

## Storm King 381

### Chapter 381: Allies

"So, how should we do this? What are your expectations?" Leon asked as he looked at Valeria from across the table. They had only exchanged a few blows during their sparring session, and since they were clearly not going to continue, they had put their weapons away and went back out into the living room to continue their discussion.

"I... suppose I don't really have any," Valeria admitted.

"So your offer to become my knight was made out of a sense of obligation?" Leon asked, annoyance creeping into his voice as his golden eyes narrowed. He hated negotiations like these, even though he'd never really participated in them before, and he wasn't about to enter into a negotiation like this if Valeria wasn't willing enough to commit to the arrangement.

"I suppose that wouldn't be too unfair to say," Valeria admitted. "However, I will follow my word. If I swear to fight for you, then fight for you I shall."

Leon unenthusiastically stared at her and sarcastically said, "Splendid."

"You don't want me as a knight?" Valeria asked with a tone that was almost teasing, taking Leon completely by surprise. Now that the two were alone together, they were much more relaxed around each other than they had ever been in the past, but this attitude was something that Leon would've never expected from her, and from the way her cheeks began to redden, it was something that Valeria herself wasn't expecting to say, too.

"Don't take it personally, I've never seen myself as a leader of knights. Or of anyone else, for that matter." Leon accompanied his statement with an almost dismissive wave of his hand. "If this arrangement is going to last, though, then I need to trust you. I don't know you well enough to trust that you'll have my back in battle, but at the very least, hammering out what this employment contract will look like will be a step in the right direction."

"I see," Valeria said as her face settled back into its typical icy expression. However, her body language betrayed her enthusiasm, with her leaning forward slightly and her sapphire eyes locked onto Leon's gold, almost to the point of making him feel uncomfortable.

The two sat there for a long while, both waiting for the other to begin. Leon ran out of patience first, and he exasperatedly said, "Well, I suppose we should keep this simple. We lay out what we want from each other in terms of duties, compensation, and guarantees. I'll start by saying that I don't need any personal work from you, meaning my personal affairs will remain my own. If I have any work for you, it will most likely be of the violent variety."

"How about any leadership roles?" Valeria asked, her eyes sparkling at the thought of being the second-in-command of a rising knightly retinue rather than a low-ranked rookie knightess in a largely ceremonial position guarding the Royal Harem.

"I wasn't planning on adding any more people to my retinue... Certainly not so many as to even warrant the use of the term 'retinue', but I suppose I can say that if I ever do need such an expansion, I can

formally place you above them in rank, at least in some capacity. You'll have to reach at least the fifth-tier to be above them in all capacities, though."

"That works for me," Valeria said with a smile. She loved training and had been devoting more and more time to it of late as she felt herself sliding further and further behind Leon's own rapid advancement and in quiet horrified anticipation of all the political instability she'd heard about over the past couple of years.

"How about expectations on your end?" Leon asked once more. "Any thoughts on salary? Length of employment? Guarantees for leaving employment under good circumstances, or protections against being fired unjustly?"

"As I said, I trust you," Valeria told him. "I don't think I'll need most of that. I suppose I'll need a salary, though... How about five thousand silvers per month?"

"Only that much?" Leon asked. Five thousand silvers was a decent middle-class wage, but he was not only quite wealthy in his own right thanks to the frugality and foresight of his House, he was also romantically involved with the daughter of the spectacularly wealthy Heaven's Eye Tower Lord. He had the capacity to pay Valeria ten times that much fairly easily.

"It will do," Valeria said with a sly smile. "I would also like a room here."

"What?" Leon flatly asked.

"It's traditional for knights to live with their superiors, isn't it?" Valeria asked, her smile widening.

Leon blinked in confusion, his mind locking up from the surprise of her demand. This was not the Valeria he knew, though to be fair, she had just lost nearly everything in a matter of days.

"That's... um... not a tradition that's really followed much... anymore..." he mumbled, but Valeria's only response was to stare at him in expectation; she had denied the need for most other standard requirements for such employment contracts, so she wanted this one to be met.

[Just say yes,] Xaphan whispered into his mind.

[This, coming from someone who once demanded that I keep my distance?] Leon asked in abject disbelief. [Now you want me to share a roof with her?]

[Of course, I do, we just went over this! She'd make an invaluable asset against her father and keeping her close would make her defection to you so much easier!]

Leon shivered in disgust, again silently vowing to himself to never be that manipulative. That wasn't to say that he was about to tell Valeria the truth of his identity, but... well, he wasn't sure what he was going to do on that front, yet.

[Keeping her here would also make it much easier for her to stab me in the back,] Leon replied to his demonic partner.

[You've already accepted her service as a knight!] Xaphan protested. [If you were more than the man you are, you'd take this opportunity to add her to your harem. See, what you need to do-]

[Yeah, I'm done talking to you right now,] Leon interrupted the demon and turned his attention back to Valeria.

"W-why do you want to move in?" he hesitantly asked.

"Other than the fact that I don't really have anywhere else to go? I had a place in the barracks, but that's gone from me after being removed from the Royal Guard. I could continue to stay with Asiya as I've been doing, but that would be... awkward for us both, given our now separate positions..."

Leon stifled a groan of understanding. It would be awkward for Asiya to be living with a fellow guard who'd been removed in disgrace, even if that disgrace was Justin's and not Valeria's. It could throw her standing into question.

"You have nowhere else?" Leon asked.

"Not at the moment," Valeria said. "Thus, the room."

With a growing scowl and knowing that he couldn't now turn her out onto the street since he'd taken her into his service not even an hour ago, Leon stiffly nodded his assent. "You... can stay, at least for a while... Elise will have to sign off on it, too..."

The last part he added just to make noise since Elise's friendship with Valeria and her attempts to get them to hook up practically guaranteed in Leon's mind that his lady would give her own assent to allow Valeria to stay with them without a moment's hesitation—and probably for longer than Leon intended since he was hoping Valeria would take the time to find her own place.

"Sir Leon," Valeria said, leaning forward and resting her elbows on the table, then her chin in her hands—and looking damn cute while doing so, Leon had to grudgingly admit, "You have been attacked once already here, would it not be prudent to keep your first knight close just in case it happens again, especially with all that's happened recently? Prince Trajan was killed in the streets, and it looks like Prince August is being set up to take the fall. Were I in Prince Octavius' shoes, after getting rid of my opponents, I would purge the Kingdom of August's most ardent supporters. I'm not sure if you would make that list, but surely you'd be in danger of some kind of reprisal from Octavius, no?"

"You... may have a point," Leon said, though he had great confidence not only in the defenses he'd constructed around his home but also in the reputation of Heaven's Eye that somewhat extended to him through Elise. He wasn't too worried about Octavius coming after little old him if August lost the power struggle, as seemed likely.

Valeria nodded, her smile now growing into one of unabashed joy as if she had just been stranded at sea for days and only now had a rope been thrown to her from a passing ship.

"Thank you! You won't regret this!" she boldly declared.

*'I hope not...'* Leon thought to himself, certain that he made a grave mistake.

Out loud, however, he said, "I know I won't. I'll have a contract with these terms drawn up fo—"

"That won't be necessary, I trust your word," Valeria quickly said.

Leon cocked an eye at her, and when she didn't back down from her statement, he simply shrugged and moved on. It was a sentiment that he understood and even appreciated.

"Now..." he said, "how about what I asked you to do? Will you do it?"

"I can ask Asiya and a few other people I know, but there are no guarantees," Valeria said, her smile quickly straightening out until her expression was all business. "Obviously, I'm not in the Princess' guard detail anymore, so I can't do anything myself. Had I not been kicked out, my chances of success would be much higher. As it is, if it's your intent to press forward with that plan, then getting Asiya on board would be your best bet."

Leon nodded. "Can I ask you to do this for me? Go and talk to her?"

"I can do that," Valeria said with confidence. "I have to go to her family's estate to collect my things anyway."

Leon twitched, suddenly a bit scared that her intent to stay in his villa was for a longer duration than he thought it would be. Perhaps wisely, though, he decided not to press that issue right now.

"Then do so, please. I have some other business to attend to..."

Valeria nodded, then made for the door where Leon quickly instructed her on how to use the controls for the gate. Once that was done, she departed for the Samarid estate.

Leon, on the other hand, returned to Anzu and took flight. His destination was the Royal Palace for the second time that day. There were a few people he hoped to speak with regarding the current situation.

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Leon walked into the old Assembly meeting hall on the north side of the capitol island where Lapis had been allowed to stay since arriving in the capital. The stone giant had barely moved since Leon had last visited to inform it of Trajan's death.

"Leon," the giant murmured, the quiet rumbling completely at odds with its size and usual cadence. "It's been a while."

"It has," Leon admitted. "A lot's happened since Trajan's death. Prince August has been arrested, and Prince Octavius is probably going to try and seize power here in the Kingdom after August's trial. I'm expecting violence to break out."

"Then, do you have need of me?" Lapis asked.

"I probably will," Leon replied. "August's trial will be in two weeks. If violence does break out, it will be after then. Can I count on your assistance?"

"Always," Lapis replied.

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Leon's second destination was the forest that contained the King's private villa where he lay in a coma. However, he wasn't even close to being high-ranking enough to enter the forest on his own; he was stopped at the forest's edge on the road leading in by the Royal Guard.

“Halt!” one of the guards shouted. He was of the fifth-tier, as were most of the other dozen guards who were stationed at the checkpoint leading into the forest. Among their number were three sixth-tier knights, who were clearly wary of Leon since his power equaled their own, and yet he himself was unfamiliar to them.

Leon willingly complied. He wasn’t here to cause trouble, and if they weren’t going to help him, then he had no other recourse than to try and risk entering the forest on his own, which would likely end in disaster for him.

The guard who called out to Leon to stop quickly ran forward out of the checkpoint to identify the young golden-eyed knight, and he almost did a double-take when Leon presented the fifth-tier knight with his Heaven’s Eye ID. The guard hadn’t been disrespectful to Leon, but he hadn’t been entirely respectful, either. However, with that ID in his hands, he looked at Leon a little differently.

“What is your business here, Sir?” the knight asked as he returned Leon’s ID and backed off a little, giving Leon a little more room to breathe than he might’ve given someone else.

“I need to speak with the Bronze Paladin,” Leon explained.

The guard raised an eyebrow in interest, and he waved to one of the sixth-tier knights behind him, who quickly approached and asked the same question, to which Leon repeated his answer.

“I can’t let you in to see the Bronze Paladin, Sir, I hope you can understand,” the knight replied.

“I understand, simply passing him a message would be sufficient,” Leon said.

“That would depend on the message.”

“Tell him that Sir Leon is here to see him, and he’ll come out to speak with me,” Leon said.

The knight looked at him in both confusion and suspicion. He wondered who Leon was that the Bronze Paladin would come to see him, leaving the King’s side. Of course, with the Penitent Paladin still there and the King still conscious as far as the guard was aware, he didn’t think too hard on it, so he nodded and had the message passed along.

“Wait over there, please,” the sixth-tier knight said as he led Leon into the checkpoint and pointed to a spot in the corner where Leon could be watched by the guard detail.

Fortunately, about twenty minutes later, the Bronze Paladin came strolling out of the forest, letting those who were watching Leon relax.

“Sir Leon!” Bronze shouted in greeting as he rushed forward and pulled Leon into a great bear hug, practically pressing the shorter man’s face into his thick and ancient bronze armor.

“Sir Bronze,” Leon replied.

Bronze let Leon loose and pulled him away from the checkpoint, correctly assuming that Leon’s presence wasn’t about something that others should hear.

“So, how have you been holding up, lately?” Bronze asked as he and Leon walked back down the road away from the forest, stopping once they were out of earshot of the checkpoint.

"As well as can be expected," Leon answered.

"Good. These are trying times, and I'm sure that even worse is just around the corner..." Bronze's tone was hesitant, and he anxiously shifted his weight around a little.

"How are you doing? I know you and Trajan were close," Leon courteously asked.

"Could be better," Bronze candidly replied, but he was an old man and by now, he was used to losing close friends. He felt monumental grief with Trajan's passing, but in the weeks since, he'd gotten his grieving done.

"Didn't see you at the funeral," Leon said with some accusation in his voice, his eyes narrowing a bit.

"Couldn't get away from His Majesty for too long," Bronze explained. "One Royal was dead, we can't be sure if His Majesty might be attacked or not. Even now, I'm not certain that His Majesty isn't still at risk."

Leon frowned a bit. It seemed clear what the answer would be with that statement alone, but he had to speak his piece anyway. "Sir Bronze, I have seen some evidence that Prince Octavius and the Earthshaker Paladin were to blame for Prince Trajan's death."

As he said this, Bronze's armor locked up in shock and he almost reached for his weapon on instinct. There wasn't the slightest sign that Bronze didn't believe Leon's claim.

"Now, Prince August has been arrested and blamed for the deed. Dame Minerva and I, along with the Brimstone Paladin and Roland Magnus, hope to do what we can to bring Prince Octavius and Earthshaker to justice. Is there any way you could lend us your support?"

The Bronze Paladin was silent for long enough that it started to get awkward, but Leon wanted a proper response, so he waited for the old knight to speak before saying anything more.

"I..." Bronze began before catching himself. His aura was chaotic, and his voice was suddenly hoarse. Leon could sense a few wisps of killing intent leaking out of his body, but they were quickly locked down as Bronze regained control over himself. After taking a few more seconds to steady himself, Bronze spoke again. "I can't assist you, Sir Leon, as much as I might want to."

Leon felt no surprise. Bronze had been his best hope for support, but the Paladin's duty was to guard the King. Even when the King was safe, he couldn't justify leaving for more than a few hours for anything less than an existential threat to the Kingdom itself, as was the case with the invasion launched by Prince Owain of the Talfar Kingdom, or without an order from another member of the Royal Family, as was also the case with Talfar's invasion.

Still, Leon had hoped that treason would be enough for the Bronze Paladin to make a move, but he was disappointed.

"I understand your disappointment, my boy, believe me, I do," Bronze bitterly said. "However, with Trajan now dead, I can't leave the King's side. To so boldly kill Prince Trajan... His Majesty might be next."

"So neither you nor Penitent Paladin will act on this?" Leon asked.

"I don't think so, not with the King's condition unchanged," Bronze replied, though from the way he was flexing his hands, it seemed clear to Leon that he very much *wanted* to act.

"That's unfortunate," Leon slowly said, giving Bronze plenty of time to back out of his decision and make a new one.

"... It is," Bronze agreed. "But trust in the courts, Sir Leon. I..."

Bronze couldn't think of anything else to say. His decision was made, he wasn't going to act.

Leon sighed. "So be it," he replied, a hint of venom in his voice that Bronze felt was justified in this situation. "Good day, Sir Bronze, I hope I wasn't that great a disturbance. I will no longer take up any of your time."

Without waiting for a response, Leon turned around and started walking back toward the palace. Bronze wanted to call out to Leon to wait, he wanted to tell Leon that he wanted to see the evidence against Octavius, he wanted to tell Leon that he would personally hunt down Trajan's killers and take their heads, but in the end, Bronze said nothing.

Instead, as Leon walked off into the distance, Bronze forced himself to turn back toward the forest, where he slowly shambled back to the villa. His duty weighed heavily upon his shoulders, but it wasn't something he could now shirk.

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Leon was profoundly disappointed in Bronze, but the trip hadn't been wasted. Lapis was just waiting for his word, and now he had Valeria on his side, working to help him get Princess Cristina and August's mother out of the harem. He'd done what he could, and now he could only wait for August's trial to begin.

## **Chapter 382: Last Preparations**

"This is a damned shitshow," Roland muttered as he and Brimstone arrived at Leon's villa.

