

Storm King 191

Chapter 191: Meeting the Prince

In the short few hours the diplomatic party was waiting for permission to walk the last quarter-mile or so to the Northern Horn, Leon practiced drawing objects into his soul realm. Unfortunately, he didn't make much progress.

The key to performing this technique was actually rather simple to understand; Leon had to project some of his magic power outside of himself and envelop an object with it. Then, he had to draw that magic back into himself while keeping the object within completely submerged. Leon was confident enough in his knowledge of the theory and his skill in mana and magic power manipulation, but even though he was only practicing with finger-nail sized pebbles, he was still unable to draw them into his soul realm.

The problem for him wasn't projection of magic power, but drawing it back into his body—he'd never done that before, and he struggled to reel in his element-less magic power. There was a moment when he wondered if using lightning magic would be easier, but he quickly dismissed the idea, as the lightning would be more likely to destroy whatever he was trying to absorb rather than contain and store it.

He was forced to give up for the time being once Aquillius returned with a Legate, three Tribunes, and a dozen other knights that were a part of their entourage. Lapis was formally allowed to enter the Bull's Horns while the non-aggression pact was reviewed by Prince Trajan—not that anyone actually thought that the Prince would reject it—and the group finally walked that last short leg of their journey. As had happened when they left, Antonius led the soldiers across the plain back to the Southern Horn, while Aquillius led Leon, the other diplomats, and Lapis up through the Northern Horn and across the wall back south.

Lapis had a little trouble with some of the gates, as two or three within both Horns weren't quite giant-sized, but it eventually made it through and followed Aquillius back to the Diplomatic Corps' headquarters. The other diplomats then separated for a couple hours to rest and get cleaned up before the briefing with Prince Trajan, while Leon and Alix escorted Anzu to the Beastmaster.

The Beastmaster's office was right next to the main stables, which took up almost a fifth of the entire mesa the Southern Horn occupied. When Leon walked through the gate and entered the enormous bailey that housed all mounts and large pets of the knights in the Southern Horn, he expected to be assaulted by the nauseating smell of animal filth and a cacophony of neighing horses and roaring beasts. Instead, the stables were impeccably clean, and even barely appeared to be stables at all, with several dozen huge stone buildings that resembled villas with numerous archways than more typical wooden barns.

Alongside each of these buildings were fenced off sandpits where the animals could be taken out for daily exercise. Leon and Alix passed many of these pits on their way to the biggest building in the bailey, where they assumed the Beastmaster could be found. There were dozens of knights riding horses in the sandpits, a few riding lions and other big cats, and even one Leon saw riding a bright red stag.

Alix slowed down a little, being fascinated with the skill that these cavalry soldiers were displaying, so Leon slowed down a little to give her a little more time to watch. They couldn't waste too much time,

however, as it was starting to get late and Anzu was getting restless with so many other beasts and new people around. In fact, Anzu got so agitated that Leon was forced to pick up the little griffin and carry him toward the main building.

Leon and Alix were greeted upon their entrance, and after explaining the point of their visit, were taken to a fifth-tier beastmaster—*The* Beastmaster was a sixth-tier Legate and dealt mostly with logistics and keeping everything running smoothly, so Leon had to see one of the Legate's underlings.

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"What do we have here?" the woman asked as soon as Leon walked into the stable with Anzu in his arms. "Oh, it's been so long since I've seen a griffin, and such a rare color, too!"

The woman hurried over from where she had been observing a pair of second-tier mages tending to an injured horse to examine Anzu closer. Leon could sense that she was a fifth-tier mage, so all he asked her was, "I take it you're the beastmaster for this stable?"

"Yes I am..." the woman said slowly, distracted as she was with Anzu struggling in Leon's arms trying to get away from her. "Right! I have to introduce myself! I'm Cecilia! Well, Dame Cecilia!"

"I'm Sir Leon," Leon replied with an awkward smile while Alix and Cecilia's squire quietly introduced themselves to each other.

"I guess you're here to register this little one with us?" Cecilia asked with an almost comically hopeful expression.

"That's right."

"Then come with me!" the beastmaster said happily, and she led them out of the stables.

Just like the outside, the entire inside of the stable was made of bright white stone, with a vaulted ceiling and enchantments in the walls keeping the temperature perfectly controlled. There weren't any ostentatious decorations, but there were several halls each with more than a hundred stalls with red wooden doors for horses and other beasts. Leon could see what he estimated to be around five hundred lower-tiered mages—and even quite a few mortals—running around with armfuls of animal feed, or keeping the place clean, or tending to the horses in the stables.

But the stalls weren't their destination. Cecilia led Leon and Alix through the building to a private examination area, with a small table and several chairs, and little else in the way of furnishings.

"Please put the little guy up here," Cecilia instructed as she tied her shiny blonde hair into a bun. She then gave her squire a look, and he nodded and scurried off. "We can't start in earnest until he returns with some paperwork, but there are a few small tests we can do before then."

Leon nodded his assent, and Cecilia reached for a still-agitated Anzu. The griffin wasn't having any of that, however, and he turned around and bolted for Leon.

"He's a bit skittish," Alix said, "so maybe it would be best for Sir Leon to hold Anzu until his exams are done?"

With a shrug, Leon picked up Anzu and sat him back down on the table, then held him there while Cecilia ran her hands through Anzu's fur and downy feathers. She pinched and massaged the griffin's legs and stumpy undeveloped wings, which Anzu barely tolerated with Leon holding him in place.

"He doesn't have fleas, and there aren't any obvious deformities or disabilities that I can find," Cecilia said after a few minutes. "That being said, we're still going to need to keep him here overnight to complete our tests and make sure he's completely healthy."

Both Leon and Alix frowned, and Cecilia figured she knew why; Anzu had barely cooperated since arriving at the Horns, and it was likely that he'd go berserk if Leon weren't there.

"Anzu..." Alix hesitantly began, "... well, Sir Leon managed to imprint on him, he was there when Anzu first opened his eyes..."

"I understand," the beastmaster responded. "You won't have to be here for the entire thing, we can put Anzu to sleep, do our tests, and you can come to pick him up in the morning. As for after that, you can keep him with you, but if he gets too big you can also keep him here. Regardless, you're going to have to come back here to pick up his food and to make sure he gets regular exercise."

"Got it," Leon said.

After a few minutes, Cecilia's squire returned, and they started working through a small stack of paperwork. By the end of it, Cecilia had used a sleep spell on Anzu, knocking the griffin out cold, and Leon and Alix entrusted him to her care.

With that done, they rushed back to their rooms to clean up and get changed, as they had less than an hour before they were to go before Prince Trajan with the other diplomats.

