva waved Leon into her carriage, behind which were about half a dozen more, which Leon could sense were filled with the rest of Trajan’s inner circle that had accompanied him to the capital. By his estimation, only Constantine was missing, who was too busy at the Bull’s Horns to return to the capital, even for Trajan’s funeral.

The drive to the Royal Palace was long and quiet. It was only Minerva and Leon in the lead carriage, and neither were in any mood to talk. However, outside the carriage, it was loud and almost boisterous, and a quick glance outside told Leon exactly why: they had reached the Royal Palace and were surrounded by hundreds, perhaps even thousands of people.

Leon hadn’t the desire to listen in on what anyone was saying, but there were a few voices that were simply too loud to ignore. One rather obnoxious noble was describing how he’d managed to acquire enough silkgrass to make not only a black suit, but a cloak as well, and there were no less than five people that Leon could see fawning over the material. Another noble was relaying her supposed heroic exploits fighting Samarid pirates, telling her story with exaggerated arm motions and a degree of excitement that Leon felt wholly inappropriate for the occasion.

There was an instinct to shout and yell at these people who were using the funeral of a Prince as an excuse to party and network, but he wasn’t that sort of person. Instead, he spared them a single glare and kept his mouth shut. From her subtly irate expression, Leon felt like Minerva was having similar thoughts.

When Minerva’s caravan of carriages reached the front gates of the Royal Palace, they had to wait in line behind others who had come first before disembarking. Only the most important guests were allowed to take their carriages this far—most others, including many high nobles, had to be dropped off at the entrance to the bridge and proceed on foot—and while Minerva was given this privilege, she knew it was an obligation due to her relationship with Trajan. It would’ve been in poor taste to have a funeral for the Prince while forcing his own retinue to walk to the palace.

When they finally exited in front of the palace, they found the central courtyard in front of the main administration building not as packed with people as the crowds on the road behind them would’ve

implied. In fact, there were only about five or six hundred people present, less than half of what the courtyard could've held.

Most people here, at least, had the good graces to be solemn and quiet, unlike many of those on the road.

Minerva, Leon, and the rest of the sixth-tier knights from Trajan's former retinue were ushered inside and taken straight to the throne room. There were much fewer people within than without, but all were of high rank and station; the three high officials, the Chancellor, the Chief Steward, and the Spymaster; the most powerful nobles in the city, such as the Counts of Lindinis and Tarsus, the Duke of Aurelianorum, and a handful of other high nobles; the highest-ranking knights of the Royal Legions, such as the Legates of the local Legions and the Consul of the Center; the members of the Royal Family that were currently permitted to be out in public, like Prince Octavius, Prince August, Prince Antonius, and Princess Stefania.

As Leon's eyes scanned this smaller crowd, he felt them scanning his group in turn. He paid it no mind and took to analyzing some of the more notable or curious people he saw. For one, he noticed a small group of extremely plainly dressed men and women surrounding a platform in the center of the room upon which sat Trajan's casket. The casket was an impressive thing, made entirely of ivory, emblazoned with the green and gold sigil of House Taurus, the gold and crimson sigil of the Royal Legions, and covered in carved reliefs depicting the battles that Trajan had participated in, with both of the wars against the Talfar Kingdom taking up both of the largest sides of the casket.

However, it wasn't the casket that caught Leon's attention, but rather the people who seemed to be guarding it—he was rather pointedly not looking at the casket too much. There were eight of them surrounding the casket platform, all dressed in plain white robes without any other adornment. They were barefoot, their heads were shaven, and they barely moved from their vigil. One man in particular caught Leon's eye; he was an immense human being, almost seven feet tall, with dark brown eyes and built like a bull.

If Leon's arm were to be twisted, he would guess that this was Prince Herculanus, the First Prince and eldest child of King Julius who had renounced his claim to the throne and joined the blood priests of Lineage Hall, who Leon also guessed were the rest of the white-clad people.

The blood priests weren't doing anything noteworthy, so Leon's briefly piqued interest quickly waned, and he glanced around the room again. Four of the Paladins were present, notably lacking both the Bronze and Penitent Paladins, whom Leon assumed were still guarding the King. He would've assumed that the Bronze Paladin would've been here, at least, but both of these elder Paladins were missing.