"Tell me about it," his fellow Paladin said, no trace of any of the usual scorn in Brimstone's voice or attitude that Roland usually received due to being a Paladin both beneath the seventh-tier and unconfirmed by the King. "How's your family doing, by the way?" Brimstone asked as the two waited for Leon to open the gates and let them inside.

"Well enough," Roland said. "My son is healthy, my wife is happy, and the business is making money. Nothing to complain about."

"Good to hear, but I would've figured you would've looked into getting them out of the city, given what seems to be on the horizon..."

"I have, and they should already be on their way to Ariminum. They left this morning."

Brimstone nodded in appreciation of Roland's foresight. His own family had been all-but forced to side with Octavius, even though his cousin, the Duchess of Vesontio, hadn't been too keen on doing so. However, Octavius' allies surrounded their lands, and they hadn't the strength to fight them all off.

However, she had also requested that he support August, which was the main reason why he continued to do so even under these trying conditions.

The gates opened, and Leon emerged from the front door of his villa. The two Paladins left their retainers at the gates and proceeded into the villa alone. Upon entering, they found that only six people were present, including themselves. They expected Leon and Minerva but were surprised to see Elise and a young silver-haired woman also in attendance.

"Lady Elise!" Brimstone exclaimed in surprise. "I wasn't expecting to see you here!"

"Why weren't you? This is my home, after all!" Elise responded with a glowing smile. Before either Roland or Brimstone could respond, she immediately went into hospitality mode, saying, "Please make yourselves comfortable! Do you two need anything? A drink, perhaps?"

"No, but thank you," Brimstone said. "I would prefer to get down to business as soon as possible."

"Indeed, we don't have much time," Roland said.

The two Paladins proceeded to take a pair of offered seats at the dining table along with Minerva and the other silver-haired woman, with Leon and Elise following shortly after. Notably, Leon, Elise, and the other woman all sat on one side, while Minerva, Roland, and Brimstone all sat on the other.

"So," Minerva said once everyone had situated themselves, "where do we stand? Are we ready in case things go sideways tomorrow?"

"We're as ready as we can ever be," Brimstone replied. "Our forces are gathered and ready for violence if need be."

"No word from August?" Leon asked.

"They've not allowed visitors," Roland said. "We haven't even been able to slip a message in with his food, we don't even know if he's still alive at this point."

"That's unfortunate," Minerva said, "but I'd say it's very unlikely that he's dead. If he were, Octavius would've made an announcement, as it would essentially eliminate all of his current competition for the throne. I'd even wager that he has the support to get away with it, too."

"Then why keep August alive? Just have him killed and claim he took his own life," Leon thought aloud.

"Perhaps to appear legitimate, to allow the courts to condemn August and keep his own hands clean," Brimstone said. "If Prince August were to mysteriously wind up dead before ever making it to trial, then Octavius would have that cloud hanging over him for the rest of his life. Better to have Prince August killed legally than illegally if he can afford it."

Leon rolled his eyes at these political games, but he paid it little more mind. He figured that if Octavius had already murdered Trajan, then he wouldn't balk that much at ordering August's death, but Brimstone's explanation did make some sense to him.

"So, operating under the assumption that August remains among the living and that his trial will still start tomorrow, where are we with the rest of the preparations?" Minerva asked, looking to Leon.



"I think we can get Princess Cristina and Lady Isabelle, August and Cristina's mother, out of the harem with only a few hours' notice," Leon said as he looked toward Valeria, and the silver-haired woman nodded in agreement.

"And this is...?" Roland asked with a friendly smile.

"A friend," Leon replied, bringing a smile to the faces of both Valeria and Elise.

"Anything more concrete than that?" Minerva asked. "If you didn't intend to introduce her to us, why have here in the first place?"

Leon fought back a scowl, but he silently acknowledged that Minerva was right; if he hadn't intended to involve Valeria even further in this, then he would've insisted on her staying out of the room during the meeting. Instead, she sat right next to him.

Again, Leon looked to Valeria for one last confirmation; she'd wanted to be here, and as his knight, she had some right to demand that. She was essentially his second-in-command, even if his command amounted to her and her alone. She wasn't his slave, and as such, his official business was hers, too.

Upon getting another slight nod from her indicating that she was still fine with her identity and involvement being known to these people, he said, "This is Valeria Isynos, daughter of Justin Isynos, and until recently, a member of the Royal Guard in charge of protecting the Royal harem."

"I see..." Minerva said with some trepidation and understandable mistrust. "I trust your judgment Ursus," she continued, though Leon had some doubts as to how much she actually meant the statement, "but I would've liked some more heads-up about her being here before we began."

Leon shrugged and gave her a light smile. If it had been a problem, she would've demanded an introduction before the conversation began, not after they had already begun to discuss offenses that bordered on treason.

"I, for one, am glad to meet you, Dame Valeria, we need all the help we can get," Roland replied. "I presume that you are one of Sir Leon's knights, then?"

"His only knight, in fact," Valeria replied, her stoic face brightening up with a proud smile before sliding back into impassiveness a moment later.

"So she was how you were going to get into the harem?" Brimstone asked. They had only so much time left, and he didn't want to waste it on introductions.

"Yes," Leon replied. "Well, her and a couple others, though they're being kept as far out of the loop as possible."

"How far?" Minerva asked.

"They have no idea any of you are involved, and they have some vested interest in keeping Princess Cristina and her mother safe," Elise said, drawing everyone's attention away from Leon and Valeria.

"If... if you say so, Lady Elise," Brimstone said, reluctantly dropping the matter now that the Young Lady of Heaven's Eye had spoken.

Minerva, however, wasn't so willing to let the issue go.

"Dame Valeria," she said with a tone of extreme gravity, "I hope you realize just how dire our circumstances are. Should we get wind of any betrayal, we'll have to act swiftly and decisively."

Without missing a beat, Valeria smiled at Minerva and replied, "I understand."

For a long moment, Minerva contemplated making a bigger deal out of Leon bringing someone new into their conspiracy, especially since it was someone none of them had ever been acquainted with, but in the end, she decided not to. Given what she knew about Leon, she at least trusted that he wouldn't make a habit of it, and if he brought Valeria in, then it was a sure sign that she was at least somewhat trustworthy—getting the surly and unfriendly Leon on her side was a feat worthy of recognition.

"How about the Legions?" Brimstone asked. "We have to be ready to send these corrupt bastards to their Ancestors if things take a turn towards violence."

"The 3rd and 7th Legions will march at my command," Minerva said, startling both Paladins. These Legions had marched with August to reinforce the Bull's Horns and had been reassigned to the Eastern Territories during August's reorganization, but still, neither Roland nor Brimstone had expected Minerva to actually be successful in her attempts to win them over.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Minerva, with a look of mild amusement gracing her sharp features, said, "You two look surprised."

Brimstone was the first to speak, and after exchanging an almost disbelieving look with Roland, he said, "... No disrespect intended, Dame Minerva, it's just that good news isn't that common these days, and it was difficult to be hopeful that you'd be successful in your endeavor."

Minerva smiled to herself, then said, "I understand. I was a little surprised, myself, but it seems that even I underestimated the loyalty that Prince Trajan engendered into his officers. I even have promises from many other Eastern Legions, including those under Sir Constantine at the Bull's Horns, to assist us in bringing Prince Trajan's killers to justice."

"Thank the Ancestors," Brimstone said as he ran his fingers through his bright red hair.

"Indeed," Roland said, though he was far less optimistic about this news. "Still, it doesn't change the fact that our Prince has been imprisoned, and almost all of the Eastern Legions are too far away to do any good here in the capital. If tomorrow's trial doesn't go well, then we're going to have to rely upon our own followers to deal with that failure. That gives us... what? Four thousand soldiers against the twenty thousand in the 1st Legion, plus the forty thousand in the 2nd and 4th Legions less than a day's march away, plus however many knights that the local nobles will bring if Octavius were to command them..."

An ominous cloud descended over the group, only to be dispelled when Minerva confidently smiled and said, "I like those odds."

"I like your optimism!" Brimstone almost shouted. "That kind of confidence is *exactly* what we need! HAHA! What have we to fear now?!"

Coming from anyone else, those words might've sounded sarcastic, but in Brimstone's booming voice accompanied by his energetic gesticulation, it came off as nothing but earnest.

“Nothing... nothing at all...” Minerva quietly replied. Despite her own declaration, she wasn’t nearly so confident in what would happen once the trial began.

After that, there wasn’t much more to talk about, and Roland and Brimstone soon took their leave to ensure their own retainers were ready, just in case they were needed. Minerva almost followed them, but she paused at Leon’s door and turned to the young man himself.

“This is it,” she whispered to him. After Leon gave her a curious look, she explained, “There’s not going to be any more chances for you to back out of this. If you’re with us tomorrow, then you’re with us. There will be no running away, no abandoning us after tomorrow. Us, the memory of Trajan, and upholding his ideals. Fleeing the Bull Kingdom like a whipped savage with nothing tying himself down to this place. These are your choices. I’ll come here tomorrow morning to take you to the Assembly. You have until then to choose between these two options.”

Leon almost answered her right there, but his words caught in his throat and he remained silent until Minerva departed.

It was a hell of a conundrum. With Valeria at his side and Xaphan in his soul realm, Leon thought himself reasonably safe from Justin Isynos, so long as he kept his mouth shut around Valeria about who he was. He could leave the Bull Kingdom to its own devices if he truly wanted to.

*If* he wanted to.

He did not. He still had business in the Bull Kingdom. He needed to find out who was responsible for the fall of his House, whether that was Justin Isynos or whoever Justin reported to. He needed to kill the Earthshaker Paladin and Prince Octavius as retribution for Prince Trajan. What was more, he felt more than a small amount of guilt at not living up to Trajan’s ideals. He didn’t think himself capable of becoming the man Trajan thought he could be, but there was still something buried deep inside of him that *wanted* to be that man, no matter how much he might declare to others or to himself that he could and would leave the Bull Kingdom as soon as he could.

On less revenge related notes, he still had to return to the Northern Vales and see that place in the Forest of Black and White that had been marked on the map in the Cradle, not to mention his family’s archives.

No, he couldn’t leave just yet, not when there was still so much left to do. And if he could keep Trajan’s ideals in mind as he went about finishing up that business, then all the better.

Leon glanced back at Elise and Valeria, the two lost in conversation about what might happen tomorrow. Leon sighed and made to rejoin them at the table, knowing that no matter what, tomorrow would be an exhausting day, and he ought to get his rest in while he could.

### **Chapter 383: The Assembly**

The morning that August’s trial was set to begin was dour, cloudy, and cold. Leon wasn’t too personally bothered by it, but it was hard not to take it as a sign of bad luck. He was suddenly grateful that he and the other ‘conspirators’ had amassed what force they could, for he felt surer than ever before that it would be needed.

Leon made his preparations quickly, showering, dressing in modest blacks and greys, and said his goodbyes to Elise. Valeria would be accompanying him to the Royal Palace as his knight, but Elise, as a prominent member of the politically neutral Heaven's Eye, couldn't attend.

He gave his lady a quick kiss and a hug, and she whispered for him to be careful into his ear. He made what promises he could, and then he stood by the door to wait for Minerva, who was set to arrive only a few moments later.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Elise and Valeria huddled together, Elise holding Valeria's hands in her own. His fire-haired lady had a look of utter seriousness on her face as she said something to Valeria, a look that then transitioned into one of entreatment. He couldn't see Valeria's face from his angle, and he wasn't going to project his magic senses and let them know that he was watching, but he did see her nod and respond, though he couldn't hear what was said. Apparently, though, it was enough for Elise, as she smiled, laughed, and pulled Valeria into a tight hug.

Once they parted, Valeria joined Leon by the door while Elise went back to her and Leon's bedroom to finish getting ready for her own day at the Heaven's Eye Tower. Valeria's face was back to its regular stony impassivity, far removed from the significantly more open and chipper attitude she'd sported in the past couple of weeks, and she didn't say a word to Leon once she joined him. They just stood there in silence.

Normally, Leon would've been perfectly fine with this; he had little to discuss with Valeria, and so long as neither made it awkward, then silence was something to be cherished in Leon's mind. However, Elise's behavior piqued his curiosity, and he desperately wanted to ask Valeria about it. Before he could do so, though, Minerva's carriage arrived at his front gate.

"You ready?" he asked Valeria.

She nodded in response. She wasn't armed, but Leon had a spare glaive tucked away in his soul realm, just in case. Unfortunately, Valeria didn't have any decent armor, as much of the gear she'd worn during her time in the Royal Guard had to be returned after she was removed from her post. Obviously, Leon and especially Elise couldn't let this stand, and so armor had been commissioned for Valeria at their expense—Valeria was Leon's knight, and her gear, or lack thereof, was his responsibility.

Unfortunately, that armor hadn't been completed, yet, so Valeria was clad in nothing more than cloth finery, with nary a single enchantment to be found amongst her clothing's threads.

Leon nodded back to her and the two walked outside.

The ride to the Royal Palace was quiet and somber. What was about to happen would be the difference between them committing treason or not within the next couple of days, and it weighed heavily on their minds—especially so in Minerva's case.

They found the Royal Palace more crowded than it had ever been before once they arrived. The Assembly had been called, so hundreds of the most powerful members of society had flooded into the city, along with all their retainers, servants, and staff, most of whom were now at the palace. Altogether, the city had probably grown by at least fifty thousand since Prince Octavius called the Assembly, and there were a good number of nobles and officials who had seats in the Assembly yet hadn't been able to arrive with such short notice.

Leon, Valeria, and Minerva stepped out of the latter's carriage and waited for the rest of Minerva's entourage to form up behind them.

"Where do we go from here?" Leon asked as he took in the sight of hundreds of people scurrying around in the front courtyard of the palace, most seeming to have somewhere to go, but others leisurely stopping to chat in small groups around the courtyard's edges and next to the bull statue in the center.

"The Assembly chambers are that way," Minerva said, nodding toward the western end of the island.

"Any way we can get there without hewing our way through this mess?" Leon asked, indicating the crowded courtyard.

"They'll move for us, of that I have no doubt," Minerva said in a tone that indicated she'd very much like to test that theory out. However, after a moment's pause, she added, "We'd be better served going around. Follow me."

She led Leon, Valeria, and about a dozen others through the front gates, then a hard turn left into the closest building that Leon had never been in before. He didn't get a chance to look around, though, as Minerva pressed onward.

As they walked, Leon's head was on a swivel, constantly looking around them in an obvious show of anxiety. He hated crowds, and the followers of the Assembly members created one of the largest that he had ever had to wade through, and that frayed his nerves almost as much as anything ever had.

Fortunately, as a group of powerful mages, the crowds parted before them without much prodding on their part, and they quickly reached the Assembly chambers.

The building itself resembled a theater or perhaps a much smaller version of the arena. It could sit about two thousand people in a large terraced circle around a central stone platform, upon which had been placed five chairs facing another, smaller chair. The domed ceiling was unadorned, but a long frieze depicting the First Bull King's conquests had been carved in the corner where the ceiling met the walls. Along the walls were a number of columns, each one carved into the shape of a man with the head of a bull holding either a sword or a scepter.

When Leon, Minerva, and the rest of their group arrived, much of the chamber had already been filled with those who were going to attend. Taking up one section were the Legion officers, made up of knights and a few Lords. Most of them were dressed in their green dress uniforms, but a good number had more humble or ostentatious attire. There were hundreds of officers present, nearly all Legates, but here and there were a few influential or well-connected Tribunes, and sitting at the very front Leon recognized the Consul of the Central Territories sitting between two more people whom he didn't recognize but could guess at their high rank given their place of honor.