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At sundown, Leon and Alix reported to the conference room where they had first met Lucilius, Eleanor, and Juliana. There, they found not only those three diplomats, but Aquillius, Antonius, and Anna, the junior diplomat that had shown them around on their first day.

"You're finally here," Aquillius growled. They were less than five minutes late, but he was still more than a little annoyed.

"I'm sorry, Sir, taking Anzu to the stables took a little longer than expected," Leon explained.

Aquillius stared at Leon and Alix for almost half a minute trying to decide what to do with them, but he seemed to decide that it wasn't worth it and moved on.

"Let's get going," he ordered, and the other diplomats rose and made their way past Leon and Alix.

While Anna took Leon and Alix's arm and dragged them after the group, chatting their ears off, Lucilius strode up to walk at Aquillius' side. "Have you decided what to do with him, yet?" he quietly asked.

"Not yet," Aquillius replied. "I'm sorely tempted to transfer him out of the Diplomatic Corps, though."

"I'm not sure that would be the best idea..." Lucilius said. "He did deliver to us the non-aggression pact we wanted, even if he did do something stupid in the process."

Aquillius frowned, wondering not for the first time what ‘power of the gods’ Leon possessed that would make the giants not only forgive him for whatever he did that destroyed the Cradle but also put a final end to the hostilities between them and the Bull Kingdom. *‘It is just lightning magic? His lightning did look a little weird...’* he wondered. Aside from outright asking Leon, though, Aquillius had no concrete answers, a silver-blue lightning bolt instead of the usual gold for lightning mages wasn’t nearly enough information for him to make more than just a general guess.

“Maybe we should just let it be,” Lucilius suggested, seeing the scowl forming on Aquillius’ face. “He accomplished our mission, but he did something he shouldn’t have. Let them cancel each other out, or maybe just give him a slap on the wrist. Whatever the reason the giants had for their behavior, I doubt they’re going to be appreciative if we punish Sir Leon too hard.”

Lapis had been put up in the largest unused pavilion until suitable guest rooms could be built for it, and Aquillius wasn’t too worried about it spying on them. Still, though, he knew that Lucilius was right and that punishing Leon too harshly might not be the best course of action.

“I’ll think about it a little more,” he said. “I’ll reach a decision tomorrow.”

Lucilius nodded, not quite satisfied but understanding that Aquillius was done talking about it.

The group continued on their way to the central keep. The white marble building had been dyed red in the light of the setting sun, but the group didn’t get much of a chance to admire the glittering edifice as Aquillius wasn’t going to stop just to sightsee. Fortunately, they didn’t have to wind their way through a warren of hallways to reach the Prince’s chambers; they simply to walk down the massive central hallway from the front door all the way to the end.

The Prince’s chambers took up the entirety of one of the five massive towers, with six floors devoted to the offices of the Prince’s personal staff, two more floors for the Prince’s office and private archive, and finally three more floors for his residence.

Once the group arrived outside the Prince’s office, his assistant had them wait for a few minutes while he went and informed Prince Trajan of their arrival. While the assistant was gone, Aquillius turned to Leon and said, “We are about to see a Prince. As he is acting as the Consul of the East, there aren’t any particular ceremonies that have to be observed in his presence but keep your demeanor and attitude in mind. No need to be servile, but don’t be disrespectful. Always refer to him as Your Highness, but only if he speaks to you directly—if he doesn’t, then keep your mouth shut.”

Leon nodded in acknowledgment.

The assistant soon returned and ushered them into the office. The room was dark, illuminated only by a few small magic lamps between the two rows of decorative pillars that separated the room into thirds. There weren’t any desks, but there were four scribes sitting at tables around the edges of the room waiting to record everything that was said in the meeting. There weren’t any tables in the center aisle, but there were two rows of chairs facing each other with their backs to the columns.

At the far end of the room was a raised dais, with a dark figure sitting cross-legged upon it—without a chair, Leon noticed. The figure was huge, almost seven feet tall and with all the muscle a descendant of the Sacred Bull ought to have. As Leon slowly followed the others into the room, he saw the figure look

up, casting more light onto his serious and stoic face. He had deep brown hair streaked with silver, an angular face, a prominent nose, and pitch-black eyes.

Most eye-catching of all was the figure's aura. His magical presence towered over everyone in the room, from the diplomats to the dozen or so Legates and other officials already in the room. His aura put immense pressure on Leon and made him feel like his every move was tracked and judged.

It didn't take a great leap of logic for Leon to know exactly who that figure was: Prince Trajan. And the Prince looked extremely unamused at their lateness.

Chapter 192: Prince Trajan

"You're late," Prince Trajan growled in deep and gravelly tones. When Aquillius was about to try and apologize, Trajan simply scowled and waved at the chairs next to the other Legates sitting before the dais.

Understanding the gesture as the order it was, the group of diplomats took their seats, with Anna retrieving several small rolls of paper from a satchel and delivering them to the Prince.

"These are the terms for the non-aggression pact," Aquillius explained. "Nothing we haven't already agreed on, merely that the giants agree not to raid our lands in exchange for our returning in several months to negotiate a trade agreement and the repatriation of our citizens they took as slaves."

Prince Trajan didn't even look at the paper given to him, choosing instead to silently look at each of the diplomats in turn, and the other Legates in the room dutifully waited for him to speak. When the Prince's eyes finally turned to Leon, they lingered for what seemed to the younger man like an eternity—or at least, far longer than Leon was comfortable with. When Leon met the Prince's gaze, he felt something strange in Trajan's aura that sent a shiver down his spine. Still, even though he couldn't identify what was making him nervous, Leon didn't look away and showed as little of his rising anxiety as he could.

"... Your Highness?" Aquillius hesitantly asked, trying to gain the Prince's attention and swing it back to the matter at hand.

Finally, Trajan spoke up, and he turned his gaze away from Leon, giving the latter some small relief from the pressure he was under. "You were late to the meeting today, but I can forgive that in light of your returning to the Horns several days early."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Aquillius said obsequiously, bowing his head slightly.

"Explain to me what happened. You've intimated to me before that the giants aren't that easy to deal with, but you suddenly come back with an agreement for me to ratify—I can't help but be curious as to what changed..."

Aquillius took a deep breath and, with a subtle glare sent Leon's way that didn't escape the notice of the Prince, began to explain the events that led to them coming back early. He started with meeting Lapis at the entrance to the passage through the mountains, the initial meeting with Rakos, and the arrival of the subordinate chiefs the next day. He then launched into how, when the soldiers and diplomats were dismissed after the arrival ceremony, Leon snuck off into the giants' sacred ground, the storm that followed and everyone's reaction, and the destruction of the Cradle. By the time he finished with the

duel between Leon and Lapis and how the chiefs reacted by inviting Leon to speak privately with them, the eyes of all the Tribunes, Legates, diplomats, and the Prince were fixed squarely on Leon.