In another corner was a group of men and women clad in black that radiated a truly eclectic collection of auras, from the second-tier all the way to the sixth. None of their faces were familiar to Leon, but if they were here now, they had to be important.

Noticing his gaze, Minerva quietly whispered to him, "Arbiters."

Leon nodded in understanding. He had never gone before the judges of the Bull Kingdom, so he had no idea what they looked like. They were all relatively elderly, with greying hair, and long black robes that covered their entire bodies save for their heads. Their robes were quite simple, perhaps in keeping with

the occasion, and they busied themselves quietly chatting with each other rather than anyone else in the room. Much like the blood priests, the rest of the people in the throne room seemed to be giving them a wide berth.

Finally, Leon's eyes fell upon those who were familiar to him, those that Trajan had been interacting with on a regular basis. Prince August, Roland, and the Brimstone Paladin, along with a startlingly small group of nobles and Legion knights surrounding him. Prince Octavius, with his two Paladins, the Consul of the Center, and more than half of the nobles present were on his side of the room. In between them was Princess Stefania, who was clearly distraught, her teary eyes locked on Trajan's casket despite the handful of very handsome men surrounding her offering words of comfort—her husbands, Leon assumed. Prince Antonius had the smallest entourage, only accompanied by a pair of elderly scholars, and he seemed barely more put together than Stefania. Antonius was clearly choked up, but he was managing—just barely—to keep his eyes dry.

As his eyes drifted around the room, they happened to cross with August's, and the two stared at each other for a long moment. Leon could see something in August's gaze, a hunger, or some kind of expectation, and the fact that August knew his identity was suddenly at the forefront of Leon's mind. Without Trajan there to keep him in check, Leon didn't know what a desperate Prince looking for allies might do.

Fortunately, nothing had happened so far. At least, nothing that Leon knew about...

Leon stewed in that mindset, but despite this look that August had given him, when Minerva led the group around to give their condolences to the three members of House Taurus who were present—Herculanus having given up his name when he joined the blood priests—August didn't say anything to Leon.

Leon was left to his paranoia, mercifully left alone once the greetings were over—Minerva led the group away from the largest groups and they simply stood around waiting for the funeral rites to begin.

A few more people came in during this time, but the only one that caught Leon's interest was when Elise and Emilie arrived about twenty minutes after he did. He and Elise shared a quick nod of greeting and then she and her mother did the rounds greeting the most important people present. Only when that obligation was over did Elise walk over and take Leon's arm.

"How are you doing?" she whispered into his ear.

Leon glanced over at the casket. It was open, but the platform it rested upon was raised and he couldn't see inside of it. He hadn't seen Trajan's body since it had been discovered, and he wasn't in a hurry to see it again.

The memory of burying his father was enough, he didn't want to add to that with Trajan.

"I'm fine," he whispered back, and she squeezed his arm in response.

About ten minutes later, the funeral ceremony began.

Chapter 369: Funeral II

Royal funerals in the Bull Kingdom were tightly regulated affairs. There would be no speeches, wakes, or parties after. The ancestors of House Taurus wanted their funerals to be solemn events, meant to honor and remember them, not to be hijacked for political gain or to be disrespected by having parties soon after their passing.

So, when it came time for Trajan's proper funeral rites to begin, the eight blood priests standing watch around his casket began to ring their bells, calling for all conversation in the throne room to cease. Given how much Trajan was respected, everyone complied regardless of their personal feelings toward him.

Once silence fell upon the throne room, the blood priests began to chant and sing, starting first with an almost bombastic song about the glories of House Taurus, then moving on to a song composed following the Talfar Kingdom's first defeat during the reign of King Julius Septimius, and then finishing with a new song composed only a few months before to commemorate the recent victory over Talfar.

Once these three songs were over, each priest took a handle of the casket, lifted it into the air, and began to move toward the exit. No one followed, though. The priests would march throughout the main thoroughfares of the city, accompanied by no one, guarded only by Legion soldiers who had already been stationed along the way. All the city would be able to see and pay their respects to the fallen Prince.