In another section sat the landed nobility, nearly all dressed as exotically or flamboyantly as they could. The entire section was a panoply of bright color that almost blinded Leon as his eyes swept over the crowd. A few of these Lords Leon recognized from their work in the Royal Palace, though he wasn't well-acquainted with any. The rest of them were unknown to him, but he could guess as to their importance based on how closely they sat to the central platform.

In a third section sat the most powerful government officials, counting among their ranks everyone from former Exarchs to bureaucrats in charge of large parts of the Royal administration. This section was much smaller than the previous two, but arguably just as powerful, at least politically speaking. At the front sat the Chancellor and the Spymaster, along with an empty seat that Leon assumed belonged to the Chief Steward. Notably, none of the landed nobles that Leon knew sat on the advisory council were seated in this section, and instead chose to sit with their peers in the landed nobility.

A fourth section had been filled with people dressed in white monochrome robes. These people were stone-faced and serious, none smiling or chatting with each other, and their heads had all been clean-shaven. Sitting in front were Prince Herculanus and the Primarch of Lineage Hall, making it clear that all those behind them were blood priests.

The fifth and final section was the smallest, consisting of only two people: Princess Stefania and Prince Antonius. A third seat had been set aside, presumably for Prince Octavius, but was empty. As a matter of fact, now that Leon's eyes had scanned the chamber, he noticed the conspicuous absence of any of the Paladins. Of the six current Paladins, none were present.

All told, this was the single greatest gathering of powerful people in the entire Kingdom, with hundreds of fifth and sixth-tier mages creating an aura so thick with magic that Leon was almost surprised he could still breathe. Attending most of these people were their personal assistants and secretaries, who were almost all forced to stand behind the seats in great crowds unless otherwise engaged with their superiors.

And even with all of this, the chamber wasn't even close to being full, perhaps only reaching two-thirds capacity at the most. Many of the Assembly members were simply too far away to reach the capital in the short few days since Octavius had called the Assembly into session, which made it that much more obvious to Leon that this wasn't going to go well, since the section of landed nobility at the very least should've been significantly less filled than it was, with most of its members too busy in their own distant lands to reach the capital with such short notice.

"Where do we sit?" Leon asked Minerva.

"Over there," Minerva said, nodding toward the Royal section. Leon gave her a skeptical look, given that there were only two other people sitting in that section, with even their few subordinates not sharing the handful of empty seats behind them. "We're Prince Trajan's retinue, and since this is a trial about his murder, we have a place where he would've sat," Minerva explained.

Leon still didn't look convinced, but he followed Minerva anyway as she led the way through the chamber toward the Royal section. They drew some attention as they bowed to the two Royals and took their seats, but neither Stefania nor Antonius seemed to have any problems with the group joining them. Fortunately, no one else seemed to have any problems with it, either, and soon, what attention they had drawn shifted away.

The group sat in relative silence as they waited for the trial to get underway. Their tension was palpable, and the current circumstances didn't lend themselves well to conversation. Even when Brimstone and Roland arrived and took their seats by Minerva and Leon, there was little talking amongst their group.

"Does he know?" Minerva asked Brimstone as the Paladin took a seat.

“He does,” Brimstone replied as he patted his breast pocket, and neither spoke another word to each other.

After a while, people stopped streaming into the chamber. Everyone who was going to attend the trial had shown up, save for Octavius, August, and the presiding Arbiters.

Octavius was the first of these last few to arrive, arriving with a grand entourage of several hundred knights, most of whom stood behind the Royal section. Leon was only mildly surprised to see Gaius among these knights, but given his placement, his position was far less prominent now that he was knight than it had been when he had been Octavius’ squire.

Octavius himself sat down next to his siblings, a strange look of subdued anger and grief on his face. They were there for August’s trial, to determine if he killed Trajan or not, and Octavius wore the appropriate mask for the event—or so it seemed to Leon.

Flanking the Prince upon his entrance were the Sapphire and Earthshaker Paladins, and they took seats next to Brimstone and Roland. It was all both Leon and Minerva could do to keep themselves from emitting any killing intent toward Earthshaker, even though their first instincts were to tear him apart with their bare hands.

Fortunately, they kept their composure, and barely even looked at the man they knew carried out Octavius’ order to kill Trajan.

The presiding Arbiters arrived next. Three men and two women, led by the deceptively slight and weak High Arbiter. She led her four colleagues up to the stone platform and sat down in the five chairs that had been set aside for them. All of them were dressed in flowing black robes, and all wore extremely serious expressions on their faces. Accompanying them were a couple dozen scribes who set up in small desks around the platform, ready to transcribe the entire affair and take mountains of notes regarding the proceedings.

The Arbiters were there to preside over the trial, and any decision they made would have to be confirmed by the gathered members of the Assembly. Still, the High Arbiter’s presence was enough to almost instantly silence the entire Assembly chamber.

“Let’s get this over with, bring out His Highness!” the High Arbiter said in a quiet but irritated voice that nonetheless carried throughout the entire chamber.

It took another ten minutes or so, but a number of Royal Guards soon arrived, carrying between them a figure that Leon managed to recognize as Prince August. The Prince was hunched over and seemed barely conscious, and once he was carried up to the last remaining chair on the platform, it was apparent why.

He was covered in bruises that were terribly hidden behind make-up and a loose-fitting tunic. His frame, recently made powerful and muscle-bound after awakening his blood, had thinned somewhat, and his face seemed gaunt and pale. It was clear, at least to Leon’s eyes, that he had not taken well to his treatment in house arrest.

Most of the Assembly chamber seemed shocked at August’s appearance, and many began to exchange hushed whispers amongst themselves.

Seeing his condition, the High Arbiter wasted no time. August would soon get a chance to speak his piece, and she would make sure he was able to describe any ill-treatment he may have received.

“Let’s begin!” her vigorous voice called out, officially beginning the trial.

### **Chapter 384: The Trial I**

The High Arbiter was concerned about August’s appearance, and understandably so since the Prince could charitably be called haggard. If the person describing him were less than charitable, though, they might’ve called him obviously abused. However, by long tradition, she couldn’t simply ask the Prince what was wrong, so she resolved to get the trial started as soon as she could so that she could ask August questions about his state of being.

She rose from her seat and glared around the chamber, immediately silencing those few conversations still taking place. The High Arbiter was a stern woman, known for keeping strict discipline in her courts, and she could make just about anyone’s life miserable if she so chose. In such a solemn occasion, especially, everyone was inclined to follow her rules.

“Today, we are gathered under the eyes of the Ancestors to find the truth,” the High Arbiter said, her surprisingly soft and melodic voice carrying throughout the entire chamber. “All of you, the most illustrious of men and women of our fair Kingdom, have been called upon to add your judgments to mine. Together, we will find the answers to questions of high treason, kinslaying, conspiracy to commit treason, bribery, corruption, and attempted murder. May the Ancestors guide our hands in our search for the truth.”

Once she finished the traditional statement, the High Arbiter turned to look at the Primarch of Lineage Hall, the priest at the head of the Bull Kingdom’s church, charged with maintaining genealogical records and honoring the Ancestors—mostly through elaborate ceremonies and the occasional animal sacrifice.

The elderly Primarch nodded to her, rose from his seat, and intoned in a deep and heavy voice, “Let it be known that any who lie upon in this most sacred of places shall be forever cursed to remain apart from their Ancestors. They will be stricken from all records, denied funeral rites, and erased from history.”

The Primarch returned to his seat, his small role in these proceedings over and done with.

The High Arbiter gave him a quick nod of appreciation, then turned her attention back to the chamber at large. “All of you should know me and be at least passingly familiar with how I conduct my business by now, but just in case there are new people here, I shall reiterate my rules: there shall be no speaking in this chamber while my court is in session! Any who break that silence *will* be thrown out, regardless of rank!” Her eyes subtly drifted in the Royal section’s direction, resting on the King’s children and the Paladins behind them. “Now, let the prosecution step forward!”

From the small crowd of scribes that had followed the Arbiters into the chamber, an impeccably well-dressed man stepped forward, clad in a mixture of dark and light greens. His short hair had been dyed to match his outfit, and across his sleeves were a series of silver stripes.

Upon reaching the center of the platform between August and the Arbiters, he bowed first to the Royal section, again to August, and then one final time to the High Arbiter. “I am Proximus Gavius, third son of the Baron of Goldcrest, and knight and investigator in service of the High Arbiter!”



“And the defense!” the High Arbiter called, not missing a beat.

Again, another well-dressed man made his way up from amongst the scribes. Much like Proximus, he was dressed mostly in green, but his attire was monochrome and trimmed in gold—the Royal colors. He was far more handsome than the prosecutor, and he carried himself with the same noble dignity that his counterpart did.

“I am Martianus Herrenia, second son of the Marquis of Ironford, and a knight and lawyer in the service of His Highness Prince August, fourth son of His Majesty, King Julius Septimius Taurus!”

“Thank you,” the High Arbiter said in the same way one might say, ‘fuck off’, and she waved her hands, practically banishing them from her sight.

With as much respect as they could, both lawyers retreated to the edges of the platform and waited for their next time to speak.

“Are there any concerns among those present as to these lawyers’ credentials?” the High Arbiter demanded, only to be answered with resounding silence. These were two noble and prestigious lawyers, none could reasonably castigate them for lack of qualification without making at least a handful of enemies in the Southern or Eastern Territories.

Even more, everyone could see how much of a rush the High Arbiter was in, since she had, at this point, blazed through the requisite ceremonies with extreme rapidity.

Finally turning her full attention to the obviously mistreated August, the High Arbiter asked the question so many in the room were dying to hear, not the least of whom were Minerva, Leon, Brimstone, Roland, and the rest of August’s allies in the room, “Your Highness, have you been treated well since your arrest?”

August, for the first time since being carried into the chamber, glanced around the room with what seemed like hollow eyes. They were dull and unfocused, and it hardly seemed like he truly saw what his eyes scanned, and it took him a suspicious amount of time to respond to the High Arbiter’s question.

“... I have been... well-treated, Your Honor...” he said in a hoarse and strained voice as if he were struggling to form the words.

“Are you sure, August?” the High Arbiter repeated, obvious concern on her face. She’d known August since his birth, and she cared about the young Prince about as much as anyone else she wasn’t related to—and that wasn’t even mentioning the effect she thought this would have on the trial she was running. “This is a place of safety and security, if you have been abused, you need only say so and we are legally-bound to investigate...”

August stared at the High Arbiter, his eyes practically looking past her into the distant walls of the Assembly chamber. Finally, though, it seemed to click with him where he was, and he managed to focus on a few familiar faces in the Assembly chamber, such as Roland, Brimstone, and Leon. Seeing the faces of his supporters helped him to collect himself and say, this time with more conviction, “I am well, Your Honor, all things considered.”

The High Arbiter continued to stare at August with extreme skepticism, but as August pulled himself back together and straightened his posture into something more befitting a man of his station, she

relented and allowed him his lie, though for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why he wouldn't be straight with her. Not many in the chamber knew why, either, but Octavius' barely contained smile was a telling clue.

Reluctantly moving on, the High Arbiter returned to her seat and asked August, "Do you need me to repeat the charges?"

"I'm well aware of them," August said with as much poise as he was able to muster, which wasn't that much.

"How do you answer them?" the High Arbiter pressed on.

"I am innocent of all charges," August claimed, bringing smiles to the faces of many in the chamber. Some were of pride and conviction, but far more were smiles of derision, mockery, and even triumph in the face of August's denial.

"The Ancestors will see us to the truth of the matter," the High Arbiter said, and she then turned to the lawyers. "Make your opening statements," she ordered.

By long tradition, the prosecution went first, and Proximus stepped forward, the silver stripes on his arm glittering in the lights of the chamber.

"My Lords, Ladies, and others of high station," he obsequiously began, his voice rather high and nasally while his fourth-tier aura wavered just a little bit in the pressure that the attention of so many powerful mages exerted, "I have come before you today to speak nothing but the truth! And the truth is this: Prince August, in a mad bid for power at the expense of the realm's rightful ruler, His Majesty King Julius Septimius Taurus, and his heir apparent, His Highness Prince Julius Octavius Taurus, murdered His Highness, Prince Trajan!

"We are all aware of the long and prestigious career of Prince Trajan, our noble shield against the eastern barbarians who sought to ravage our fair Kingdom! Our indefatigable warden of the Eastern Territories, who, by his great and mighty efforts, ensured the peace and prosperity of our lands for decades! This most valiant of warriors and most noble of Princes was slain by this base and cowardly criminal in cold blood, out of greed, pride, and lust for power!

"Today, I shall offer proof to all of you that Prince August is guilty of the charges levied against him, and that his treason is unworthy of a single shred of mercy that this esteemed body may grant him!

"Thank you, Your Honor, my statement is finished."

With that, Proximus returned to standing by the edge of the platform and smugly stared at Martianus, August's defense lawyer, while the rest of the chamber sat in rather numb silence following his unexpectedly vicious opening statement. Going so hard against a member of the Royal Family was unheard of, and even the High Arbiter herself seemed taken aback.

Many in the chamber began to silently wonder what exactly it was that made Proximus so confident that August wouldn't be able to retaliate against his strong rhetoric, for if the Prince was acquitted of the charges, then retaliate he almost certainly would.

And yet, August, of all people, seemed the least affected by Proximus' words. He simply sat in his chair and watched what was happening before him with a look of disinterest, his eyes glazed over as if he what held his attention wasn't the trial, but something happening thousands of miles away.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Martianus stepped forward with no small amount of awkwardness and hesitancy. He took a deep breath to steady himself and then launched into his own spiel.

"For the past couple of weeks, Prince August has been subjected to baseless allegations, rumors, and accusations. He has been accused of murdering his own uncle, Prince Trajan, through foul deception and trickery! Nothing could be further from the truth! Prince August and Prince Trajan were as close as family could be, there was no bad blood between them!

"As if to highlight this, my esteemed and most *honorable* colleague has slandered Prince August's good name, calling him base, calling him cowardly, calling him a criminal! Accusing Prince August of terrible sins and seeking to deny His Highness even of mercy!

"As should be clear to all of you, my noble friends, Prince August is being set-up, he's an innocent man being made to endure false accusations so that the true killers may escape justice! I will not let this stand! And I shall prove this to all of you, the highest and most illustrious men and women of this Kingdom!

"Thank you, Your Honor, my statement is finished."

The High Arbiter nodded to Martianus as the lawyer stepped back to the side. Martianus' statement wasn't nearly as surprisingly inflammatory as Proximus', and yet, it still made it clear to everyone watching that this wasn't going to be clean. No matter what happened, the likely result would be a large amount of bloodshed.

A heavy, solemn aura began to fill the already quiet and serious room as they finally saw for themselves just how far this was going to go.

For their part, Leon and Minerva watched in silence, wary and holding in their killing intent. They were expecting this to get heated, for strong language and inflammatory rhetoric to be used. This was as much a show as it was a trial, and they knew that for a lot of people in the Assembly chamber, it didn't matter what happened during the trial, they'd only pronounce August guilty. They were simply too committed to Octavius to be an impartial jury.

"Very well," the High Arbiter said, drawing the attention of everyone in the chamber yet not even blinking under such immense pressure, "Sir Proximus, you may begin asking your questions of His Highness."

"Thank you, Your Honor," Proximus said as he practically waltzed back out to the center of the platform, sparing nothing for Martianus except a brief sneer. "Your *Highness*," the lawyer began, his tone holding none of the respect that one would expect of someone speaking directly with Royalty, "I... *humbly* ask for your permission to begin my questioning."