The young mage had to fight to retain his composure under the scrutiny of so many older and more powerful mages. Still, he sat as straight as he could, ready for whatever punishment that was likely to be coming his way. As he waited, he heard a few of the older Legates whispering about him.

“... old is he?”

“... and a fifth-tier...”

Prince Trajan glared at the murmuring Legates, and they immediately paled and shut their mouths. He then turned his gaze back to Leon.

“Do you want to deny anything Sir Aquillius has said about you?” he growled.

Leon needed to take a long breath before he was able to answer, so great was the pressure he was under from all the other mages in the room. “... No, Your Highness,” he eventually managed to choke out.

Again, silence fell upon the room as the Prince stared holes into Leon. In fact, it was so quiet that many of the lower-tiered mages started forcing themselves to breathe quieter, so as not to disturb the Prince.

Finally, Trajan ordered, “I would speak with Sir Leon alone.”

“... Your Highness?” Aquillius said in confusion. However, the Prince simply glared silently at the diplomat.

Aquillius and a few of the other more senior Legates gave the Prince some funny looks, but none of the other knights in the room ever thought to ask the Prince why, and they certainly didn’t hesitate to make their way to the doors. Aquillius, too, couldn’t justify staying when the Prince was so obviously unwilling to tell him why he was being dismissed. The only person who looked like she might need to be told a second time was Alix, but Anna saw her not move, so she grabbed the younger woman’s arm and half-dragged her out of the meeting room. Once they had gone, only Leon and Trajan remained; even the scribes had left.

Once more, the chamber slipped into silence as Leon rose from his chair, stood before the dais, and waited for the Prince to speak. Trajan inspected Leon up and down, his eyes capturing every detail of the young man’s face and attire. He lingered for a few moments on the sword at Leon’s waist and then turned his eyes upward to meet Leon’s.

“Tell me, boy,” Trajan began, drawing out each syllable to sound as intimidating as possible, “what is your name?”

Leon began to sweat, and he fought the urge to grip the handle of his sword. He could tell that Trajan knew what his twitching meant, as the Prince’s eyes narrowed and he leaned forward a little, preparing to move if Leon tried anything hostile.

“Answer me!” Trajan demanded. “Tell me your name!”

“I am Leon Ursus, Your Highness!” Leon shouted out.

The Prince scowled, and he rose from where he had been sitting on the dais. His aura spiked and so much killing intent poured out of him that Leon's knees gave out in seconds and he dropped to the floor. Slowly, with every step so heavy as to shake Leon to his core, Trajan marched over to where Leon was barely holding himself up off the floor.

"If you do not tell me your entire name, *Sir Leon*, then I will assume you to be a murderer and a thief. Now, this will be the last time I ask: *what is your name?!?*"

Speaking up from Leon's soul realm, Xaphan said, [This guy isn't playing around; look at his killing intent, he'll kill you—and then me—if you don't give him the answer he's looking for...]

[You want me to reveal my identity?!] Leon asked incredulously.

[Not particularly, but if you don't, you're going to die!]

Leon struggled to breathe, but he managed to force down a few ragged breaths and stumble to his feet. He looked Prince Trajan directly in the eye and, summoning every ounce of dignity and poise that he could muster, said, "I am Leon Raime, son of Artorias Raime, grandson of Archduke Kyros Raime."

The pressure Trajan was emitting didn't let up, but Leon clenched his teeth and stayed on his feet, determined as he was not to succumb to it again. Like that, staring into the eyes of Prince Trajan, Consul of the East and strongest mage in the Legion outside of the Paladins, he waited.

After about ten seconds, Trajan whispered, "... I see..." and he restrained his immense sixth-tier aura.

"... You... believe me?" Leon hesitantly asked.

[No, no, no! What are you doing? Don't create doubt if none exists!] Xaphan shouted, panic creeping into his voice.

Fortunately, the Prince explained, "You resemble your grandfather a great deal. He was already several decades old when we met, but you look like a younger version of him. Not to mention, you have his sword. Beyond that, I suppose I *could* insist on testing your blood to verify your identity, but that would involve the services of the blood priests of Lineage Hall back in the capital, and I don't have the eternity it would take for those lazy bastards to get out here."

Trajan returned to sitting on the dais while Leon stood before him, standing ram-rod straight and clearly not at ease.

"Do you want me to ask Lineage Hall to send someone out here, creating a trail of official paperwork in the process?" Trajan asked with the hint of a smile on his face.

"No," Leon answered instantly.

"I thought not. It's a good thing your aura is remarkably similar to the auras of other Raime's I've met in the past; I don't need a blood priest to tell me who you are."

Leon paled slightly at that small revelation.

Noticing his reaction, Trajan looked a little surprised and asked, "Wait, don't tell me you were *actually* trying to hide who you are?! With *those* looks and so proudly wearing *that* sword?"

Leon's face twisted in awkwardness as his left hand came to rest on the pommel of his sword. "I... didn't think that would be a problem..."

The Prince stared at him in disbelief. There were so many things he could say about that statement that he simply didn't know where to begin.

More silence followed, until Leon awkwardly asked, "What now?"

Ignoring Leon's question, Trajan inquired, "Why are you in the Legion?"

"... Your Highness?" Leon asked, seeking clarification.

"Is there any grand purpose to your being here, or are you only here for the experience and the training? To gain power? I assume that you want revenge against those who've destroyed your family, but you're far too weak for that, even if you're a fifth-tier mage..."

Leon took a moment to think. He wanted to be a knight when he was younger, but not for any high-minded notions of protecting the Bull Kingdom or serving the Bull King. Instead, he wanted to emulate the heroes in the stories that Artorias told him when he was still a child.

Now, his purpose was more for gaining strength and influence than anything else. Even his muted desire for adventure took a backseat to acquiring the means to find his enemies and take his vengeance.

Leon didn't want to tell the Prince all this, but he also felt like lying would be a terrible idea.

Sensing Leon's indecision, Xaphan said, [Be very careful how you answer him; his example was too on the nose for him to not have some kind of idea what your goals are.]

[He just stated my goals as if they're obvious,] Leon responded. [Though, I guess they would be fairly obvious, as who wouldn't seek their revenge after seeing their father killed...?]

[My point is, whatever you tell this Prince, think it over before you open your mouth. Make sure it's absolutely what you want to say...]

Leon sighed, then said, [Thanks for the advice, demon.]