The blood priests walked out the door, and slowly, people began to chat again. They wouldn't follow the casket, they would wait for it to return before escorting it to the Royal Mausoleum elsewhere on the island. And it would be several hours before the priests returned.

After waiting a few minutes for other conversations to fill the air with noise, Leon turned to Elise and asked, "That man leading the blood priests... who was that?"

Elise smiled at him, understanding from his tone that he had already figured that out. The man's tall and built frame alongside his powerful earthy aura was hard to mistake, after all.

"That was Prince Herculanus," she whispered, confirming his suspicions. "Although, I suppose he isn't a Prince anymore, not since he renounced his name and titles. He can't be both priest and Prince, after all."

"Any idea what his reasoning for doing such a thing was?" Leon asked. To him, who only ever had his father around him during the majority of his life, family was more important than anything, even loyalty to the King—not that he really had that much of the latter. It was truly baffling to him why someone would willingly choose to seemingly abandon their family, especially when that person was in such a favored position as Herculanus had seemed to be.

"No public statements were made by him, but His Majesty did proclaim that it had been Herculanus' own choice to do so," Elise answered. "I suppose he simply didn't have the temperament to be a Prince, or he maybe he just didn't want the crown. Maybe he genuinely wanted to spend his life honoring the Ancestors, who can say? He's no longer a public figure, so it's not like he's easy to question about these things."

Leon couldn't suppress a frown. Even Prince Antonius hadn't abandoned his family when he became a scholar, even if he did give up his claim to the throne.

"You disapprove?" Elise asked, seeing his expression.

"I do," Leon said, quietly nodding his head. "I've never really had a family before, and abandoning those I consider family is not something I'd ever do..."

Elise smiled, then teasingly asked, "Does that include me?"

"Of course it does," Leon said, suppressing his own urge to smile. His twitching mouth quickly reminded Elise of where they were, and she stowed the teasing attitude. There was a time and a place for that sort of thing, and in the middle of Prince Trajan's funeral was not it.

As they stood waiting for the casket to return, Sir Publius Umber, the Spymaster, walked over to their group.

"Greetings, Dame Minerva," he said, greeting the leader of their party first. He then politely nodded at Leon and Elise before briefly acknowledging the rest of the knights.

"Hello, Sir Publius," Minerva responded. She was a direct woman, and she wasn't in the mood for politics and the games that were played in the capital, especially not now. "To *what* do I owe the pleasure of your greeting?"

The Spymaster blinked at her not too subtle hostility, and he hesitantly said, "I wished to express my condolences to you and to the rest of Trajan's retinue. It's never easy to lose a commander, let alone such a great man and, from what I've heard, a great friend."

"Thank you, the sentiment is appreciated," Minerva said, nodding her head slightly. Despite her inviting expression and body language, though, her tone was icy cold and dispassionate, almost driving the Spymaster away right then.

Fortunately, after a brief glance at Leon and the rest of the knights around her, the Spymaster decided to stick around for a few more minutes.

"Listen, my Lady, there have been some developments that I felt it prudent to warn you about..." he said with some hesitation.

"Oh?" Minerva responded, her curiosity thawing her freezing tone just a bit.

"It's no great secret that my office has had some setbacks lately," the Spymaster began with a self-deprecating smile. "I was ordered to cease all investigations in the Duke of Aurelianorum, and my investigation into the murder of his son in this very city didn't go very far. On top of that, we've had those recent incidents with vampires, and... Needless to say, confidence in my office isn't what it was just a few years ago..."

"What point are you trying to make?" Minerva asked, not having the patience to endure the Spymaster throwing a pity party for himself.

The Spymaster glanced over his shoulder at the Arbiters standing in a corner by themselves. They were remarkably serious and dour individuals, even by the standards of a funeral. They were all clad in featureless black robes to reflect the severity of their duty, and none were more severe in temperament than the woman who led them.

The High Arbiter, the woman who served at the behest of the King as the highest judge in the land, wasn't tall, overly muscular, and even her fifth-tier aura wasn't as intense as those of some of her comrades since a few others around her were possessed of sixth-tier strength. And yet, no one ignored her. She was clearly the most important person in her group, radiating a sense of command and confidence that was obvious even from the other side of the throne room.