August looked up at him, the Prince's eyes taking a moment to focus on Proximus. "Proceed," the Prince said, mustering as much energy as he could to speak the word, though it was obvious to the entire

chamber that August was struggling to project his voice enough to convey strength. He may have claimed that he had been treated well, but it couldn't have been further from the truth.

In the audience, Leon's heart sank into his feet as he watched. He had little hope for the trial turning out well and had already resigned himself to the fate of committing treason. However, this was far worse than any scenario to which he'd ever given serious thought. August was clearly too weak to undergo questioning, and with at least thirty or forty percent, if not more, of the people in the Assembly seats in Octavius' pocket, he felt that what little chance August had of an acquittal vanished in the light of this obvious weakness.

Some people, perhaps even most of the undecided, could remain impartial and listen to all the evidence before making a decision. Many others, however, wouldn't give someone who put on so weak a showing their loyalty.

*'What a damn shitshow,'* Leon bitterly thought to himself as he sat back and watched the direct questioning phase of the trial begin.

## **Chapter 385: The Trial II**

"Proceed," August said, his voice weak enough that those in the back of the Assembly chamber struggled to hear. Fortunately, all of the actual decision-makers in the Assembly could hear him, though the Prince's weakness was obvious.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Proximus said without a hint of actual gratitude. He spared a moment to preen before the Assembly, standing up straight, puffing out his chest, and practically making a show of getting serious. "Prince August," Proximus said with more formality than he'd ever shown before in August's presence, "If you would be so kind, please illuminate this esteemed body as to the relationship that you and His Highness Prince Trajan shared—aside from familial ties, of course. And may I remind you that you *did* make a sworn statement already..."

August took a deep breath, casting his gaze around the room in a search for what strength he could find in the presence of his friends and family. Both Antonius and Stefania were there, staring at him, but neither had accusation in their eyes. All August saw in them was concern and fear, and he took a strange amount of comfort in that. Their expressions seemed to say that they didn't believe he killed their uncle.

Roland and Brimstone were there, too, with steel and fire in their eyes. Sitting next to them was Minerva and Leon, both impassive, though that also brought some comfort to August; it meant that there was a chance they were still on his side. He had a few other supporters in the chamber, and he took strength in their presence, even if they were not nearly as numerous as Octavius' own people.

Finally, August turned his attention back to the lawyer in front of him, staring at him with a shit-eating grin, waiting for August to speak so he could start tearing into him. For two weeks, August had been nervous about just this very thing, but now that he was here, with his friends and family here, he straightened up and began to act like the Prince that he was—however, it was still clear as day that he had suffered and hadn't much energy.

But even with more poise and a clearer mind, August wasn't able to simply say what he wished. He had already given a sworn statement and sealed it with his Mana Glyph. It was a stupid thing to do, but he hadn't been in the proper state of mind when he did so. The only saving grace he had was that the

statement had been sparse on details, was now in the hands of Lineage Hall, and his Mana Glyph would dissolve in time.

"Uncle Trajan and I were never close," the Prince truthfully began, "however that all changed when I rode to his aid following the Talfar's recent invasion. I gathered all the brave men and women who would follow me in defense of this great Kingdom, and I rode to Ariminium, and there, I reconnected with my uncle."

Proximus managed to stifle a frown, but his grin didn't reappear. August's sworn statement had been quite simple and to the point, so his verbosity engendered a bit of anxiety in the lawyer, though it wasn't enough to make Proximus truly nervous. August wasn't technically going against his statement, so that wasn't a legal weapon that could be used against him without stretching the truth. Still, Proximus knew that letting August portray himself as a patriot defending the Kingdom from foreign barbarians was a terrible move on his part, and so he quickly interrupted.

"Ah, yes, and I believe that would technically be treason, would it not?" Proximus asked, eyeing August like a shark eyeing a seal. "You persuaded two Legates and their Legions to desert their posts, against both the regulations of the Kingdom and the personal orders of their commander, the honorable Consul of the Central Territories."

August scowled and glanced at Martianus, his own defense lawyer out of the corner of his eye. Martianus didn't need such prodding, though, and he swiftly shouted, "Objection, Your Honor!"

The High Arbiter glanced at him with a raised eyebrow and nodded her assent for him to continue.

"This matter was settled during the court-martials of the Legates in question—both were found innocent of treason. For Sir Proximus to insinuate that treason occurred when it has already been officially established to have *not* occurred is misleading!" Martianus spoke quickly and with passion, and the High Arbiter nodded in agreement, though August noted with some dismay that none of the other four Arbiters had so charitable of reactions. But it was the High Arbiter that was in charge, and August would take the wins he could get.

"Please move on with your questioning, Sir Proximus," the High Arbiter ordered.

"... Yes, Your Honor," Proximus replied with a hint of bitterness to his tone, and an edge to his gaze that only sharpened when Martianus flashed him a victorious smile. "Your Highness, please continue. You reconnected with Prince Trajan at Ariminium...?"

"Yes, he was grateful that I had responded so quickly and reached him with much-needed reinforcements," August said, leaning into his narrative as much as he could. Even after long days in custody, suffering beatings, interrogations, and starvation, he had still managed to keep enough wits about himself to keep his sworn statement vague enough that he could get away with such details.

August continued, "While staying at the Bull's Horns, my Uncle and I spoke at great length, to the point that I learned many of the names of his personal knights. I told him of my concerns regarding the situation in the capital, and he told me that he would lend me his considerable aid in stabilizing this city and this Kingdom's political situation until my Royal Father left seclusion."

“Yes, your ‘concerns’,” Proximus said, the smile on his handsome face returning as August got to the unavoidable point. “What concerns did you have?”

“That I was too young, that my brother, Octavius, had been gone from the capital for too long, that he’d abandoned his duties as Prince-Regent, and that I suspected he was amassing support to usurp my Royal Father from the nobility.”

“What were your expectations when you told this to Prince Trajan?” Proximus inquired.

August’s face twisted, but he’d been unable to keep this information out of his sworn statement. Once sealed with his Mana Glyph, he would be hard-pressed to deny the words he’d written, no matter how much he wanted to. If he forced the statement to be taken out of the hands of Lineage Hall, it could even be used to harm him on a more tangible level, since his Mana Glyph was a connection with his soul realm that could be exploited by someone with nefarious motives. Fortunately, if given enough time, he could close that connection from his end, but such a time-consuming option wasn’t available to him right now.

“I… I’d hoped that he would support me over my brother Octavius to be my Royal Father’s heir,” August choked as if the words themselves were fighting not to pass his lips.

Gasps were heard throughout the entire Assembly chamber, and some of them were even legitimate. While it was true that Octavius hadn’t been declared the Crown Prince and heir to the King, he was still the heir apparent since he had been the only child of King Julius that both had his blood awakened, and hadn’t relinquished his claim. For August to publicly admit to seeking support against Octavius did not cast him in a good light, to put it mildly, even if everyone already knew he was doing that.

“So even back then, while this Kingdom was suffering from an invasion from the barbarians to our east, you were already planning on pulling this Kingdom into civil war,” Proximus stated like it wasn’t a question.

August wanted to angrily retort, but given how much of the Assembly was already against him by virtue of being in Octavius’ faction, he bit his tongue. He didn’t want to alienate the rest of the Assembly—assuming there were even any neutral parties left out in the chamber—by shouting and arguing and abandoning his Royal dignity.

“I’m finished, Your Honor,” Proximus stated as he turned back to the High Arbiter.

“Thank you, Sir Proximus. Sir Martianus, you’re up,” the High Arbiter said, not wasting a single moment of time.

Proximus returned Martianus’ smile of victory as he walked back to the edge of the platform, while Martianus had a dark look as he thought about what exactly he could do to reframe what August had just said.

“Your Highness, thank you in advance for answering my questions,” Martianus respectfully said as he stepped forward, enunciating the words to try and squeeze out just a couple more seconds of thought while the Assembly’s attention turned to him.

August simply nodded in response.

"Let's start simple; Your Highness, did you murder Prince Trajan?"

"No."

"Did you order Prince Trajan killed?"

"No."

"Were you involved in Prince Trajan's murder in any way?"

"No."

"Your Highness, for what reason did you seek the throne?" Martianus asked. "It surely wasn't out of a desire for power, was it?"

"No, it wasn't," August replied. "Back when my Royal Father went into his seclusion training, it was a complete surprise to me when I was named Prince-Regent. Back then, I never fathomed the possibility of becoming King, and I didn't even want the position."

"For what reason, then, did you take the actions you took?"

August sighed, hating the fact that he now had to bare his greatest weakness before the entire Kingdom. Yet, he had to, he'd get nothing but a swift trip to the headsman's block if he refused to answer such a question.

"For my mother and sister," August quietly said. "It's no secret within the Royal harem that Her Majesty wants my mother dead and my sister exiled—preferably, I think, to somewhere uncomfortable and out-of-the-way. I couldn't let that happen, and from my perspective, becoming King was the only way to ensure their safety."

"Was that the only reason?" Martianus asked.

"No, I—" August began, but the words died in his throat. Once again, he cast his gaze around the entirety of the Assembly chamber, looking at as many of the people present as he could. So many were from the landed class, even those in the sections given to the Legion and the government officials. If he finished his thought, then he would undoubtedly lose any hope of support from the ranks of the landed nobility.

And yet, the more he thought about it, the less August cared. He had little support from the landed class, anyway, and if he made his intentions known here and now, before the Ancestors and all the great men and women of the Kingdom, then it might endear him to the common-born in the chamber who might be wary of siding with Octavius.

But it would still be a great risk, for August could lose his support in the Eastern Territories if he failed.

*'Or... how much of a risk is it, truly...?' August silently wondered. 'Not like my situation could get any fuckin' worse right now. If this trial goes poorly, then I'll... I'll probably die tomorrow...'*

"... Your Highness..." Martianus hesitantly prodded. August had fallen silent and sat thinking for several long seconds, and while Martianus would've gladly given the Prince more time to think, he still had to keep the trial moving or else the High Arbiter might take a more active role. Already, there were narrowed eyes in the Assembly seats who were staring disapprovingly at August's long pause.

'... *Fuck it,*' August thought to himself as he steeled himself for the single biggest risk he had ever taken.

"When I began trying to rally support for my claim, I did so for my sister and my mother," August said in a strangely calm voice, a tone that carried to the furthest edges of the chamber so easily that many were taken aback at how rapidly August's demeanor had changed. It was as if all the weakness he had showcased earlier had vanished, leaving nothing but the resigned strength of a man with little left to lose.

"This did not remain my only motivation," August continued. "After speaking with my Uncle and learning the goals of my glorious Ancestors, I decided to take up their cause for my own. I pressed onward to make myself King because I can—and *will*—continue their work. I would bring true justice to this Kingdom, ending the system of hereditary nobility and ensuring that only the most worthy of people take their place. I would expand the Exarchates, give all rights to the common people that they have been denied, and never again allow the accident of one's birth to hold them back.

"That is what I now work for. That is why I *must* become King."

As August finished giving his bold answer, the Assembly chamber was as silent as the grave. Martianus, Proximus, and even the High Arbiter were shocked to speechlessness. The trial had barely begun, and August had just declared to the Assembly, a body made up of at least sixty percent—if not more—landed nobles or their family members, that he was going to take away their most prized and valuable right, that of passing their political power on to their own family members. The sheer madness of such an act shocked the entire chamber.

Slowly, people began to regain control of their senses, and many Assembly members began to whisper amongst themselves. However, a few seconds later, the High Arbiter immediately put an end to that and silenced them all when she asked, "Sir Martianus, have you any more questions?"

Martianus stared at August in disbelief. His own family controlled the March of Ironford, one of the most powerful noble Houses in the entire Eastern Territories. However, August's declaration of intent didn't shake him too much; rather, his disbelief came from how much harder his own job now was. He had no idea how he was going to help August now, and after almost ten seconds of thought—which the High Arbiter allowed him—any additional questions that he may have wanted to ask eluded him.

"... No, Your Honor," he was forced to admit. "I have no more questions for Prince August."

"Very well," the High Arbiter said, her composure already back in place. "Sir Proximus, you may now call your first witness or present your first piece of evidence."

### **Chapter 386: The Trial III**

Proximus' first witness was a young assistant to August. He was a timid-seeming man, barely even a first-tier mage, and his eyes were practically bulging out of his skull as they whirled around in primal panic at so many powerful people staring at him.

"Tell us what you found," Proximus ordered, barely acknowledging the young man.

"I-I was going th-through His Highness' letters, S-Sir," he said, trying and failing to keep his voice stable when he felt like he was about to be crushed against the floor from the magical and social pressure he was under. "I f-found a signed order f-for Prince Trajan's murder..."



"Give us more details," Proximus demanded. "Who's letters, specifically? Who was the letter addressed to? When did you find it?"

"It was P-Prince August's letters, Sir," the young man answered as quickly as he could. "The letter wasn't a-addressed! I found it a w-week before Prince Trajan was murdered!"

"So, to be clear, you found an unaddressed order from Prince August, signed by His Highness, ordering the death of Prince Trajan?" Proximus sought clarification.

"Y-Yes, Sir."

"Is this the letter you found?" Proximus asked, pulling a piece of paper out of his soul realm, showing it to the man.

"Yes, Sir," the man repeated.

Proximus held the letter in front of him and read, "I hereby authorize the operation to remove my Uncle from play. Signed, Prince August Taurus." He then passed the letter to the Arbiters for their perusal, and the High Arbiter, in particular, noted that the signature was genuine, sending one of her eyebrows almost rocketing into her hair as her eyes flitted between August and the letter in her hand.

Many of the nobles around the chamber looked unconvinced, and Leon was among them. Something so blatant, so *obvious* just didn't seem like August's style. In fact, he'd question the intelligence of anyone whose style would leave such a damning piece of physical evidence.

"I'm finished with the witness, Your Honor," Proximus said, yielding the assistant to Martianus for cross-examination.

Martianus, grateful for what seemed like such a slam dunk, walked forward with a smile on his face. This was so much better than what he had to work with following August's statement to Proximus.

"You say you found this letter while going through Prince August's letters, correct?" Martianus asked.

"Yes, Sir."

"What were you doing going through the Prince's letters?"

"I was gathering them, Sir, preparing them to be sent to those they had been addressed to."

"And yet, you found an unaddressed letter? Was it unsealed? Is that how you read it?"

"It was unsealed, Sir. I-I couldn't help but look at it since it was unaddressed."

"Did you see His Highness write this letter with his own hand?"

"N-No, Sir."

"Can you say for certain that this letter wasn't forged?"

"I can't, Sir."

"Your Honor, I would like to file a motion to dismiss this evidence as faulty," Martianus said to the High Arbiter.

"I would agree," she immediately replied. August's signature on the letter was genuine, to be sure, but a politically active Prince could sign hundreds of things every day. Forging a signature was nothing.

However, it seemed that her fellow Arbiters were not so dismissive. To the High Arbiter's astonishment, only one of her colleagues agreed with her. To dismiss a piece of evidence required a vote by the supervising Arbiters, and the other three denied the motion.

The High Arbiter scowled and glared at the three who voted against Martianus' motion.

"What reason have you for accepting this evidence?" she asked.

"Because it *is* evidence," one replied, speaking for the other two as well. "We can't pick and choose what evidence we collect, especially since this signature appears to be genuine."

The High Arbiter glared at him, resolving to look into his affairs when this was over. However, her hands were tied. "Motion to dismiss this letter is... *denied*..."

Martianus quickly began to sport a scowl to match hers, but fortunately, it was his turn to call a witness, and his first choice was the Brimstone Paladin, who happily left his seat and walked right up to the stone platform, relieving the young assistant who made himself scarce as quickly as he was able to.