[No need to thank me, young mage. If I deign to give you my opinion that could save your life, then I certainly don't do so for *your* acknowledgment; I do it for myself, for my own entertainment!]

Leon had to suppress a chuckle at Xaphan's ridiculous posturing, which he found easy to do when he refocused on Prince Trajan, who was waiting for his response.

"I..." Leon began before hesitating for another moment, "... I want my revenge, that's my motivation for being here."

Trajan waited for a few seconds for Leon to elaborate, but the latter stopped there. The Prince sighed with slight dejection. "I see..." he muttered. "I have to admit that I was hoping for a little more from a member of House Raime."

"Your Highness... while we're on the subject of my parentage..." Leon anxiously began before being cut off by the Prince.

"I have a proposition for you, Sir Leon," Trajan said with extreme formality, rising to his feet and towering over the already tall Leon. "Become a member of my personal retinue. I will raise you to the rank of Tribune and protect you from your enemies to the best of my abilities. And when the time comes for you to seek out your enemies, I will provide you with every assistance, from information to fighting at your side if need be."

Leon blinked in confusion. "Your Highness... I don't know what to say..."

"How about 'yes', or 'I accept'?" Trajan asked with a smile.

"If it's all the same to Your Highness, I think I'll go with 'what's the catch'?" Leon countered, which only made Trajan smile even wider.

"That's a good question. All right, here's what I would expect of you: fight the enemies of my Kingdom. You are to wet your blade with the blood of those who would cause harm to the Bull's subjects. I will send you out to kill vampires, werewolves, and all manner of monsters that hide in the dark. I will send you out to put down rebellions and murderous mages that let their power go to their head. I will send you out to defend the borders of this Kingdom from foreign invasion.

"In short, if you would join my retinue, you would help me in making this Kingdom a beacon of light, peace, and prosperity, a place where people feel safe no matter where they are or what time of day it is. Commit yourself to this, and not only will I keep your identity secret from even my own brother, the Bull King, but I will also make your enemies my own.

"This is what I offer. Now, will you take me up on it?"

Prince Trajan held out his hand for a handshake, pointedly not insisting that Leon bow to his royal personage. Leon stared at that hand for a long time, but Trajan kept it extended, waiting for the younger mage to make a decision.

Finally, and with a great deal of hesitation, Leon reached out, took the Prince's hand, and whispered, "I will."

Chapter 193: Leaving the Diplomats

With the wide grin of a man who had just gotten what he'd wanted, Trajan clasped Leon's hand. The latter was now his knight, even if there was still a great deal of paperwork to deal with before it became official.

"Your family has always stood for justice and righteousness in this Kingdom," Trajan said to Leon. "I'm hoping you strive to live up to that reputation."

Leon was quiet for a second or two, but he responded with, "I'll do my best, Your Highness..."

"Good. Now, wait here while I fetch Sir Aquillius and inform him of what's going on."

Leon nodded, and Trajan began walking toward the door.

[What was all *that* about?!] Xaphan loudly wondered. [All that talk of peace and prosperity... I didn't expect someone so relatively strong to be so idealistic!]

[It is surprising...] Leon mumbled with a strange look on his face.

[Oh, don't tell me that you were actually buying into that little speech!] the demon shouted. [Mark my words, young mage, that Prince has some dark secrets! I guarantee that the paragon of virtue persona is a cover for some dark and twisted perversions! You keep your guard up around that man!]

[I'll take that under advisement...] Leon quietly replied.

[I'm serious, boy! No one's so altruistic as to genuinely desire those things!] Xaphan cynically shouted with some mounting frustration. [Maybe he's only acting like this to curry support from people like *you*! Or maybe he's just looking for more popular support... Aargh! What is *wrong* with this guy!]

While Xaphan screamed himself hoarse trying to work out Trajan's motivations, the Prince himself returned with a slightly confused Aquillius, who stared at Leon and trying to read some kind of explanation as to what happened in the younger man's stoic face. Unfortunately for him, Leon didn't express enough for him to have any idea what was going on.

"Sir Aquillius," Prince Trajan said as he stepped back onto the dais, "I am informing you of my intent to transfer Sir Leon here out of the Diplomatic Corps and into my personal retinue. Do you have any concerns or objections you'd like to raise?"

Aquillius almost reeled from surprise; Trajan taking Leon as one of his own knights was certainly not something he could've ever predicted, given the less than glowing picture he'd painted about Leon's conduct in the Crater. However, as he thought about it a little more, he felt that it was understandable for higher-ranked knights to be interested in Leon, as, despite everything else, he was still a seventeen-year-old fifth-tier mage, an unthinkable amount of power to be held by someone so young—at least, in Aquillius' mind.

"Your Highness... I have no objections, but I must admit to some curiosity regarding your purpose and intent in recruiting Sir Leon..." Aquillius said, keeping his tone even and taking pains not to seem like he was pressuring the Prince for an explanation.

"I'm afraid your curiosity will have to remain unsatisfied, my friend," Trajan responded. "The reasons for my taking Sir Leon into my service are between him and myself. I think you can see that he possesses great potential, and I wish to nurture that potential personally. Beyond that, I'll not say..."

"Your Highness," Aquillius said respectfully as he bowed, "I will not object to this transfer, so long as Sir Leon has agreed to it."

"Wonderful!" Trajan quietly exclaimed. "I'll have my people coordinate with yours to get the paperwork done. I apologize for taking away one of your new recruits..."

"Please, Your Highness, to take promising young knights under your august wing is your prerogative," Aquillius said, quickly returning to the obsequious attitude he put on when dealing with royals and anyone of comparable authority.

Trajan and Aquillius spoke for a few more minutes about the specifics of the transfer, and then the diplomat was shown out, leaving Leon and Trajan alone in the meeting room once again.

"Your Highness," Leon said, "I have a squire... what will this mean for her?"

“Ah, she’ll follow you, of course,” Trajan confirmed. “I wouldn’t want to part a knight and his squire.”

Leon nodded, with relief evident on his face. He felt that he could trust Alix—or at least, he could trust her far more than any random squire that he might be assigned. Besides, he still felt an enormous amount of guilt for leaving her without explanation back in the Crater, and he didn’t want to be separated from her on those bad terms.

“So, what now?” Leon asked.

“We’re going to have to get you and your squire some new rooms,” Trajan said, ignoring Leon’s lack of ‘Your Highness’. “Let Sir Aquillius and my assistants take care of the paperwork, but right now why don’t you introduce me to your squire.”