No one had a keener mind for criminal law than she, and hers was often the last opinion the King heard when enacting a new law, even though she didn't sit on the advisory council. Whereas the Spymaster conducted investigations of all sorts into matters for the King and his representatives, the main criminal investigation departments of the Royal demesne fell under the jurisdiction of the High Arbiter.

To put it plainly, she wasn't one of the King's official advisors, but she was still easily one of the most influential people in the entire Kingdom.

"I see..." Minerva said, sparing the High Arbiter but a single glance. The High Arbiter was certainly a remarkable woman, but Minerva wanted an explanation as to why her taking over of the investigation was a problem large enough that the Spymaster saw fit to warn her about it. Her dark eyes fixated on the Spymaster, wordlessly demanding that he continue with the same intensity that Trajan's would've shown.

"Look, I had no doubts that none of you or anyone else in your retinue was to blame for His Highness' death, so I refrained from calling any of you in for questioning," the Spymaster said, instantly telling Minerva everything she needed to know about why the previously mentioned investigations had failed.

The Spymaster was, at his core, a bureaucrat, and not an actual *spy* or even an investigator.

Continuing, the Spymaster said, "The High Arbiter is not of that same opinion. She's most likely going to be leading a *staggering* investigation into this matter, and I would expect to be called in for questioning if I were you or any of your other knights..."

"... They're not *my* knights..." Minerva muttered as her eyes drifted back in the direction of the High Arbiter just in time to lock gazes with the venerable judge. Minerva was stronger, but in that moment she felt an iron grip take hold of her eyes and keep them trained on the High Arbiter. There was no warmth there, only frigid determination.

Minerva could only look away once the High Arbiter had, and once her eyes peeled off the judge she was suddenly very aware of her heartbeat as if it had stopped when they were looking at each other.

"... She's a remarkable woman," the Spymaster murmured as he witnessed Minerva's reaction. "Good luck, not that I think you'll need it. The High Arbiter will ferret out the truth, I'm sure of it."

With that, the Spymaster turned on his heel and returned to his own group.

"Heard that, everyone?" Minerva quietly asked the rest of the group, and everyone wordlessly nodded in response. "Good," she said. "Make sure everyone else expects this, as well."

No one else in their group spoke a word for hours. It was the funeral of their Prince, of their commander, and that didn't put them in the most talkative of moods. The same couldn't be said for everyone else in the throne room, as it grew steadily louder as people spoke amongst each other, and

then began speaking louder to be heard over the rising din. Soon enough, the room was filled with the sound of conversation amongst several hundred people.

During this time, Leon and Elise stayed right next to each other, the quiet that pervaded Trajan's former retinue sinking into them, as well. Leon, for his part, clung to Elise's hand like a drowning man to a thrown rope. It wasn't enough to hurt her, but it was enough to tell her that beneath his stoic and indifferent expression, he wasn't nearly as all right as he wanted everyone to think.

During this time, Leon felt eyes fall upon him. Someone was looking at him, almost to the point of staring, and it was intense enough that he could feel it. Dread crept through him, causing his hair to feel like it was standing on end, but the more he analyzed this subtle aura of attention he seemed to have attracted, the more he relaxed—this aura wasn't too powerful, though it was intense. It came from a fifth-tier mage and one that he was passingly familiar with.

Leon glanced around at the crowds, looking for eyes that were turned in his direction. Pretty soon, he found exactly what he was looking for: August's dark brown eyes were piercing into him from across the room. The Prince was occupied with several young-seeming Legion knights he was in a conversation with, but his eyes kept flitting in Leon's direction often enough to rouse the latter's attention.

Once August realized that Leon had noticed, he simply smiled at the young knight, who slightly lowered his head in response.

'He wants something from me...' Leon thought to himself when he saw that smile. It was pleasant enough, but there was something about it that gave Leon the impression of a bull that hadn't eaten in days—hungry and desperate.

He was not looking forward to finding out what that look meant. He mentally made a note to go through his and Elise's belongings back at the house and give them a packing order, just in case August did something drastic like revealing Leon's identity to the Kingdom in the hopes of bringing him over to the Prince's side. Should that happen, Leon would have to flee, as he still lacked the power to face his enemies with confidence. Xaphan was powerful and apparently could be summoned from his soul realm, but without Naiad and a couple more tiers under his belt, Leon wasn't going to take any chances.