"Sir, what can you tell me about the relationship between Prince Trajan and Prince August?"

"They were quite cooperative, without a hint of strife between them," Brimstone quickly replied.

"So the idea that Prince August had Prince Trajan murdered is, in your opinion...?"

"Ludicrous. Prince Trajan was Prince August's greatest supporter, it would gain Prince August nothing to have Prince Trajan murdered. In fact, this whole affair benefits no one but Prince August's rival, Prince Octavius."

"Are you making an accusation?"

"I am," Brimstone said without hesitation, sending quiet whispers echoing throughout the chamber.

"Upon Prince Trajan's body was discovered a gem containing the magic body of Caecilius Symmachus Aemilianus, the seventh-tier founder of the Bluefire Guild. He verified that it was Petrus Duronius that struck the killing blow!"

All eyes in the chamber turned in the Earthshaker Paladin's direction, but he seemed not to care. In fact, he stared back at the Brimstone Paladin, nothing but contempt and arrogant pride on his face.

"And where is this gem now?" Martianus asked, his face lighting up in muted triumph.

"I have it right here," Brimstone said, reaching into his breast pocket and retrieving a small red ruby, now freed of the plate that it had once been embedded in.

"I object to this!" Proximus shouted, pointing at the gem.

"For what reason?" the High Arbiter asked. "I, for one, would love to hear what a seventh-tier mage has to say about these matters."

"Only one witness may be called at a time!" Proximus explained.

The High Arbiter stared at him, her aged face resting in an expression of mild disdain and disapproval. Slowly, she turned back to Martianus and said, "He has a point."

Martianus nodded, took possession of the ruby, and then said, "Thank you, Sir, my questions are done."

Proximus stepped forward without even being called and immediately launched into his own questions.

"Where were you on the night of Prince Trajan's death, Sir Saturnius?" he asked, his voice quivering with his attempts to keep it neutral and without anger.

"Here at the palace, surrounded by many who can verify it," Brimstone unhesitatingly answered before quickly listing off a few names of people he'd been in contact with who were now in Assembly seats, all of whom nodded in response when the High Arbiter cast her gaze to each.

"Do you have any knowledge regarding where Prince August was that night?" Proximus asked.

"... I do not," Brimstone answered.

"Thank you, Sir," Proximus said, ending his questioning.

His next witness was another of August's secretaries who'd been arrested not long before August. She testified that she had heard August and Trajan arguing the day before Trajan had died, but Martianus got her to admit that she never actually saw the two arguing, nor could she say what the argument was about.

When Martianus' turn next came, he lay the ruby down on the stone platform and asked, "Can you hear me, Caecilius?"

"I can," came Caecilius' voice from the ruby, bringing some amount of surprise to many in the Assembly chamber. None of them knew who Caecilius was since he'd died so long ago, but they could at least feel the last remnants of his power contained within the gem, so there was little doubt as to his identity.

But that wasn't to say there was no doubt at all.

Caecilius quickly narrated the events of the night Trajan died, including when Trajan identified Earthshaker by name, again drawing many a look in Earthshaker's direction. However, the Paladin looked about as perturbed as he had previously, and barely even acknowledged that he was being called out before all the greatest men and women of the Kingdom.

Martianus had little to add following Caecilius' testimony, but Proximus was another matter entirely.

"Have you any solid evidence tying Sir Petrus to these events?" Proximus asked Caecilius.

"I was there, I heard them speak. Is that not solid enough for you?" Caecilius imperiously shot back.

"Depends on how trustworthy others find your word, I suppose," Proximus replied, sneaking in a quick grin toward Martianus. "Seems a bit convenient that Prince Trajan identified his killer so clearly, and that his killer happens to be affiliated with Prince August's own brother, who he's already admitted to attempting to supplant as King Julius' heir."

"Are you implying that I'm lying?!"

“How can anyone believe your word? Who even are you? You don’t even have blood we can test to verify your identity! You could be anyone!” Without waiting for Caecilius to respond, Proximus turned away from him to address the Assembly as he would a regular jury. “How are we supposed to take this thing seriously? For all we know, this could be nothing more than a cleverly enchanted ruby! And even if it does contain a magic body, that doesn’t make it *alive*!

“No matter what this thing *claims* to be, in point of fact, it is an instrument of slander and little else! Maybe it was once a man, and maybe that man had a respectable level of power, I can’t say, but now it’s a shiny talking stone, and its ‘opinion’ ought to be treated accordingly!

“Your Honor, my questions are done.”

The High Arbiter nodded for Proximus to continue with his next witness, while Martianus scanned the room. What he found was a depressing number of people who seemed to be resonating with what Proximus had said. His expectations for this trial going his way weren’t high to begin with, but now, with his only witness with first-hand knowledge of Prince Trajan’s murder effectively discredited, his expectations were plummeting through the floor.

Proximus’ next witness was, much like the previous two, one of August’s people who had been arrested a day or two before the Prince, except this time he was a knight from a long line of hereditary knights with a history of service to the Royal Family. And just like those before, this knight testified that August had been in conflict with Trajan and had been falling out with him over some disagreement. What that disagreement was, no one seemed to know.

When Martianus cross-examined the knight, he wasn’t able to bring to light any great revelation; the knight stuck to his guns that he heard August and Trajan getting into several heated arguments and that office gossip was that the two despised each other.

For hours, the two lawyers kept calling witnesses to testify, cross-examining them and trying to poke holes in the other’s story. For the most part, Martianus continued trying to prove that August had nothing to do with Trajan’s death, and Proximus tried to establish reasonable motivation for August to want Trajan dead.

Six hours after the trial began—without any breaks—the two finally ran out of witnesses. Nothing new had been said that hadn’t been said by the first couple of witnesses in one way or another, just more evidence onto the pile—though Leon couldn’t help but notice, and he was sure that others had as well, that Proximus had never actually established *how* August was supposed to have killed Trajan—and with no more witnesses, it was time for the piles to be judged, much to the relief of many in the Assembly chamber.

For his part, Leon was quite surprised that the trial was going so quickly, even if he was rather dismayed at how poorly it was going. Many trials could take days, and he was fully expecting this one to take weeks. However, it seemed that everyone wanted this one over with quickly, and someone had gone to great lengths to ensure that this was a quick and speedy affair. He didn’t know if that was the High Arbiter, Octavius, or someone else, and he didn’t even know if he should feel concerned or not. He couldn’t ask Minerva about it, either, as the High Arbiter had several times made good on her promise to throw people out who were talking, and he wanted to stay until the end.

The two lawyers made their closing statements—essentially repeating their opening statements and urging the Assembly members to vote their way—and the trial came to a swift end. All that remained was a vote.

All eyes turned to the High Arbiter as both lawyers, their jobs done, descended from the platform to wait with the scribes. Only August remained on the platform with the five Arbiters.

The High Arbiter cleared her throat to grab attention, though the Assembly chamber, full as it was with hundreds of Assembly members and thousands of their attendants, was dead silent.

“If anyone requires a break to think things over, please say so,” she said, casting her gaze around the room. For such a monumental event, deciding the guilt of a Prince over the murder of another Prince, she expected at least a few people to speak up. She, of course, wasn’t blind to the factionalism that had plagued the Royal court of late, but there were still large numbers of neutral parties in the Assembly, and she thought that some of these people might need an hour or two to deliberate over all that they had just heard.

Not a single person spoke up. She could just call for a break anyway, but more than any other emotion, she saw impatience in the crowd. In the minds of many, this had already gone on for too long. What ‘this’ meant, though, she wasn’t sure—perhaps it was the trial, or maybe it was the constant politicking, or it could’ve been the instability in the Kingdom following the King’s seclusion.

The High Arbiter frowned, turned to look at her fellow Arbiters and when none of them spoke up, she quietly sighed and said, “Very well. Let us begin the vote.”

The first Arbiter, the one furthest to the left from August’s perspective, wasted no time in rising to his feet and declaring to the Assembly, “Guilty!”

August’s face fell. It was expected that at least some of the Arbiters would side against him, but it still hurt.

The second Arbiter from the left rose once the first returned to his seat. “Guilty!” she shouted, her voice echoing in the immense chamber.

August’s heart sank into his feet. Two out of five. It would only take one more and his fate would be as good as sealed. His head would part from his neck, his mother would be assassinated, and his sister would be either exiled to some tiny estate in the country, married off to the tenth son of some minor noble or otherwise ‘disappeared’.

The Arbiter furthest from the right rose to his feet. His face was solemn. Stoic. Grave. All the proper words for sentencing a Prince to death. “Guilty,” he whispered, his voice still carrying throughout the room.

August stared at the man, his eyes dead and disbelieving. The trial was a sham. There had been little conclusive evidence on either side, so he’d thought he’d had a good chance of at least getting the Arbiters on his side, even if the Assembly had a better shot of overriding their vote.

‘No...’ he thought, his body suddenly breaking out in sweat as dread flooded his mind, only marginally stymied by hatred when his eyes, in their desperate attempt to not look at the man who had just sealed his fate, happened to land on the smiling face of Octavius.

His brother had won. August would for sure be dead in less than a day. Octavius would have no rivals, and with the King's infirmity, he had no obstacles remaining between him and the throne.

With everything that was now running through August's mind, from his fear for his family to his worry for his friends and allies living under Octavius' thumb, the Fourth Prince didn't manage to catch the fourth Arbiter's judgment, not that it mattered much at this point. The High Arbiter's decision, though, he did manage to pay attention to.

"Not guilty," she said, though it meant little. She was the High Arbiter, the highest-ranking judge in all the land, second only to the King. And yet, she had only one vote. Her gesture was symbolic, and nothing more, though August did take some small comfort in her pitying gaze, her eyes wrinkled in pity and concern. As much as she wanted to help, her power was limited when the opinions of so many were against her; even she couldn't overrule the Assembly.

August slumped back in his chair, any trace of Royal dignity now gone. The past two weeks had left him too weak to maintain it under these circumstances. He vaguely registered the High Arbiter calling for the Assembly's vote, but he wasn't sure how much it would matter. Perhaps the High Arbiter making her position on the matter clear would sway enough people to his side, but he somehow doubted it. Octavius had probably gotten to the other four Arbiters, and if he did that, then he probably had more than enough support within the Assembly that the entire trial was nothing more than a formality. August wouldn't have been surprised to learn that Octavius probably had enough votes in the Assembly that corrupting the Arbiters wasn't even necessary.

It would certainly explain why the Earthshaker Paladin barely even reacted to the accusation of murdering Prince Trajan. It simply didn't matter.

*'Why am I even thinking about all of this?'* August wondered as the Assembly votes were taken and tallied. There was still some smidgeon of hope, but even if there wasn't, over the past few years, his mind had gotten used to constantly considering and ruminating over political problems. With nothing else, his mind fell back into these habits.

"What is the decision of the Assembly?" the High Arbiter loudly and formally asked, bringing August back to reality.

Her highest-ranked scribe reported back to her, "Your Honor, the final count is one thousand and seventy-three for 'guilty', and four hundred and forty-two for 'not guilty'. Eighteen abstaining."

There were a little under four hundred members of the Assembly still unaccounted for, being simply too far away to reach the capital in time for the trial, but their votes weren't counted. Even if they were defaulted to abstention or not guilty, Octavius still had the clear majority.

August had been condemned.

"... Very well," the High Arbiter murmured, her sharp eyes memorizing each and every person who voted guilty. She could do nothing about them now, but she'd remember them.

She returned to her seat, turned her eyes back to August, and gave the final verdict.

"August of House Taurus, fourth son of King Julius Septimius of House Taurus, Prince of the Bull Kingdom, you have been found guilty of the murder of Prince Trajan Anastasius of House Taurus. For the

charge of murder, you have been found guilty. For the charge of high treason, you have been found guilty. For the charge of kinslaying, you have been found guilty. For the charge..."

She continued to list off the charges of which August was now officially guilty of, and his eyes glazed over. It hardly mattered at this point to anyone but the scribes scribbling it all down. All three of the first charges carried the same punishment, and it rendered all the rest moot.

"... For all of these," the High Arbiter finished, "the punishment is death by beheading. The sentence will be carried out at noon tomorrow."

### **Chapter 387: The Last Moments of Peace**

As the pronouncement of August's sentence rang out through the chamber, many sat in stunned silence, others smiled with the glee of victory, while still others looked on in horror and dread. The death of a Prince was never something to be taken lightly, no matter who that Prince was or what they had done.

Leon and Minerva's reactions, though, were significantly more muted than many others in the chamber. They weren't surprised at the outcome and managed to carefully control their reactions—Leon remained stoic, while Minerva subtly glared at August, just as she would be expected to in this situation—August had just been 'proven' to have murdered Trajan, after all.

After announcing the sentence, the High Arbiter and her colleagues rose from their seats and quickly departed, letting the Assembly burst out into frantic conversation in their wake. Most everyone stayed seated until a couple dozen Royal Guards escorted August out of the chamber.

As soon as August was out of the chamber, Leon, Minerva, and the rest of their group were on their feet, pausing only for Minerva to lock eyes with Brimstone before turning and leaving the Assembly chamber. They were some of the first people out, since most of the other Assembly members wanted to socialize and discuss what had just happened amongst themselves. This suited Minerva and Leon just fine, though, since it meant that the rest of the Royal Palace was relatively peaceful.

Not a word was spoken in the group as they marched toward Trajan's old office. They knew what was about to happen, and it weighed heavily on their mood. Treason was a weighty thing, and they hadn't the support to give them the confidence to successfully pull it off.

Upon arrival at Trajan's old office, Minerva almost broke down out of anger once the door was closed, and she wasn't the only one.

"Those *corrupt* bastards!" she bitterly cried, slamming her fist down onto her desk in a struggle not to shout the words so loudly that the entire palace could hear. Her statement was echoed in several of the knights, who expressed their own frustrations in similar ways.

Leon and Valeria, however, retained their own natural stoicism.

"What now?" Leon asked, his tone suggesting that what he was really asking was 'are you done?'

"Now, we make our move," Minerva replied, her voice sharp and her face determined. "We tried the law, but Octavius has won the legal battle. He will win no more."

—

It was a good day to be Prince Octavius. He expressed his grief at Prince Trajan's death and the 'revelation', 'fury', and 'disappointment' that it was August who had done it, but his mood was decidedly more chipper, especially since several of August's more fickle allies in the capital took the initiative to speak with him and express their shock at August's actions following the trial.

But even with this victory, he couldn't stay long. He had to keep up the mask of the grieving Prince, and so not long after Leon and Minerva left, Octavius followed suit, departing the Assembly chamber in favor of his own private apartments in the palace. There, he met with several of his most loyal supporters, including the Countess of Lindinis, the Consul of the Center, and both of his Paladins.

"What do you make of Dame Minerva?" Octavius asked the room. "Will she be a problem?"

"Possibly, Your Royal Highness," the Consul said. "To my eyes, she was quite aggrieved at August, and responded in a pleasing manner to the High Arbiter's sentence."

"She should be watched anyway," the Sapphire Paladin said. "She controls too many powerful knights for us to simply let her do what she wants."

Octavius smiled. "I agree, she's too great a risk, but she's still a powerful knight and respected leader in her own right. If it seems like she's going to be amenable, then there's no need to do anything drastic. Just keep an eye on her and her associates."

"What about Roland and Saturnius?" Earthshaker growled.

"Roland will be stripped of his title as Paladin the instant I become King," Octavius said, clearly relishing the thought. "Brimstone... is too powerful and well-connected—the Duchess of Vesontio would be insulted if her cousin were to lose his title of Paladin—but if he behaves, then I will happily welcome him back into the fold."