“Right!” Leon replied. He walked back to the door, stuck his head outside, and waved Alix back inside. The other Legates and Tribunes were still there in the waiting room, but all of the diplomats were gone, leaving Alix alone with all of those high-ranking soldiers. Needless to say, she was more than happy to get away from so many higher-ups and duck back into the meeting room.

But, if she thought that she was going to get a break from such pressure, then she was sorely mistaken. Once inside the meeting room, Leon took her to personally introduce herself to the Prince. After finding a lost scion of House Raime, Trajan had allowed his stoic exterior to drop, but now that gruff and unsmiling demeanor was back, and Alix had to breathe deep just to not pass out from the Prince’s aura.

Introductions were made and the situation was explained to Alix, which certainly didn’t help her nervousness. *‘We’re going to be working for a Prince?’* she asked herself in disbelief as Trajan seemed to stare holes in her.

It was all she could do to nod and signal her assent; Leon had already agreed, and as his squire, her opinion on the matter was largely superfluous. That being said, she did feel some appreciation for both Leon and Trajan for asking for it in the first place.

With that, their meeting with the Prince was over, and it was time for them to return to their room in the Diplomatic Corps’ residential building.

“Time to pack...” Leon said bitterly. “It’s a shame, I really liked where they put us...”

“So did I,” Alix admitted. She almost felt like she was about to burst into tears at the prospect of leaving such a luxurious room. “Would’ve been nice if we had been able to stay there longer than a month.”

“Hopefully we’ll get somewhere comparable, given who we’re now going to be working for...” Leon said, trying to keep their hope alive.

Alix was about to respond, but she quickly remembered that it was because of Leon that they were now moving out. She didn’t give him any angry looks, but she sighed and stopped talking, causing Leon to frown a little.

“Hey,” Leon said, “I think maybe we should talk when we get back to the room.”

“We have to pack, not a lot of time for talking...” Alix responded.

“Neither of us has that many things—we’ll have plenty of time,” Leon countered. Alix had to admit that he was right; one of Trajan’s assistants would come to their room in several hours to take them to their new place, but neither had so much stuff that they’d need even half that amount of time to get ready.

It was Alix’s turn to frown as they hurried back to their room. It turned out that Leon was right, they were done packing in less than an hour, and so found themselves waiting in the living room of their room for the Prince’s assistant to arrive.

“So...” Leon awkwardly began, “... I’m sorry for leaving you in the maze and sneaking off to the Cradle by myself.”

“It’s fine,” Alix said in a flat and resigned tone, “I understand why you did it...”

“You do?” Leon said, arching an eyebrow in slight surprise.

“Yes. I’m your squire and should be by your side, but you don’t trust me with all of your secrets.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you completely...” Leon muttered, hearing the dejection and disappointment in her voice.

“But you don’t *know* me,” she said. “The only people who know me that well are either dead or moved to the Great Plateau...”

“Well, then, let’s try and fix that. I doubt that working for the Prince will be particularly peaceful, and we’ll need to trust each other better if we’re to watch each other’s back,” Leon countered. He understood what she was saying, even if he didn’t quite agree with it; they had spent a couple months together by now and had spent hours every day training and chatting about books and whatever else interested them.

They knew each other quite well, at least in Leon’s inexperienced opinion. Still, he couldn’t deny the possibility that she didn’t feel the same way, and that his leaving her in the maze could only be taken as proof that he didn’t trust her.

Leon took a deep breath to steady himself, then launched into his questions. “Why don’t you tell me about your family? How are your parents doing? Got any brothers or sisters?”

Alix was quiet for a long moment, debating with herself whether or not she should actually engage in the conversation. Eventually, her naturally friendly disposition won out over her desire to remain surly and distant.

“My father is a blacksmith and my mother a tailor,” she said. “They moved to a town close to Teira after I joined the Legion, and my little brother went with them. They told me they were doing well in their letter I received last week.”

“That’s good to hear,” Leon softly said, “not all of us have the luxury of speaking with our parents anymore.”

Immediately, Leon regretted saying the last part of his statement, as it put a damper on the conversation and caused Alix to stop talking. Eventually, though, he managed to lift the mood by chatting about Anzu, who Alix was looking forward to seeing and playing with again.

By the time the Prince's assistant arrived, the two were happily talking about the Myths of Ninurta, the story that gave Anzu his name.

Happy to be back on relatively normal speaking terms with his squire, Leon thought to himself, *'I'm glad I didn't have to buy anything to get that conversation going. Probably wouldn't have been taken very well under the circumstances... Still, she needs some good armor and a better weapon.'*

The two picked up their belongings and followed the assistant out of their room, both looking back forlornly at the luxurious residence one last time before making for the magical lift. As they walked, Leon couldn't help but rue that he didn't manage to figure out the trick to pulling something into his soul realm, as he was finally at the point where he'd need a second trip if he had any more things.

It was relatively late, and the walk back to the central keep was quick. However, instead of entering the keep, the assistant led them around to the side, to a tall building adjacent to the keep. The inside was actually quite similar to the Diplomatic Corps' residential building, all white marble and luxurious carpets and murals, and two people behind the front desk. This building, however, wasn't quite as large, and the two were taken to the eighth floor, which was also the top floor.

There were several dozen rooms on either side of the hallway, with enough space between them for Leon and Alix to know that the rooms were fairly spacious.

"You'll be living in here," the assistant said as he stopped them outside a room about halfway down the hallway.

When he pushed the door open, Leon and Alix stepped inside, then froze in surprise and shock; this room was nearly identical to the one they had just moved out of, though it was a little bigger and had a few more pieces of opulent furniture.

"Is... everything all right?" the assistant asked, seeing the two abruptly stop in the entryway.

"... Yes, everything is fine," Leon said, not turning around and showing the assistant his red embarrassed face. Alix remained quiet, but she felt just as ridiculous as Leon at dreading what kind of place they'd move in to.

"Good," the assistant said. "Then, I will come and pick you two up tomorrow morning around nine-thirty. Until then, feel free to get settled in. There's a cafeteria on the second floor if you get hungry, but don't feel like you *have* to eat there if you don't want to!"

The assistant said his goodbyes, and the two looked at each other and burst out laughing as soon as the door closed. They then began to put their stuff away in rooms that appeared to be exactly the same as those they had just left.

Chapter 194: Trajan's Knight

"So, you're all right with this?" Lucilius asked Aquillius in the latter's office.

Aquillius leaned back in his chair and gazed out of the window behind his desk. After a few seconds, he responded, "... Yes, it's for the best that Sir Leon not stay with us. I'd have to punish him somehow for going against orders. It's easier for everyone for him to simply not be with us."

"A shame. I think he might've been a great diplomat, given a decade or two of experience."