As he thought this, the quiet rumble of conversation outside of the throne room intensified with exaggerated wails of grief and crying, making it clear to everyone that Trajan's casket had returned.

Everyone reassembled into their respective groups, with Octavius standing on one side with all of his supporters, counting many great nobles and influential ministers among them. Behind August stood his two Paladins, a few nobles, some lower-ranking knights and ministers, and that was it. Between them on the far side of the platform from the door stood the three high officials—the Spymaster, the Chancellor, and the Chief Steward—Prince Antonius, Princess Stefania, Emilie, and those few who attended them. Minerva and Trajan's retinue happened to be on the same side as Prince August, but there was enough room between them to make it seem like that was simply coincidental. As it so happened, they were actually closer to the politically neutral Arbiters on the other side of the aisle than they were to August's group.

If it wasn't clear before where the lines had been drawn, it was now. It was Trajan's funeral, but it was also a battlefield. And Octavius was the clear winner. After this show of support, most people in the

room knew that the remaining undecided nobles would be quickly joining sides, now. Few thought they'd side with August, since it was not in the nature of those who wait and see to jump onto a sinking ship.

The doors opening only partially loosened the tension in the room. Trajan's casket was brought back in on the shoulders of the priests, former-Prince Herculanius steering them towards the casket platform. Once the ivory was back in its place, Herculanius addressed the room in a booming voice befitting a man with the blood of the Sacred Bull.

A voice that brought a frown to Leon's face and a stinging to his eyes with how much it resembled Trajan's.

"If you have any last words to say to His Highness, then now is the time. We shall commence with the cremation in an hour's time."

People began to respectfully line up at the casket to see the Prince in what was a clear unofficial ritual. Leon hesitated, but Elise squeezed his hand, letting him know that she was still there. He took a deep breath, smiled at his lady, and then got in line.

No one lingered at the casket for long. They only had an hour to get hundreds of people past, so the line moved with barely any time for a person to pause and actually say any words to the Prince, lest they run out of time for everyone to walk past. For that, Leon was grateful. It had taken him hours to work up the courage to look upon his father's corpse, and that was when his life depended on moving fast and getting out of the Forest of Black and White. He didn't think he could face Trajan's body without such a heavy social pressure to keep moving.

About half an hour later, Leon found himself at the front of the line, and he gazed upon Trajan's visage for the first time since he'd seen the Prince battered and broken following his murder. Trajan had been cleaned up, his body reconstructed and well-dressed to hide any remaining injuries. He lay in the casket surrounded by flowers of all kinds, which Leon knew had been thrown in by the grieving public as Trajan had been carried through the streets. There were so many flowers that most of Trajan's legs and torso had been obscured, but the priests had cleared away the flowers from Trajan's face and upper chest.

Each step that Leon took as he stared down at the fallen Prince felt like it took an eternity. It was surreal, seeing Trajan dead in the casket when he'd just been alive a mere two weeks before, old but still strong and energetic.

Had there been no one behind Leon, he might've frozen there. However, with those knights behind him, Leon kept moving, putting one foot in front of the other with his eyes locked on Trajan. It took him just seconds to walk past the casket, but it felt like a lifetime.

His hand found Elise's again on the other side of the casket, and he didn't take another look in its direction, though he hid it well. Not even when the priests picked the casket back up, took it outside into the sun and the warmth and the beauty of the day did Leon look at the casket. Not even when Leon and the rest filed outside and followed the casket to the rarely used north side of the island where the mausoleum had been built did Leon look at the casket. Not even when it was taken to the top of a pyre and the body within ignited did Leon look at the casket.

He'd done all of this once before, he didn't want to do it again. The only thing he was grateful for right now was that the funeral had gone off without a hitch, that nothing terrible or disrespectful or violent had happened.

Once the funeral was over, Leon didn't stick around. He ditched the place as fast as he could, with no one but Elise in tow. He didn't even say goodbye to anyone, he just left without a word.