"Forgive me for the impertinence, Your Royal Highness," the Countess said, "but the King still lives, and there is still a chance that His Majesty will recover. How long should we wait until ensuring the crown rests upon its rightful head?"

"I'm not too concerned about that, now that my bastard brother's been taken care of," Octavius serenely replied. "Whether or not my father wakes, I will hold the power in this Kingdom. After August has been made a head shorter, there'll be nothing stopping me from consolidating my power here."

"There's still Bronze and Penitent to consider," Sapphire cautiously warned. She quickly walked forward and took Octavius' hands in hers. She then looked into his eyes with her own almost watering up in worry, and her voice quivered as she said, "If you take the throne now, they'll object, and I don't think there's a force in this Kingdom that can stop them if they move together. I don't want anything to happen to you..."

"As I said, love, I'll wait a while," Octavius said soothingly, squeezing Sapphire's hands in turn. Turning back to the others, he asked, "Where's August being held and what does his guard detail look like?"

"He'll be in the dungeons, and the standard guard detail of six fifth-tier knights has been doubled. A pair of sixth-tier knights have also been reassigned to guard his cell personally, along with the rest of the dungeon's standard guards," the Consul explained.



“Uncle, I want you to watch over August as well,” Octavius said to Earthshaker. “*Nothing* is to happen to him until tomorrow. I want his death to be swift and *very* public. As a matter of fact, I want everyone here to be involved in keeping that dungeon secure.”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness,” Earthshaker replied, though his voice was a bit strained. He was a Paladin, not a lowly guard! Still, he understood the need and didn’t argue.

The others agreed as well, including Sapphire and Lindinis, even though Sapphire was also a Paladin and Lindinis didn’t have much ability to actually contribute to the guard detail.

“Good,” Octavius said as he settled back into a nearby armchair to relax, his years of work finally about to reach their completion. “I’m sure the entire city already knows but make a grand announcement about the verdict anyway. I don’t want a single person in the Kingdom to be ignorant of August’s guilt. And ensure that the 1st Legion is mustered and ready for anything that might happen. Tomorrow must be *perfect*, not a single thing is allowed to go wrong!”

—

Leon sat in his villa, silently enjoying the last few moments of peace he would have for a long while. He cleaned out his workshop of all his research, he undid most of his enchantments on his home, and he packed away just about all of his clothes into his soul realm. Once he was gone, Elise would temporarily move back into her mother’s estate; they would leave nothing behind that was worth taking.

All of this was because he did not believe that Octavius was above attacking his home in retaliation, and he wasn’t sure that Elise’s status alone would be enough to protect her. Emilie and her Heaven’s Eye guards, however, would be more than up to the task of keeping her safe.

With that taken care of, Leon’s only goal had been to make sure that nothing remained in his home that might have been of interest to anyone who might break in after he and Elise were gone. And to that end, he was of the mind that he succeeded.

Now, all he was doing was quietly sitting in a chair on his back terrace, looking out into his back yard, enjoying the quiet late afternoon ambience. It would all be shattered in just a few hours’ time.

Valeria had come with him back home, and she had likewise packed up most of her things. What she couldn’t live without she gave to Leon to store in his soul realm, and the rest of her possessions were to go with Elise back to Emilie’s estate. Once that was done, she began to quietly meditate in Leon’s meditation room, preparing herself for the first real test of her skills she had ever undertaken. Leon had given her a tremendously important task, and she was going to prove his trust was well placed.

When Elise came home, she found Leon and asked, “What’s going on?”

Leon looked at his lady standing in the back doorway, smiling when he saw her. However, as he registered her question, his smile disappeared, and he said, “We’re committing treason tonight.”

Elise nodded in understanding. She knew what this meant, Leon and Minerva had been planning this for a while, and as much as she hated the idea of being separated from Leon again, she accepted it. Leon wanted to do this, and she hadn’t the fighting skills to follow him.

“We’re not going to see each other for a long while after you leave, then...?” she asked, her voice inundated with worry.

“Probably not,” Leon said.

Elise sighed, her already worried mood growing even more melancholic. She didn’t say it out loud, but she knew that she and Leon might not see each other ever again once he left. He could easily be killed in the war to come, and no matter how much she reassured herself that he had survived quite a bit could alleviate her worries.

After a long moment of silence, she suddenly walked over to Leon, hiked up her long, black, almost skintight dress, and practically draped herself over Leon, straddling his thighs while her arms wrapped around his broad shoulders. She pulled him into a deep hug, which he immediately returned, holding her close.

They sat there for what felt like hours, simply filling their senses with each other, until Elise leaned back and pulled Leon’s face into her ample breasts.

“If we only have a few hours left before we’re separated, then let’s make the most of them,” she seductively whispered.

Leon needed no further encouragement, letting his hands fall from Elise’s lower back and down to her toned rear, where he grabbed ahold and stood up, easily lifting Elise, much to her delight. He projected his magic senses so he could keep his face right where Elise was holding it, then carried her to their bedroom where they began to tear each other’s clothes off.

The two emerged a few hours later just as the sun was starting to go down. They found Valeria relaxing on a sofa, who immediately went beet red as she made eye contact with Leon and Elise. She was dressed for war, clad in steel plate that had been perfectly fitted to her body, with mail at her joints and gambeson padding beneath. Her helmet—which was sitting on the nearby end table—was completely close-faced with only two holes for her eyes, and she had tied her long silver hair back into a tight bun to ensure that it would all fit beneath it. On top of that, Leon had personally enchanted her armor to make it stronger and to ward it against elemental magic—plus a few small air enchantments so that she could still breathe and hear perfectly well despite its lack of requisite holes.

But her armor wasn’t the only new piece of gear she had—resting against her shoulder was a brand new glaive, with a haft of a heavy dark grey wood shaped with nature magic around a core of enchanted steel. The blade—made of Freezing Steel so that she could more effectively use ice magic once she ascended to the fifth-tier—was long and wide, and when she channeled her magic into it, its edges would glow with whitish-blue runes. These Leon hadn’t made, since his skills in water magic still weren’t quite up to that standard just yet.

“Everything all right, Val?” Elise asked with a mischievous smile.

Valeria declined to answer out loud, choosing instead to vigorously nod her head.

Elise giggled, glanced at Leon, and said, “I think we may have been a bit too loud.”

Valeria’s face became somehow even more flushed, while Leon seemed to be looking anywhere but at the silver-haired knightess, his cheeks rapidly matching hers in complexion. Of course, Elise took no

small amount of pleasure in torturing her friend and her lover so, but unfortunately, she could see that the Heaven's Eye movers had arrived, which meant that they were out of time.

"Leon, could you head outside and coordinate with them?" Elise asked, pointing out the window.

Leon nodded and made for the front door, leaving Elise and Valeria alone together. Elise, who had seemed so comfortable after leaving her bedroom, quickly tensed up, while Valeria was as uncomfortable as she had ever been. The two were good friends, but their relationship had grown a bit ambiguous since Valeria had moved in. They were still friends, but Valeria felt quite a bit of awkwardness with Elise still supporting the former starting a relationship with Leon. That awkwardness was turned up to eleven now that Valeria was going to be spending so much more time around Leon in the near future as his knight than Elise would be able to.

Fortunately, Elise knew exactly how to diffuse this tension; she took a quick step forward and pulled Valeria into a tight embrace, taking her silver-haired friend by surprise.

"I've already told Leon to come back to me," the red-head whispered, "now I'm saying it to you. Don't you *dare* die out there. You come back to me, too."

Valeria pulled back just enough to stare into Elise's eyes, and she could see the seriousness within them.

Elise gave her a wicked smile and continued, "I'm entrusting you two to each other, and if you don't come back, I'll hunt you down and drag you back to where you belong: here, with us. Got it?"

Valeria nodded. "I'll keep him safe," she said. "I can't guarantee that he'll do the same, given what Adrianos did, but I'll do everything I can to keep us both safe."

Elise smiled, then pulled Valeria just a little bit closer, turning their embrace into something far more intimate than it had been. "You'd better. When you do, maybe the three of us can do something *fun* together..."

At that moment, Leon walked back in, the movers at his back. He momentarily froze in the doorway long enough for the two ladies to separate before being seen by the movers.

He quickly walked over to Elise pulled her close, and, while the movers got started with moving Elise's stuff back to Emilie's estate, quietly asked, "What were you doing with Valeria? Not forcing her to do anything she didn't want to, right?"

"Please, who do you think I am?" Elise shot back, her lips curling upward in a coy smile.

"A woman who pursues what she wants rather aggressively," Leon retorted.

"Oh, hush." Elise playfully pushed Leon back, and followed up with a, "Go get to work!"

"Yes, dear," he said, giving a rare, full faced smile as he drank in the sight of her for what he knew would be the last time for what could very well be years. But he couldn't linger, and he slowly walked back out into the front yard and let Anzu out of his stable.

Once he was gone, Elise and Valeria looked at each other, Valeria having recovered somewhat from Elise's teasing. The two friends shared a nod of solidarity, and then Valeria joined Leon outside.

It was time to commit treason.

### **Chapter 388: The Easy Part**

The sun slipped below the horizon, and Leon, Valeria, and Anzu prepared to leave Leon's villa. There was a sense of dread and anticipation within them, and Leon, at least, was of the mind that he could very well never see his home again. Still, he'd said his goodbyes to Elise, and there was no other reason for him to look back.

For her part, Valeria took the time to pull a pitch-black sleeved tabard over her brand-new shiny plate armor to stand out less in the dark. Leon's black armor, which appeared over him from his soul realm, didn't have this problem, and if it did, he still had his invisibility ring.

Once Anzu was saddled and ready, Leon hopped up, then extended a hand back down for Valeria. Her face reddened a few shades, but she didn't hesitate to take his hand and pull herself up behind him. There wasn't much to hold onto back there, so she had little alternative than to wrap her arms around Leon's waist, which she did with some trepidation and hesitation. Leon, however, said nothing, and quietly allowed it to happen.

"Let's go," he whispered, and Anzu began to run as wind began to gather beneath his outstretched wings.

Fortunately, Anzu was large, strong, and powerful, and Valeria, while fit, athletic, and covered from head to toe in steel armor, wasn't nearly heavy enough for her presence to bother the albino griffin. The three lifted off the ground without difficulty and began soaring through the skies of the capital.

Anzu flew fast, and it was only a few scant minutes later that they were touching down on a massive lakeside estate, near the private docks where a huge yacht was moored. Leon and Valeria quickly dismounted and took off running for the yacht, Anzu close at their heels. Their chosen method of leaving Leon's villa was faster than just about anything else they could've chosen, but it was not subtle in the slightest, even in the early evening darkness. If there had been anyone watching the villa from afar, they would've seen the three leaving by air.

In other words, there was a damn good chance that they had little time before news of their unusual departure reached the Royal Palace.

Fortunately, Minerva, Brimstone, Roland, and the rest of their combined retainers were probably already in position. Their job was far more difficult, while Leon's was comparatively easy. He and Valeria had to smuggle Princess Cristina and her mother out of the Royal harem and then rendezvous with the others on the southern tip of the palatial island. Minerva's job was to break August out of wherever he was being kept, which would undoubtedly involve far more violence than Leon's mission.

The owner of the yacht was waiting for them on deck as they charge up the gangplank.

"You... three? Are you three ready?" she asked good-naturedly as she held out a hand to stroke Anzu's feathers. Anzu jerked back a bit in response and tried to hide his massive body behind Leon, glaring at the ship's owner with no small amount of wariness and antipathy.

"As we'll ever be," Leon said, silently urging them onward.

—

The Royal Palace was dark and quiet. Most people had gone home, but Leon couldn't easily verify that; all he could do was scan the shore and the tree line with his eyes. Even if he wanted to risk projecting his magic senses as far as he could—which he did *not*—most of the buildings on the island, even those that didn't see regular use, were warded against such surveillance.

He counted them lucky that the yacht wasn't stopped as it slowly cut through the waves moving north along the island's western side. Of course, the sigil of the golden bull on a green field emblazoned unmistakably on the side of the yacht was probably why, but Leon was hopeful that the reason they hadn't seemed to attract any attention yet was that they simply had yet to be seen.

The yacht soon came to a stop about two hundred feet from the shore, near a small private dock tucked away in a rocky inlet about halfway up the western side of the island.

"This is as far as we're going to go. You're on your own until you return," the yacht's owner said, giving Leon and Valeria a glowing smile. "I'll wait for you here, but please be quick."

In the back of the yacht, several members of the crew were unloading a dinghy with practiced ease. This small boat was the main method that the yacht's passengers used to come to and from the ship when it wasn't moored, and now it would ferry Leon and his small group to the private dock.

"We're on it," Leon replied, waving Valeria and Anzu over to the dinghy. It was enchanted with small water jets on the bottom that would propel it through the water, so they were the only three to board it, which was for the best since Anzu was large enough that the dinghy started to rock unsteadily.

The griffin, channeling his lion half, began to quake and shiver in fear of the water beneath him, and only calmed down when Leon held out a hand and rested it upon his head. Valeria, meanwhile, took the wheel of the dinghy and began to steer it toward the shore. She tried to strike a balance between speed and stability since the dinghy still rocked enough to make the ride harrowing for all occupants.

But they made it to the docks safe and sound and found the place relaxingly deserted. This made some degree of sense to Leon, since the dungeons were on the eastern side of the island, about as far away from the harem as it could reasonably be on the inhabited side of the island. The harem itself was quite secluded, though heavily guarded. Much like the King's private villa, it was surrounded by a forest, but it wasn't that dense and had more than enough room for a number of expansive gardens and even a hedge maze.

It was also guarded by several thousand highly trained knightesses, nearly all hailing from noble backgrounds with plenty of resources to throw behind their training.

Leon thought he had a good chance if he were to fight one of these women in a fair duel since as Royal Guards, most didn't see much combat and had little in the way of practical experience—though there were always exceptions. Additionally, they were well-equipped, and judging by what he saw from Valeria during the past two weeks, more than skilled in the arts of war.

In other words, he wasn't in a hurry to test his confidence, and he stepped lightly once his feet hit the dock.

"What do you know about the wards on the island preventing intrusion by flight?" Leon quietly asked Valeria, whispering despite their apparent isolation.

"Not much," she whispered back as she secured the dinghy to the docks, her voice taking on a slightly resonant quality as it passed through her helmet.

"Do you know if there's anything preventing our exit by air?"

Valeria shook her head in the negative, eliciting a scowl from Leon. The ride on the dinghy had been terrible, and if there were going to be a few more bodies added to their dinghy, he was all-but-certain that they'd need multiple trips. He couldn't fly to the palace island, but if he could fly away from it, then it might solve that problem.

"There are other boats," Valeria said, calming his mind somewhat as she pointed to a small shack-like structure sitting over the water.

"How many?"

"Not sure about the total, but there's enough."

Leon nodded, taking her at her word for the sake of expediency.

"Then let's be off," he said. Under normal conditions, he'd take the time to secure their exit by confirming that there were enough boats and then getting them out of storage, but things were going to kick off as soon as Minerva began her own part of the operation, and he wanted to be done by then. Besides, there would be more hands when they returned, making the work go much faster.

The surrounding region of the island was hilly, and the rocky inlet that the dock had been built into was at the foot of these hills. The forest surrounding the harem began at the top and was not guarded. At the furthest end of the dock was an artfully rugged stone path that led further into the forest toward the harem.

"We're not taking the path, I take it?" Leon asked.

"No, this end isn't guarded around the block, but there are checkpoints further in," Valeria answered.