"You can say that about a lot of people—we didn't specifically *need* him," Aquillius said as he turned back around to look at his friend.

"True. Still, we might have a bit of trouble with that giant that came out of the mountains with us..." Lucilius mentioned with a frown.

"Sir Leon is still around, he's just not in the Diplomatic Corps anymore. I made sure Prince Trajan knows about that particular circumstance, and if Lapis needs to speak with Sir Leon for any reason, then we can simply direct the giant to the main keep."

"I see... I suppose we'd better get started working on a trade agreement with the Crater Tribe in the morning."

"That we should. We've gone so far out of our way to gain access to the Border Mountain's rich mineral resources, we can't screw things up now just for a single knight's lucky mistake..."

Lucilius sighed as he stood up and made his way over to a small bar in the corner of Aquillius' office.

"Want anything while I'm up?" he asked the senior diplomat.

"Get me something strong," Aquillius said. "It's been a *long* day."

—

One of Trajan's assistants came and picked Leon and Alix up exactly at the appointed time and escorted them to the keep.

"His Highness is awaiting you in his training chamber," the assistant informed them.

"Do you know why?" Leon asked.

"His Highness didn't deign to inform me, and it's not *my* place to assume," the assistant said with all the haughtiness of a man that thought himself too good to answer questions.

'Got the feeling that this ass is telling me that it isn't my place to ask in the first place,' Leon thought, his mouth slowly curving into a low frown.

The assistant's attitude didn't change while the three were walking, so Leon and Alix quickly stopped trying to speak with him. He was only a third-tier mage, but Leon hadn't any interest in making a big deal out of something so inconsequential, especially since the assistant wasn't directly insulting him or Alix, unlike Gerold, Aquillius' assistant that had escorted them to their room in the diplomatic residence when they first arrived at the Bull's Horns.

The Prince's training chamber was located in his private tower, on the lowest of his three residential floors. It was a large circular chamber, with a round sandpit in the center separated from the rest of the chamber by white granite columns and thick black curtains. There were a few chairs to rest in and sinks to clean up at near the door, but for the most part, the only pieces of furniture in the outer section of the chamber were weapon racks; Leon estimated that there were several hundred training weapons of all kinds lining the walls.

"Your guests have arrived," the assistant loudly said, bowing as low as he could without kneeling.

“Good, you may leave us,” the Prince said, his voice coming from within the sandpit. All of the curtains were drawn, so neither Leon nor Alix could see him. Leon projected his rudimentary magic sense at the curtains, hoping to see through them, but he found that the curtains even blocked that.

The assistant left the room, loudly closing the door to make it clear that he was following the Prince’s orders.

“Grab a training weapon, you two, then join me in here,” the Prince called out.

Alix looked to Leon for confirmation, as Prince or not she was Leon’s squire, not Trajan’s. Leon nodded to her, though, so they both grabbed training swords and walked through the nearest curtain.

In the center of the large sandpit stood Prince Trajan, waiting for them. He had a huge training spear in one hand, a sword at his waist, and deadly serious look on his face.

“Sir Leon, I would evaluate the skills of my newest knight personally. Your squire can do separate training if you or she chooses to do so, but you *will* be sparring with me today.”

The Prince made it clear with his tone and expression that there was to be no argument. Still, Alix looked to Leon for what she should be doing.

“Meditate for now,” Leon told her, “focus on ascending to the second-tier.”

“Got it,” Alix replied. She then took a seat on the shallow steps at the edge of the sandpit and closed her eyes. She wasn’t able to immediately enter her meditative zone, given the circumstances, but it was enough for both Leon and Trajan.

“Come at me,” Trajan ordered, pointing his spear at Leon in an obvious challenge.

Leon responded with a subdued smile and he charged at the Prince. His first strike was a stab toward Trajan’s stomach, but he was under no illusions about whether or not it would connect. His doubt was proven justified when Trajan’s spear appeared seemingly out of nowhere, deflecting Leon’s sword upward and following through by slamming the pommel into Leon’s midsection, driving all the air out of his lungs.

The younger mage was thrown backward, and he gasped from the pain and lack of air. Leon ignored the pain and attacked again, raising his sword and slashing down at the Prince as fast as he could. Unfortunately for him, the Prince’s spear materialized just in time to block his sword, and the Prince twisted, sending Leon reeling. Trajan then took a step forward and shoulder checked Leon, throwing him down into the sand.

Again, Leon found himself knocked breathless, and it took him a moment to struggle back to his feet. He summoned his magic, augmenting himself as much as he could, and threw himself at Trajan once more, making it look like it was going to strike low, but instead swung high.

The feint didn’t work, however, as the Prince saw right through it and easily blocked his attack.

“You’re going to need to do better than that,” Trajan taunted.

With a clenched jaw, Leon pressed forward, staying on the offense as much as he could. None of his attacks penetrated the Prince’s defense, however. Making things worse, he could tell that the Prince

was going easy on him, as Trajan never once took the initiative to attack, even when Leon was made vulnerable from his own many failed attacks; the Prince simply stood there and waited for Leon to come to him, countering only when he felt like it.

The younger mage wasn't discouraged, though. In fact, he felt more than a little nostalgic, as it reminded him of when he used to spar with Artorias. He had never once managed to beat his father in a duel, and Artorias had usually acted the same way, waiting for Leon to attack then countering in response.

"That isn't all you have," Trajan stated as he knocked Leon back again. "You have magic, so why aren't you using it?"

Leon paused, giving the Prince a strange look.

"In battle, you won't just be using your blade, you'll be using your magic as well. Show me what you can do!"

For one hesitant moment, Leon stared at the Prince. He quickly transferred his weapon to his off-hand, though, and started channeling his magic power into his right arm.

"Hurry up! You're taking too long! No enemy worth their salt would ever wait around for you to finish preparing your attack!" Trajan shouted, angrily pointing his spear at Leon.

The younger mage responded by raising his fist up by his ear, which began to spark and crackle with lightning magic. In less than a second, a six-foot-long bolt of silver-blue lightning burst out of his hand, and he hurled it with all of his strength at the Prince.

Trajan raised his left arm to defend himself, smiling the whole time. In the split-second before the lightning bolt reached him, his arm hardened and turned a mottled grey. The bolt exploded on his arm, showering him in sparks and small arcs of lightning, but the Prince stood firm upon the sand. After a brief second or two, the lightning cleared up, revealing Trajan standing there, still smiling, and looking hale and hearty with a completely unblemished arm.

"Try again," he said with a hint of mockery.

Leon clenched his jaw and called forth his magic power once more. He raised his arm again, and a bolt of silver-blue lightning appeared in his hand. He launched the bolt at Trajan, but once again, the Prince blocked it—and made it look easy.