Chapter 370: Interrogation I

For three days after Trajan's funeral, Leon stayed at home. He didn't visit anyone, he didn't leave the property, he just stayed at his villa with his head buried in training and his enchanting work. Minerva had nothing for him to do, so he had nowhere else to be. Whenever he was asked how he was doing by people like Elise, Xaphan, or the Thunderbird—also the only people he had regular contact with since this self-imposed seclusion—he would respond with some vague words about being fine.

None of them believed him, but it hadn't yet gotten to the point that something needed to be done. He was still giving his training his all, and he lavished Elise with the attention she wanted, but it was hard for anyone to deny that he was still mourning.

Leon had gotten over Artorias' death fairly easily. He hadn't had the time to just sit and mourn, since Artorias' death left him in the middle of the Forest of Black and White—a place with threats far beyond his capacity to eliminate—completely without support. It was only after a few weeks of frenzied flight and travel that Leon had some time to truly sit down and process things, and by then, the worst of it was over.

He had no such temporal luxuries this time. He only had empty hours in the day, and he filled them in the only way he knew how: with his lady, with his griffin, and with his training.

But the political machine in the Bull Kingdom churned on, and his time to mourn ran out the moment that Alix showed up at his door. It was early enough in the morning that Elise was still around to let her inside the villa.

"What's going on?" Elise asked as she gave Alix a hug of greeting.

"Can't I just stop by and say 'hi' to a friend?" Alix hugged Elise back.

"You absolutely can, but this early in the day would indicate that Minerva has you acting as a messenger again."

The two women separated, and Elise gave a meaningful look at the dark green Legion knight uniform that Alix was wearing.

"You're definitely here for work," she said with a look of amusement.

Alix smiled, and after glancing around the living room and not seeing Leon, asked, "How's he doing?"

"Well enough, I think," Elise said with a look of some concern. "He'll be fine, but I think he needs more time to return to normal."

Alix nodded in understanding. "Prince Trajan's death has upset many things. Speaking of which..."

"Yes, what brings you out here so early?"

"Dame Minerva has had some visitors from the High Arbiter. Leon has to go to the palace, now."

—

"No getting out of this, Ursus, they asked for you by name," Minerva stated, seeing the look of extreme discomfort on Leon's face.

They were in Trajan's former office, now re-appropriated by Minerva. Some people in the palace might have been a bit aggrieved that she managed to get such a nice office, but the powerful and experienced retinue of two thousand behind her ensured that those people remained quiet. She was an unknown in the capital, one without public loyalties to any faction, and she had a strong force behind her, and that gave her a degree of freedom few others possessed.

"Why me?" Leon asked.

"They wouldn't say, no matter how much I pressed," Minerva shrugged, though Leon could see some amount of fury in her expression anyway. "It's not uncommon for specific individuals who were close to the victim to be called out like this during investigations, but what *is* strange is that you're the only person in the entire retinue to be requested by name."

"No one else?" Leon inquired with a degree of incredulosity. "Not even you?"

"Not even me," Minerva replied. "I asked about that, and the investigator just smiled at me and said it would be my turn eventually." The lady knight's hands subtly curled into a fist, as if she wanted to punch that investigator in the face right now. For their sake, Leon was glad that they weren't currently present.

Of course, his feelings on the matter weren't entirely different from Minerva's, it put him severely on edge that out of the two thousand knights and men-at-arms in Trajan's retinue, his name was the only one uttered by the investigators when arranging interviews. Made him nervous, anxious, and all other feelings of that sort.

"Anyway," Minerva continued, relaxing her hand and ignoring Leon's own anxiety that peeked through his stoic demeanor, "I want you to remember that these are *not* our people. Knights in the service of the High Arbiter and the Bull Kingdom they may be, but they are not on our side. Answer the questions as honestly as you can, but don't speak any more than is necessary.

Leon couldn't suppress a cynical smile at that statement. As fellow knights of the Bull Kingdom, technically this investigator and his assistants *were* on Leon and Minerva's side, but Octavius and August's little quarrel made that idea little more than theoretical. Unaffiliated with palace politics though the Arbiters may be, he felt certain that both Prince had at least one or two allies in the ranks of the justice system.