"This place is only secured if a member of the Royal Family is visiting, or if the ladies of the harem want to spend some time at the beach, and even then, it's incredibly rare. Given what's happening right now, there's no way any of the King's concubines are outside, so we're probably not going to have to worry about running into any guards since we're not going too far into the forest."

"Good," Leon said. It did seem a bit strange to him that this place wasn't more heavily guarded, but with how they had gotten in and with how little these docks were apparently used, he supposed it made some sense why there wasn't a more permanent Royal Guard presence here.

The three moved further into the forest, with Anzu staying low to the ground so his bright white fur and feathers didn't stick out too much. If the guard situation had been less in their favor, he might've left Anzu back at the docks. If things went to shit, though, then he wanted his griffin with him, just in case, both to fight and to escape.

Leon, Valeria, and Anzu crept further into the forest, shadowing the path but staying far from it. Just as Valeria said, there was a checkpoint further in, but it was only guarded a pair of lady knights who were

far more concerned with their own conversation than with paying attention to the surrounding forest. After all, their role was largely ceremonial, no one would be suicidal enough to try and infiltrate the Royal Palace.

Leon's small group kept infiltrating further. There would be a point where they would have to stop, where enchantments on the forest would give them away or they'd be seen by the guard patrols, but Leon was banking on Valeria's familiarity with the area to avoid them as best as they could.

"Not too much farther, now," Valeria whispered.

Sure enough, after only another minute or two, Leon spotted a small gazebo in the forest, surrounded by flowers of all colors and even a small decorative stream. It was also occupied by about a dozen young-seeming women, most armed and armored.

"Wait here a moment," Valeria said as she quickly removed her helmet. Leon frowned a bit but decided that since he'd trusted her this far, he could trust her a bit further. Still, he kept his eyes locked on the group of women in the gazebo; at least two of them appeared to be sixth-tier, and he was willing to bet that all were skilled in the use of their weapons of choice.

Leon and Anzu hung back, hidden fairly well behind a tree, some nearby bushes, and the early evening darkness. Valeria, meanwhile, confidently strode toward the gazebo, her glaive strapped to her back and her helmet in her hands, revealing her face and distinctive hair. Leon calmed himself down as much as he could, reducing the amount of noise he made as much as he could in an attempt to listen in to the encounter she was about to have. Anzu took his cues from Leon, retracting his wings and settling in on the forest floor looking like he was ready to pounce on unsuspecting prey.

"Halt!" Leon heard one of the sixth-tier knightesses call out once they'd notice Valeria.

Valeria complied, coming to a stop and spreading her arms to show that she had no weapons at the ready. That wasn't strictly necessary, though, as another voice rang out as the rest of the knightesses turned and noticed her.

"Val!" cried Asiya's familiar voice.

Leon saw Asiya, armed and armored in a similar fashion to the rest of the knightesses, rush out of the gazebo and practically tackle Valeria to the ground in a tight, passionate hug. Unfortunately, as hard as Leon tried to listen in, the rest of the conversation between Valeria, Asiya, and the other knightesses was too quiet for him to hear. However, about five minutes later, Valeria turned around and started leading the group back in his direction.

It took every ounce of restraint that Leon possessed to allow them to close distance with him and not reach for his sword or summon his bow from his soul realm, but most of the lady knights were clearly jumpy and understandably nervous, and he didn't want to provoke a confrontation. Still, it almost looked like one was about to break out once the group drew close enough to see him, with several of the knightesses drawing their blades.

"Hold!" one of the sixth-tier ladies ordered, immediately putting an end to any thoughts of fighting.

"You, are you Sir Leon Ursus?" she asked.

"I am," Leon confirmed.

The lady nodded, her eyes drifting over to Anzu, who was low to the ground and ready for a fight. “Is your war beast safe?”

“He won’t attack unless I do,” Leon said, resting a hand on the griffin’s head and calming him down a bit.

“In that case, might my charges ride him?”

There were thirteen ladies in the group, including Valeria. Eleven of them were armored, but the last two wore flowing black robes with hoods pulled over their heads, concealing their faces from Leon unless he wanted to be rude and use his magic senses. However, even without his magic senses, he could tell that these two were relatively weak in terms of magical ability, with one in the second-tier and the other barely even a first-tier mage. All the other knightesses were at least of the third-tier.

Leon nodded, understanding the need to move fast.

The sixth-tier knightess who appeared to be in charge nodded to the other, who quickly helped both of the robed women up onto Anzu’s back. Anzu was a bit nervous with so many unfamiliar people so close to him, and Leon had to stand right next to him so that he would sit still enough to allow both the Princess and her mother onto his back.

As Leon was doing this, he happened to glance up at the ladies as Anzu straightened himself out after allowing them onto his back. The first was exceptionally pretty, from what he could see under her hood. She had softer features and a heart-shaped face, long black hair, and bright blue eyes. She was clearly terrified, though, and kept looking back in direction of the harem. The other—Princess Cristina, Leon presumed—looked much like her mother, with the same black hair and heart-shaped face, though she was a bit taller, and her demeanor was completely different. Instead of fearfully looking back, she kept alternating her gaze between Leon, Anzu, and the way forward. Even more notably, her face was split with a wide smile, and her body shook with nervous excitement.

“Can we go, now?” Leon heard her whispering into her mother’s ear after a few moments of waiting for the rest of the group to get organized again.

Hearing the Princess, too, the knightess in charge quickly said, “Dame Valeria, fall in. You should know where to go. Sir Leon, if you could walk with me, I would appreciate it.”

Valeria almost moved automatically, but she was now Leon’s knight, not a Royal Guard. She looked first to him for confirmation. Not wanting to make a scene, Leon nodded, and Valeria quickly made for the end of a wide, shallow wedge that the knightesses fell into, with Leon and Anzu in the center, flanked by both sixth-tier knightesses.

“By the way,” the lady in charge said to Leon, “I’m Dame Maxima Aquileia, the head of Princess Cristina’s personal guard.”

“Good to meet you,” Leon whispered back, not wanting to say more until they were away from the island. Maxima, though, had other ideas; it seemed she was far more confident that they weren’t going to be caught than Leon was.

“So, where are we going, Sir Leon? Dame Asiya and my former squire weren’t clear on the details.”

Leon’s face momentarily warped in surprise, though it was hidden by his helmet.



"A ship not far from the nearby docks. From there, we're going to head south to the southern tip of the capitol island and meet up with Dame Minerva, and the Paladins Roland and Brimstone. Once we make that rendezvous, we're going to continue south along the Naga River."

Leon could've gotten more detailed, but he didn't trust Maxima quite yet, and if she were a double agent, then he'd already said too much.

"Got it," Maxima replied. "Anything to get Her Highness away from this city as soon as we can, though I'd prefer if we weren't waiting around for the others."

"We don't technically have to," Leon softly suggested. "I mean, you can just drop me off and then head south afterward. Depends on the situation--"

As Leon was speaking, a distant explosion echoed through the forest, startling the entire group and causing everyone to draw their weapons. A few more explosions could be heard in the distance, but the group remained unassailed. Whatever was happening with Minerva and August was clearly kicking off, but it didn't seem to be spilling over to the western side of the island.

"We should hurry," Maxima said, saying out loud what everyone was thinking.

There was no more talk; the group moved through the forest as fast as they could without completely abandoning stealth, and they managed to make it back to the docks without incident. Four of the knightesses entered the shack by the docks and had another dinghy a little bit bigger than Leon and Valeria's in the water in a matter of minutes, and the group began to pile in, with half going in that dinghy and the other half packing into Leon and Valeria's. Leon, Valeria, and Anzu, however, remained on the shore, while both Princess Cristina and her mother were split up and put into different boats.

Without waiting, the boats set off, making straight for the yacht that was still waiting a couple hundred feet from the shore. Meanwhile, Leon and Valeria quickly mounted Anzu without hesitation; the explosions they could still occasionally hear in the distance meant that neither was wasting time with feelings of embarrassment right now. As soon as they were both on, Leon bent down to whisper into Anzu's ear.

"Get to that ship as fast as you can."

Anzu was a smart beast, and Leon could get by with verbal commands almost more than he needed the reins, so as soon as the words entered Anzu's ear, the griffin took off running, taking flight just before reaching the waterline.

From the air, Leon could see bright orange flashes in the distance, concentrated on the eastern side of the island, and now that the forest wasn't in the way, he could hear the clashing of blades and the shouting of hundreds of people fighting miles away on the eastern side of the island.

He pointedly did not hear any alarms going off from Anzu's takeoff, but that didn't mean that none had been tripped. Anzu kept moving for the yacht, and Leon didn't stop him. For the moment, at least, it seemed like he and Valeria had pulled off their part of the mission.

## **Chapter 389: The Hard Part I**

Anzu landed on the top deck of the yacht that had ferried Valeria and Leon to the capitol island. The rest of the group got onto the boat the same way that the three of them had left: via a small platform at the back that led to a storage area for the first dinghy and had a staircase leading back up to the deck. The ten knights and their two charges left the dinghies with the yacht's crew to handle and ascended to meet with Leon and the woman who owned the yacht.

As soon as the group reached the top, Princess Cristina threw off her hood and rushed forward, pulling the woman into a tight hug.

"Sister! You came!" she gasped.

"I'd never leave you here," Stefania, the First Princess, replied, for, of course, she was the yacht's owner.

"Your Highness... thank you," said the second hooded person, who slowly removed her own hood to reveal the same pretty face that Leon had earlier glimpsed. Her features were no longer wracked with worry now that she had found a familiar face to cling to, and her smile was breathtaking in its beauty. It was easy for Leon to see why she had become the King's favorite.

"Lady Isabelle, it's good to see you," Stefania responded, welcoming the King's concubine onto her ship warmly.

"Where are we going now? To get August?" Cristina asked, her excitement at seeing her sister and at freedom from the Royal harem dying a bit as the sounds of battle continued to find their way to the ship from the eastern side of the island.

"That *was* the plan," Stefania said as she glanced at Leon and Valeria.

"Going with Plan B?" Leon asked as he removed his helmet.

"Hu! I know you!" Cristina exclaimed with a gasp of surprise now that she could see his features.

"Your Highnesses," Leon said with a bow directed more toward Cristina than toward Stefania. The latter had already given him permission not to bow to her, but he could see a few disapproving looks from Cristina and Isabelle's guard detail at his lack of formality.

"Yes, yes, we can all stroke each other's egos another time," Stefania said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Right now, we have much more important things to take care of, namely that it seems like Dame Minerva and the two Paladins on our side have made a mess of things on their end. I'm not bringing my baby sister to a battlefield."

Leon nodded in understanding, noting that the yacht had already begun to turn southward. "Get us as close as you can," he said.

"I can do that, but we'll be falling back to the secondary rendezvous point," Stefania replied with a warm smile.

Leon nodded, then looked to Valeria. "Get ready for a fight," he said.

Valeria nodded and unslung her glaive from her back while Leon summoned his bow from his soul realm.

“Wait, you two aren’t going to go join that battle, are you?” Cristina asked with a panicked expression. Her question was directed more toward Valeria than Leon, but it was the latter who answered the Princess.

“It’s our duty to go join the battle. Your Highness will be safe here in Princess Stefania’s capable hands, and you have ten of the finest knights in the Royal Guard to protect you. There’s little need for the two of us to stick around.”

Cristina frowned and stared at Valeria, silently asking what she was going to do.

“I... I will be fighting alongside Sir Leon,” Valeria said, to Cristina’s immense disappointment.

Before the Princess could protest, Asiya skipped over and added, “Your Highness, we should let these two lovebirds play, I’m sure they’ll be fine...”

“But they’re not playing... they’re going into battle...” Cristina pouted as Asiya pulled her away from Leon, who had averted his gaze to anything but Asiya’s teasing smile, and Valeria, whose face had gone scarlet. With a wink and a nod to Valeria, Asiya and Cristina disappeared below deck, along with Isabelle and the rest of the Royal Guard.

“Ah. Well. Shall we carry on?” Stefania asked, giving Leon and Valeria a knowing smile.

“Yes... yes, let’s get going,” Leon whispered.

—

At the same time that Leon and Valeria were making their way to the Royal harem, August was sitting in a cell in the dungeon. For the two weeks before his trial, he had languished in his private apartments, with little food and the occasional ‘visit’ from some knights in his brother’s employ. They demanded he write and sign a sworn statement ‘confessing’ his guilt, and whenever he refused, they would get rough.

In the end, August made the statement they wanted, and he was left alone in his apartments. Even if he was locked in a cage, it was a gilded one, with all the amenities a man of his station could ask for. The temperature was regulated, he had access to his bathroom where he could wash and do his business in peace, and all of his furnishings were simple, if of the highest quality.

The cell he was moved to after the trial, however, was dark, cramped, and lacked even the most basic of amenities. There was nowhere for him to wash, his toilet amounted to a bucket in the corner, and his bed was a slab of stone elevated a mere foot off the stone floor. The cell itself was only about five feet square, which meant that August, now a little more than six feet tall after awakening his blood, couldn’t even stand up straight, and barely had enough room to stretch out diagonally on the floor.

Even more uncomfortable were the powerful wards placed upon the cell that were specifically designed for high-level mages. The same reinforcements that existed on the walls of fortresses and within most training rooms to keep them intact were present here, so even August’s earth magic couldn’t help him escape.

The only way in or out of the cell was a three-foot by three-foot hatch in the ceiling. On the other side of that hatch, though, August knew were at least two powerful guards, if not more, let alone the guards that filled the dungeon. It wasn’t a large building since most law-breakers were held in prisons run by

the Arbiters, reserving the dungeon on the capitol island for those who had crossed the Royal Family. However, even with its smaller size, the dungeon still had an impressive complement of knights watching over it, even though to August's knowledge he was the only person imprisoned within.

But August didn't mind his current accommodations that much. He was relatively uncomfortable, but he was alive, and he didn't think he'd be able to say that tomorrow. What really bothered him wasn't even the fact that Octavius had won; he had never lied when he said that the primary reason he got involved in the struggle for the throne was for Cristina and Isabelle.

He'd lost. Octavius had won. August's only regret was that now his mother and sister would be without his protection.

As August lay on the stone bed, bereft of even the thinnest blanket and lost in thoughts of his family, he felt the ground start to shake. At first, the fallen Prince paid it no mind, chalking it up to a trick of the mind, or at the very least something that he needn't concern himself with.

But the shaking didn't stop. It came in irregular bursts and eventually became too powerful to ignore. There was clearly *something* going on.

*'Probably just breaking ground for my execution platform,'* August cynically thought.

It wasn't until he started hearing the screaming and the fighting that he realized what was happening.

He bolted up from the meager bed he'd been resting on and straightened up as much as he could, pressing his ear against the hatch to try and hear anything. He heard some muffled shouting, probably the guards outside of his cell getting ready for whatever was obviously coming, but the details escaped him.

And then came an explosion, loud and strong, ripping through the room above August and sending dust falling down into the cell from the stone ceiling. The hatch vibrated in its frame, knocking August back a bit, and he backed away from it as fast as he could, just in case it was knocked loose and fell into the cell. He was weak from weeks of mistreatment, and he didn't want to take any chances with an injury.

The sounds of fighting became loud, clearly happening just above him. A few wisps of power leaked in through the hatch, telling him that very powerful mages were battling above. He detected fire, wind, and light magic, giving him a few clues as to who might be up there, but when he strained his senses looking for even the tiniest spark of lightning magic, he came up empty.

That ruled out Leon, but August guessed Brimstone and Roland at least had come for him.

The fallen Prince did his best to keep a straight face, but he couldn't help but break out into a wide smile. There wasn't any confirmation of what was happening, and he knew better than to make assumptions.