"Again!" Trajan shouted.

In less than two seconds, Leon hurled one more lightning bolt at the Prince, to the same effect—or rather, the lack thereof—as the two previous.

"ONCE MORE!" Trajan thundered.

Summoning up as much power as he could, Leon conjured one more lightning bolt and cast it at the Prince. To his complete lack of surprise, the Prince blocked the bolt with little visible effort.

Leon stared at the Prince, panting from the exhaustion of four successive lightning bolts.

'I think I get why my family's lightning magic revolved around using swords... This is tiring,' he thought.

"Is that it?!" Trajan loudly asked. "Is that all you have?! If you were to face any battle-hardened fifth-tier mage on the battlefield, I'd put money on you losing! I suppose that's where we can start then, on endurance."

Two hours later, when the two were done sparring, Leon all but collapsed into one of the chairs by the doors. He'd washed his face and arms with the sinks, so he felt at least a little clean from the sweat, sand, and the small amount of blood that he was covered in after the training session.

"You really need to work on increasing your mana reserves and the size of your soul realm," Trajan said as he took a seat next to Leon.

Alix was still meditating next to the sandpit—she was close enough to ascension to the second-tier that Leon wanted her to be training as much as possible.

"You know, I never met your father, but your grandfather and I were quite well acquainted," Trajan mentioned. Leon gave him a curious look, silently asking him what his point was. "I'm saying old Kyros and I sparred more than a few times—though he and my little brother were always a lot closer. Your family's martial and magical arts are powerful, but they rely on speed and explosive power. That's all well and good in a duel, but battles are tests of endurance. If you blow your load ten minutes into a ten-hour long battle, then you're going to be of little use to the men you lead."

"I understand, Your Highness," Leon replied.

With a wave, Trajan said, "You can drop that 'Your Highness' shit when we're alone. If I were that keen on titles, then I wouldn't have renounced my claim to the throne."

"Then what should I call you, if not 'Your Highness'?" Leon asked, seeking clarification.

"Trajan is fine, though you're going to have to stick with 'Your Highness' when in public, as some appearances must be maintained."

"I don't exactly know how to increase the size of my soul realm, Trajan," Leon said, quickly taking to the lack of formal address the Prince asked for, "but I do have some thoughts as to how I can use my magic for longer..."

"Oh? Well, why don't we start with your ideas, and then we can work out a training schedule."

Leon stared at the Prince for a moment. "Do you personally train all of your knights like this?" he asked.

"I try to make some time to spar with all the knights under my command, but I rarely spend so much time with any," Trajan responded. "However, you are not just any of all my knights—you are a son of House Raime! And an absurdly young fifth-tier mage to boot! Your age gives you some advantages, but it also means you're not that experienced, and what is an old man like me to do if he doesn't pass on his own experiences to promising young people when he can?"

"... Thank you..." Leon said quietly.

"Don't mention it! I expect you to become a great knight someday, and to do your best to protect the people of this Kingdom. Helping you get to that point is not something that deserves thanks!"

Leon nodded and smiled gratefully anyway, and he launched into his explanation of his ideas to extend his use of magic, which amounted mostly to more practice with lightning and creating more complex enchantments for his armor. That being said, he refrained from telling the Prince about both Xaphan and his affinity for fire magic. He wanted those, and especially the first, kept under wraps for the time being.

When he was done, Trajan explained his own ideas for expanding Leon's soul realm, which also meant a great deal of training. Leon quickly came to grips with the fact that his life for the foreseeable future would be spent in this room, letting the Prince beat the hell out of him in the sandpit, or training with Alix when the Prince was attending to his other duties.

After a little bit more rest, the conversation took a slight turn.

"So, out of curiosity, do you ever put that sword away?" Trajan asked Leon, nodding to the latter's family sword that was always at his side.

"I... I'm never going to leave this sword anywhere else," Leon answered. "It belonged to my family, and I don't have much else of theirs left, so I want to always keep an eye on it. Besides, aside from maybe my armor, it's the most valuable thing I own..."

"I understand," Trajan replied, "but why don't you keep it in your soul realm instead? You'll be able to pull it out in an instant, and it keeps an heirloom of House Raimé out of sight. If you hadn't been wearing that sword, then there's a good chance that I wouldn't have recognized you. Actually, now that I think about it, you really weren't taking too many precautions in regard to your identity..."

"I can't pull things into my soul realm, yet," Leon said, moving on from the last thing the Prince said for the time being.

"Then I suppose that just means more training!" Trajan said enthusiastically. "As a matter of fact, let's get back in there!" The Prince rose to his feet and led Leon back to the sandpit, where they continued their sparring for a little while longer.

Afterward, Leon and Alix left to retrieve Anzu, who had received a clean bill of health, and to get the meal plan for the griffin. Once they were done, however, they returned to the Prince's training chamber, where servants had just left them food.

Leon sighed, knowing how hard the upcoming training was going to be. He was, however, ecstatic at the thought of Prince Trajan training him personally, as it would mean that he would have a proper instructor in magical arts as opposed to just a sarcastic and mocking demon in his soul realm—though he knew that this kind of training wouldn't last long, as the Prince had many duties to stay on top of.

Eager to make the most of this time, Leon quickly finished his food and returned to the sandpit, with Anzu hot on his heels.

Chapter 195: Roland's Investigation II

'Who would ever want to live in these dreary Northern Territories...?' Roland thought as he rode his horse along the last dirt path on his journey. The sky was overcast, the ground was rocky and broken, and what few forests he'd seen were thin and hardly inviting.

It had been more than a month since he'd left the capital, and he felt like he'd been riding all over the Northern Territories looking for the Consul of the North. First, he'd gone to Cyrenaica, a large fortress city located near the center of the Northern Territories—itsself a more than two-week journey from the capital—only to find that the Consul wasn't there. When he'd asked where the Consul had gone, he'd only been told that the Consul hadn't returned from Cyrene.

Naturally, Roland then rode with all haste to the harbor fortress, expecting some kind of trouble there—the Valeman incursion had long been dealt with, so he'd expected the Consul to return to his central base. However, Cyrene was calm as could be when he arrived, much to his confusion. He'd gone to the citadel looking for answers and was only then directed to Fort 127. With some mild annoyance, Roland departed for the Fort with a guide, who he was sure took him on as winding and circuitous route as he could.

But, finally, after a month of riding through the Northern Territories, Roland and his guide crested a hill and the fort he was seeking appeared in the distance. It looked incredibly different compared to when Leon had first laid eyes upon it, as it was now staffed with a full Legion—Clovis having sent two of his three Legions back to their respective posts. Thousands of simple wooden barracks had been constructed, and much of the forest on both the southern and northern sides of the wall had been cut down for wood.