"I'll answer what I can, but I'll be conservative with my answers," Leon said, nodding to Minerva to confirm that he was ready.

"Good. Then follow me."

—

The interview chamber was comfortable if a bit small and intimate. It was a sitting room that could comfortably accommodate perhaps ten people, though only three were in there right now. In an armchair on the side of a square table furthest from the only door in the windowless room sat Leon. In the opposite seat was the investigator, a thin and somewhat short man, though still obviously fit and strong. He radiated the strength of a fourth-tier mage, but in his bright blue eyes glittered an intelligence that ensured that Leon wasn't going to underestimate him.

To the investigator's right sat the third of their little group, a young bookish woman who would record everything that was said in the room.

"Thank you for sitting down with me today, Sir Ursus," the investigator began, his voice slow, deep, and smooth. Comforting, and easily disarming, but Leon wasn't taken in. He kept his guard up, especially since the investigator's eyes remained solidly fixed upon him.

"What kind of knight would I be if I couldn't spare the time for a few questions from the office of the High Arbiter, especially with recent events." Leon was serious, he kept his golden eyes locked on the investigator's, and he betrayed nothing with his stony expression, least of all the panicked beating of his heart. "Besides, you asked for me by name. That's the kind of invitation that's hard to turn down."

The investigator chuckled to himself a bit as he flipped the first page of a stack of papers in front of him. "We have questions, and more than 'a few', I'm afraid. We've been going through Sir Publius' notes on some of his recent investigations into crimes committed here in this very city, and they've left us confused and concerned about a great many things. These files have left us feeling like we're in a dark and murky place, and my colleagues and I were hoping that you could illuminate a few details of these investigations for us."

"I'm not entirely sure how I, of all people, could be of any help..." Leon muttered.

"Really?" the investigator asked, his eyes not wavering an inch from Leon's. "Well then let's lay things out, let's be transparent. You're a native of the Northern Vales, specifically from the Brown Bear Tribe, an ally of the Bull Kingdom. A barbarian by the standards of most of the nobility, a man of ill-breeding. And yet, you have ascended through the magical tiers with alarming alacrity, and you've been at least involved, if not featured as the central figure in most of the major events that have shaken this Kingdom in recent times.

"From a relatively humble start in the Knight Academy, you went on to greatly aid the Legion in forcing back your kith during their assault on Fort 127, you assisted the Diplomatic Corps in brokering peace with the stone giants, gained the backing of a Prince, participated in the war with the Talfar Kingdom, survived an assault upon your home by a cadre of powerful vampires—after, from what I've been able to gather, providing the instigating push that uncovered the vampiric threat within our borders. On top of all this, you've forged a powerful connection with the Heaven's Eye Merchant Guild *and* reached the sixth-tier, all before the age of twenty!

"Is it truly any wonder why I might call you out by name when coming to ask questions of the retinue that you're a part of?"

Leon's urge to frown grew stronger the more his accomplishments were listed out. They sounded great and heroic, but for the most part, he hadn't done any of them out a sense of civic duty, and having so

many of his acts of selfishness brought back up was more than a little embarrassing. What was more, the simple fact that the investigator recited it all from memory disturbed Leon more than he let on since it indicated the investigator had gone to some lengths to research Leon's professional record.

But Leon couldn't tell the man to fuck off, no matter how much he might've wanted to. This listing of Leon's record only made that even more impossible, at least for the moment. Leon might be able to wiggle out of it later on, but not immediately after that recitation.

Reluctantly, Leon nodded his head as a signal for the questioning to begin, and the investigator smiled in gratitude.

"For the record, my name is Lucius Columella, a knight in the service of the High Archon and scion of House Columella. As a knight of the Bull Kingdom, you do have a few rights you can observe, namely having a lawyer present for these questions. If you wish to exercise this right, you need only say so and the questioning will pause for a period of two weeks, during which time you must find your own lawyer. Does this make sense?"

"It does," Leon said, nodding his head. He was silently grateful that Sir Lucius essentially laid out a way for him to bail on the questioning, just in case. However, Leon was well aware that if he did so, it would look incredibly suspicious—not that he was expecting sensitive questions, but his paranoia was starting to get the better of him the longer Lucius stared at him.