Fortunately, he didn't have long to wait, as only about five minutes after the shaking started, the hatch swung open, letting light stream into the cell. It was harsh and bright, but August's fifth-tier eyes adapted in a second, and he saw above him the Paladin Roland.

"Your Highness!" Roland shouted as he lowered an arm into the cell. Behind him, August could see other figures, but he couldn't recognize them from behind the veil of tears he failed to suppress.

"You damn idiots!" he cried out as he smilingly reached out for Roland's outstretched hand.

With ease, the Paladin pulled August out of the cell. The Prince stumbled a bit once he was put back on his own feet, but he quickly righted himself and turned to analyze the situation.

His cell—or, more accurately, his shallow oubliette—had been located on one end of a small guard room, just large enough for a table that could seat five or six people. There had been six people there guarding his cell—at least, that's what August figured since there were now six corpses on the ground. Within the guard room were another four people, aside from himself and Roland: Minerva, Brimstone, and two knights he couldn't name but recognized as sixth-tier mages from Trajan's old retinue.

"Your Highness," Minerva said as she stepped forward, "this isn't the time to talk, we need you to come with us if you don't want to die tomorrow."

"Got it," August said, simply going with the flow. He wasn't a military man by any stretch of the imagination, and he was perfectly comfortable with deferring to someone who had both the experience and knowledge of the situation to get him away from the cell.

"Good. Come with us," Minerva said, leading the way back out of the only door into the guard room.

Outside, August witnessed a scene of carnage. The guard room opened into a four-sided courtyard that had been lined with eleven other cells just like his on three sides, with the fourth side functioning as a reinforced gateway. Above the courtyard were stark concrete walls forty feet high, and August knew that the opening at the top was heavily warded to keep anyone coming in from above.

The courtyard itself was filled with bodies, at least two dozen from the brief glimpse August got before Roland hurried him along. Much of the courtyard was heavily damaged from the fighting, with rubble everywhere, but the dungeon itself still seemed stable.

Still standing were a handful of other knights that had come with Minerva, Roland, and Brimstone, though the bodies some of them were carrying indicated the fight hadn't been nearly so one-sided as the one in the guard room.

Minerva led the group past the gates and into the main hall of the dungeon. It was fairly long, with three stories opening into the hall, each with at least a dozen more normal cells—all empty. This made the normal guard detail light, but the bodies scattered around the hall were already far more than double what August would've expected. Again, he found several dozen knights still standing in the hall covering the main door whom he assumed followed either Minerva or one of the Paladins, and while they had clearly taken a few casualties, a quick count put them at less than ten. Combined with those from the section he was being kept in, that put the total number of casualties sustained by Minerva's force at barely a dozen.

On the one hand, it was a testament to the retainers that Trajan had employed that so few casualties were taken, but on the other hand, it was deeply suspicious that more hardened knights hadn't been watching the dungeon. The guard detail had clearly been staffed up for August's stay, but it all just seemed too easy...

August's concerns seemed shared by Minerva as her face wore an expression of intense focus, and she kept the group moving, calling the rest of the knights into formation as they went rather than stopping

to give orders. The knights, who were looking more and more like Minerva's own rather than Roland's or Brimstone's, sprang into motion with barely a word from Minerva, opening the door for them and spilling out into the night to link up with even more knights who had been securing the dungeon.

Only outside did August begin to truly understand the scale of what Minerva and his Paladins had launched. More than a hundred knights had come for him, completely overwhelming the prison guards with superior power, experience, and discipline. August didn't even think it had been ten minutes since he first felt the ground begin to shake, and he was already outside of the dungeon.

"Let's go!" Minerva shouted, and that was all the gathered knights needed to hear, again impressing August with the speed and precision with which they moved. There was no questioning her order, no signs of laziness, just crisp action. They stormed off southward from the dungeon, staying well off the roads. By sheer necessity, the dungeon had been built a good distance away from the rest of the palace complex in the southwest, so there was little risk of running into anything of note if they stuck to their current course.

However, August's quiet fears were soon proven prophetic as the large group sped south, sticking as close to the rocky cliffs of the coast as they could. As they moved through the hills and light forest of the island, they found a large contingent of soldiers formed up waiting for them.

Minerva called their group to a halt but didn't bother trying to conceal herself. Even in the evening darkness, they were unmistakable. Even more, she could see who was leading them: the Earthshaker Paladin was standing in front of the Legion shield wall, grinning at her like a hunter gloating at a hare trapped in his snare.

## **Chapter 390: The Hard Part II**

Minerva stared at the challenge ahead of her. Earthshaker had at least a full battalion behind him from what she could see with her magic senses. Many of their auras were powerful, indicating a higher than usual percentage of fifth and sixth-tier mages, too. Usually, there were only a handful of fifth-tier mages in a single battalion, with a fifth-tier Tribune acting as its commander, plus two more to act as logistical and bureaucratic leaders. Here, though, she could sense the presence of at least twenty fifth-tier mages, and ten sixth-tier.

Not as many high-tiered mages as she had, but to assume that gave her the advantage would be doing a grave disservice to the thousand-plus Legion soldiers in the shield wall only a few paces behind the Earthshaker Paladin. She knew as well as any Legion commander worth their salt would know that the Legion shield wall was incredibly powerful and difficult to crack, even with the power of a sixth-tier mage.

"Ahh, Dame Minerva!" Earthshaker shouted, his handsome face twisting in a crude grin. "I have to say, I was hoping you wouldn't turn out to be a traitor, but it seems that Prince Octavius was right to have you watched! Here you are, breaking the bastard and base criminal August out of prison before his just punishment!"

Minerva knew that Earthshaker's words were directed more toward his own soldiers than at her, and even if she were mistaken about that, she didn't want to dignify it with a response. Instead, she glanced

at Brimstone—Roland was sticking with August just behind her—and asked, “What do you think? We can’t go east or west, but we can go back north...”

To the west was the main palace complex, and to try and escape through the place with the highest concentration of powerful mages in the entire Kingdom was not something she was eager to try. Likewise, to the east were steep cliffs and rocky shores, terrible terrain to fight upon let alone try and escape through. They couldn’t even use earth mages to flatten the ground, since almost the entire shore going around the capitol island had been reinforced to prevent earth magic from tampering with it, specifically to prevent invasion or treasonous actions like what Minerva was attempting.

“We can’t go north, it would cut us off from our boats,” Brimstone said, confirming what she already knew: going south was their only real option, which meant that they had to get past Earthshaker, break through the shield wall, and reach the southern-most tip of the island, the point that they had chosen for their boats to come and pick them up.

“Put down your weapons, and your punishments will be lenient!” Earthshaker bellowed, addressing Minerva and her allies with less ambiguity, now. “By the order of the Prince-Regent, Julius Octavius Taurus, all who participated in this foolish endeavor and do not now surrender shall be labeled traitors and enemies of the Bull Kingdom!”

“Take your offer and shove it up your rancid asshole!” Brimstone bellowed back, his seventh-tier aura spiking and sending a wave of heat rolling off all those around him.

Oddly enough, Earthshaker’s grin widened in the face of this defiance, and he released his own aura in response, inundating the surroundings with a heavy, sluggish feeling as if everyone had suddenly gained a noticeable amount of weight. In between Brimstone and Earthshaker, the earth shook and trembled, suddenly cracking as their auras clashed.

“I’ll deal with this animal,” Brimstone said to Minerva, Roland, and August. “Just get past the rest.”

“Don’t fall too far behind,” Roland cautioned his colleague.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Brimstone said with a smile of anticipation as he began to calmly walk forward. Earthshaker did likewise, slowly moving to meet Brimstone between their respective groups while a handful of sixth-tier knights appeared in the gaps between the ten companies of the battalion.

Earthshaker’s battalion began to march forward, staying in perfect formation despite their relative lack of experience compared to their Eastern Territories counterparts.

With a wordless gesture, Minerva spurred her own knights on, and they formed into a rough line. They had no Legion shields, but they were well-armored and strong. In fact, it was arguable that the hundred or so knights that Minerva brought, along with the dozen that both Brimstone and Roland were accompanied by, were the strongest single unit pound-for-pound in the entire Kingdom—not that Minerva truly *wanted* to test that, but it seemed there was little other choice.

“Open up!” Minerva shouted, and she swung her sword in a horizontal slash, sending a razor-sharp wind blade careening toward the closest of Earthshaker’s advancing companies. All along her line, the knights did likewise, sending blasts of fire, exploding boulders, pillars of ice and water, deadly gusts of wind, and the occasional beam of light into the oncoming shield walls.

Chaos erupted upon the Legion shields. Fire and water mixed, exploding into boiling steam. Stone and ice crashed into the shield walls and shattered, sending shrapnel flying in every direction. Light hit the shields with deceptively little power, but those hit by the beams had to withstand incredible force or be knocked aside. Finally, the wind squeezed through every crack and crevice it could find, slicing and cutting as it went.

The elemental mages on Earthshaker's side did their best to dampen the blow, raising barriers and using their own power to counter the wave of magical power crashing down upon them, but there was simply too much to block, and the majority of Minerva's magical assault hit the Legion companies with titanic force. The sound alone of so much magic impacting the shields resounded throughout the entire city, shattering glass as far away as three miles. The ground around the Legion shields was torn to shreds, with great crevasses and pits being carved from the earth both in front of and behind them.

And through all of it, the shield walls kept advancing.

The Legion shield was the key to the power of its heavy infantry. Every shield was inscribed with a reinforcement enchantment that had been designed in a flowing fractal pattern. This meant that every shield linked together in a shield wall reinforced every other shield, making the collective enchantment bigger as more of these 'modular' enchantments were added to the whole.

As a result, despite the power of Minerva's side, only a handful of Legion soldiers dropped, and none of the ten companies had their formations meaningfully disrupted.

"AGAIN!" Minerva roared, her power rushing through her bloodstream. Again, her people launched all of their most powerful magic, letting it roll over the shield walls like a wave upon the beach. When the smoke cleared, the shield walls kept coming.

Minerva scowled. She'd never been on this side of the fight before, and suddenly felt some small measure of sympathy for every enemy that had ever encountered a Legion shield wall. However, the shield walls, while powerful, were not invincible, and she had some ideas for how to pierce them.

"Target their leaders!" she shouted as she wound up another volley. Her actions were mirrored down her line, but everyone had to stop for a moment when Earthshaker and Brimstone finally met in the middle of the battlefield, their clash of earth and fire seeming to bring all the world to a momentary halt.

Fire roiled off of Brimstone as he brought his sword wreathed in flame down upon Earthshaker's head. Earthshaker blocked with a wall of stone, but the wall crumbled in seconds, letting fire rush past. However, Earthshaker was wearing terrifically expensive plate armor, and as Brimstone's fire wrapped around him, runes illuminated all over the armor's surface, keeping Earthshaker relatively unscathed by Brimstone's furious attack.

Earthshaker then responded by summoning stone jaws from beneath Brimstone's feet, hoping to catch the other Paladin and prevent him from moving. Brimstone, in the split second before it happened, leaped into the air, letting the rocky teeth taste nothing but air as he soared twenty feet into the air and launched three successive fireballs before he began to fall back down. These fireballs were aimed around Earthshaker rather than directly at him, and when they detonated on the ground a moment



later, Earthshaker was enveloped in a great torrent of fire that would've cooked a sixth-tier mage in a matter of seconds.

But Earthshaker stepped through it like it wasn't even there, like it was at most an inconvenience as it blocked Brimstone from view.

The two met again in the center of the battlefield, meeting fire with earth and earth with fire. The nearest shield walls were effectively blocked from proceeding, but the rest continued on as the fight between the two Paladins showed no signs of stopping. The earth quaked beneath their feet, but they were still Legion soldiers, and they soldiered on.

"Their leaders!" Minerva repeated, silently cursing at herself for getting distracted. But, everyone else had been distracted, too, so at least her mistake was one that cost nothing.

A second later, all of her knights retargeted, launching all of their magics upon the sixth-tier mages leading the shield walls. These knights were thickly armored and powerful in their own right, but even they couldn't stand up to such force. Most fell back as quickly as they could, letting the first rank of their shield walls cover them from the coming onslaught. One didn't move fast enough, and another reacted so slowly or was so confident in his own abilities that he didn't even stop walking forward.

Minerva's knights' magic hit them like a sack of bricks, crushing their magical defenses under the sheer weight of almost twenty fifth and sixth-tier magical attacks apiece. Both knights were killed almost immediately, while the other four who had taken shelter came out relatively unscathed thanks to their shield walls.

Unfortunately, this meant that they had time enough to prepare attacks of their own, rather than having to focus all of their power on defense. Two fireballs, one exploding boulder, and a glowing orb of light were hurled from the shield walls and slowly arced through the air toward Minerva's people.

The boulder did what it was designed for and exploded, showering Minerva's knights with shrapnel. The fireballs did likewise, crashing down upon her knights and detonating while the ice spikes rocketed into her line.

However, Minerva's knights were strong as well, and just as armored as their opponents, and came through it none the worse for wear, though a few of her knights had been lightly battered. The more pressing issue was how close the shield walls were coming, having passed the point where Brimstone and Earthshaker were having their duel, and they showed little signs of stopping.

Minerva's scowl deepened. They weren't going to break through like this, and they had to change tactics.

"On me!" she shouted, calling all of her knights back together. They closed ranks, which under normal circumstances would allow the enemy to completely surround them. However, her knights were much faster than the shield walls, and they had no reason to try and hold the field. Their goal was to escape, not to defeat their enemy.

The Legion shield walls began to close in on their now much smaller position. The formations couldn't turn on a silver, but they were still small enough to maneuver with relative ease. They were already starting to form a U-shape around Minerva, Roland, August, and the rest of the knights, with two

companies staying on either side of the dueling Paladins to prevent that from opening a hole in their line.

“On my target!” Minerva shouted, hoping that she wouldn’t need any further explanation. Even Trajan’s training never covered defeating Legion shield walls, so she was making things up as she went.

One more time—perhaps even the last time before the shield walls closed in and her ad-hoc unit would have to rely on their personal combat skills rather than massed magic blasts—she channeled her power and concentrated it upon the arming sword she wielded. A small cyclone whipped around it as her power filled the metal, and to her sides, all the rest of the mages did likewise, illuminating the shrunken line with magical light.

Without a word, they all attacked at the same time, working in perfect unison. With their numbers, there were at least ten high-tiered mages concentrating their power upon a single Legion soldier, since the companies were operating in ten-by-ten squares. The power of Minerva’s group splashed upon the Legion shields, mixing and combining into one giant explosion of white magical power bright enough to blind just about everyone for a few seconds.

However, Minerva’s aim had been achieved, and the Legion formation was scattered with many of the soldiers dead or gravely injured.

“MOVE!” Minerva bellowed, spurring her entire unit into the gap. Her people didn’t waste time, and Roland even abandoned any sense of propriety as he lifted August off of his Royal feet and carried the Prince over his shoulder—the Prince was still weak and couldn’t move as fast as the others.

Minerva’s group charged through the breach, their fifth and sixth-tier speed too much for the Legion shield walls to stop, even as they scrambled to close the hole in their line. A few of the mages on Earthshaker’s side that were capable of elemental magic even sprang forward in an attempt to stop, or at least slow down, Minerva’s charge, but her knights weren’t going to take that lying down and fired off even more magic as they charged.

A moment later, they were through, sprinting south with the Legion shield walls behind them. Earthshaker’s more powerful knights gave chase, but a few of Minerva’s sixth-tier knights fell to the back of their rough column to cover their movement.

For the moment, at least, they were relatively clear, but they hadn’t reached their boats yet, and until they had Minerva knew full-well that they weren’t free.