"All right! Let's not waste any more time and just jump right into things. Sir Ursus, are you familiar with Tiberias Decimius?"

Leon froze up. He'd thought that the questions would be limited to the investigation into Trajan's death, questions about Tiberias were extremely far from his expectations.

For a moment, Leon tried to fight letting his surprise show, but with the investigator continuing to stare at him, taking in his every gesture, Leon decided to let his stoic expression slip just a little bit.

Letting a hint of surprise show, Leon cocked an eyebrow and responded, "That was an unexpected question, I was under the impression that we were only here to talk about Prince Trajan's murder."

"We'll get to that, but your name came up in several other investigations, and we at the High Arbiter's office have some questions about those, as well."

"Several investigations?" Leon asked.

"Several," Lucius confirmed with a smile that was almost pleasant.

Leon glanced at the note-taker who was busy scrawling down everything they had just said. "Whatever." Leon shrugged, feigning indifference. "I'm familiar with Sir Tiberias. Or was it 'Lord'? Forms of address can be difficult to sort through when titles stack up."

"Sir Tiberias was a knight. That was a title he held in his own right," Lucius helpfully answered, though his helpful expression didn't quite reach his eyes, which continued to bore holes into Leon with the intensity of his stare. "To call Sir Tiberias 'Lord' would be more of a courtesy, since he was the son of the Duke of Aurelianorum. Refer to him as either, it doesn't really matter."

"Thanks," Leon said, a matching forced smile on his lips.

“Anyway, you say that you’re familiar with him, can you elaborate on the nature of that relationship?” Lucius leaned in a bit, steering their little chat back to the matter at hand.

Leon took a deep breath as he organized his thoughts, put an expression of resignation for Lucius’ benefit, and then proceeded with his almost painfully brief explanation.

“We were classmates at the Knight Academy. Same year.”

“No other relationship?” Lucius asked with a light tone that didn’t match his expression of utter seriousness.

Leon gave an ambiguous frown, shrugged, and said, “None. At least, none on my end.”

“What does that mean?”

“He was a scorned suitor to my girlfriend. I can imagine he was insulted when Lady Elise chose me, but as far as I’m aware, he took it all in good stride. After leaving the Knight Academy, I didn’t see him again until the graduation ceremony two years later, let alone correspond in any way with him.”

“Yes, the graduation ceremony... that was the same day he died, wasn’t it?”

Leon nodded.

“We’ll get back to that, but first, I’d like to go back to something you mentioned. You’re dating Lady Elise, correct?”

“I am,” Leon affirmed.

“What would you say her relationship to Sir Tiberias was like?”

“On her end?” Leon asked, to which the investigator nodded his head. “Annoyance. Like a fly that won’t leave her alone.”

“Nothing more? Just ‘annoyance’?”

Leon nodded.

“Right. So, the day you two graduated from the Knight Academy, you both attended a party together, one thrown by the son of Marquis Aeneas.”

“Correct.”

“And you two left at about the same time?”

“Maybe? I wasn’t close with the man, and I wasn’t keeping track of him at the party.”

“Sir Tiberias was killed in an ambush by a lightning mage. He was, as you have, yourself, admitted, a scorned suitor who attempted to court your girlfriend. You are a lightning mage, and you reportedly left the party at roughly the same time as him. Seems like there’s a connection that can be made here if you know what I mean...”

Leon smiled with as much understanding as he could. He obviously didn’t like the way this conversation—that was sounding more and more like an interrogation—was going, but he still wanted

to present a somewhat pleasant demeanor to the investigator. Getting irate wouldn't help him any, especially with the way Lucius was staring at him like he was a fish in a barrel.

"I had no hand in Tiberias Decimus' death if that's what you're insinuating," Leon said, his smile plastered over his face. "I don't do so well in crowds. I went to the party, and once I'd had enough, I went home to spend some time helping my beastmaster train my griffin and to train."

"Can this beastmaster verify this account?" the investigator asked.

"He can," Leon replied.

"May we have his name?"

Leon gave it.

"Thank you," Lucius said, turning a couple pages in his thick stack of papers. "Let's continue with something else..."