"... I didn't realize this place was so big," Roland murmured as he looked out over the fort.

"It didn't use to be," his guide replied, "that recent raid really shook things up out here."

"Oh really, I didn't notice..." Roland said sarcastically as he glanced back south at the other camp in the area.

This other camp wasn't nearly so big as the Legion that was entrenching itself at Fort 127—Roland estimated it was only big enough for two or three thousand men—but it was certainly close enough that it could cut off supplies going to the fort if those in the camp wanted to. The banners flying over this camp showed that these soldiers were Count Whitefield's personal army.

Moving along the dirt road between the camp and the fort, Roland and his guide were watched by hawk-like soldiers on both sides, making this final short leg of the journey more than a little nerve-racking.

"Hold there!" came a shout from ahead. A ten-foot-tall wall had been built on the southern side of the fort, with short battlements and stocky guard towers along its length.

Roland wasn't too impressed with the fortifications, but since they had only gone up in the last month, they were relatively remarkable. The gatehouse appeared more formidable in his eyes, with a clearly enchanted gate built into the foot of a tall and sturdy looking tower.

The person who had called out to him to stop appeared, walking out of the gatehouse and onto the ramparts.

"Identify yourselves!" the soldier demanded. He wasn't too overbearing, as he was a third-tier mage and could tell that Roland was stronger than him, but he also couldn't allow them to enter the fort unchallenged.

"I am the Paladin Roland! I'm here to speak with Sir Clovis!"

The third-tier mage in charge of the gatehouse paled a little, but to his credit, he didn't back down. "Wait right there, I'll send someone out to verify your identity!" he shouted.

Roland was wearing a full suit of gleaming silver armor polished to a near-mirror shine, with his blood-red Paladin cloak hanging from his shoulders and his aura proudly unrestrained. He found it doubtful that anyone would really doubt his identity, but he patiently waited several minutes until a fourth-tier mage—the man in charge of the all the gatehouse guard shifts, Roland guessed—appeared out of a smaller door built into the gate.

The Centurion hurried over and checked Roland's ID, and several minutes later, the gate was slowly opening for the Paladin. Roland couldn't help but be a little surprised and disgruntled that the only person waiting for him on the other side of the gate was a single fifth-tier Tribune.

"This way, Sir," the Tribune said, pointing the Paladin and his guide toward the nearby stables.

The two quickly got their steeds taken care of, and the guide was directed to the guest barracks; he'd stay in the fort until it was time for him to take Roland back to Cyrene. The Paladin, meanwhile, followed the Tribune to a relatively large two-story structure near the center of the main fort wall. He could sense dozens of people within, including several high-tiered mages.

"I assume this is the command building? This is where Sir Clovis is?" he asked the Tribune.

"This is the fort headquarters," the Tribune confirmed. "However, the Consul may not have time to see you today. I've only been ordered to escort you here, for anything else I'm afraid you'll be waiting on those inside to make time for you."

Roland couldn't help but visibly frown.

"Perhaps things might have been a little different had you sent a message ahead informing us of your arrival," the Tribune said in a hard tone.

'Don't bite, don't get angry,' Roland repeated in his mind like a mantra. He had no idea why the Tribune would be so snippy with him, but he refused to get outwardly angry—Prince August's position was too fragile for him to alienate high-ranking members of the Royal Legions.

Wiping his frown off his face, Roland politely asked, "That couldn't be helped. Perhaps you could take me somewhere I could wait for the Consul to finish his business and find some time to have a quick chat with me?" It was a tight rope the Paladin had to walk; he couldn't be subservient, but he also couldn't act superior, given his own uncertain position. Regardless, he was still a sixth-tier mage at the end of the day.

The Tribune stared at him for a moment but seemed to decide against further passive-aggressiveness. "Of course, Sir," he said, guiding Roland into the headquarters.

Ten minutes later, Roland was sitting in a comfortable chair outside the Consul's office, waiting to be shown in. To complete his investigation and find Leon, he was willing to wait for as long as it took. Fortunately, he had to wait no longer as a group of Centurions and Tribunes left the office, and one of the Consul's assistants waved Roland in, where the Consul was sitting at his desk waiting for him.

"Ahh, Sir Roland," the Consul of the North, said with a jovial smile. "It's been too long, how are you doing?"

"I'm well, Sir Clovis," Roland answered. Clovis offered him a seat in a nearby chaise lounge, and Roland gratefully accepted.

"I'm surprised," Roland said, "I didn't expect to find so many Legion soldiers up here. What's more, I wasn't expecting to see you all but fighting with Count Whitefield's own soldiers."

"Well, we had about twenty, twenty-five thousand Valemens attempt to get past this wall. Not an insubstantial raid, to be sure, but easily taken care of. Unfortunately, Count Whitefield attempted to delay my dealing with the raid."

"I wouldn't imagine he likes the idea of thousands of Royal Legion soldiers occupying his land," Roland observed.

"He does *not*," Clovis said. "However, I'm not giving him a choice. He can bark about legality, but he allowed a Legion's worth of Valemens into the Kingdom—I'm not going to let him dictate how the passage to a hostile nation is guarded. If he attempts to force us out, he's going to have to fight in open battle, and if he does that, then I'll execute him as a traitor to the Kingdom."

The Consul's face twisted into a sadistic smile, and Roland accurately guessed that Clovis would only be too eager to send Count Whitefield to the headsman's block.

"Anyway," Clovis said, moving on, "what brings you so far away from the capital? The Prince-Regents not giving you enough work?"

Roland was about to correct him to 'Prince-Regent', singular, as Prince Octavius was still in the Western Territories, but he clamped down on that foolish impulse. "Actually," the Paladin said with a good-natured smile, "I was looking into a certain trainee from the Knight Academy that was sent up to this very fort for his squireship. I believe I sent you a letter a couple months ago inquiring into his status..."

"Ah, yes, I remember," Clovis said.

"You told me that it wasn't my place to know," Roland continued, narrowing his eyes as he did. "You claimed that I wasn't a real Paladin, and as such, didn't have the authority to make the request that I did."

"Well, to be fair, you *aren't* a real Paladin," Clovis said, his own gaze becoming sharp and angry as he did.

"I was appointed to my post by Prince August," Roland responded, barely keeping his voice from quivering in anger. "Princes have all the rights needed to appoint Paladins."

"True, but Paladins serve the King, not any Prince," the Consul stated. "Without the King confirming your status, you could very well be removed, especially since you're not even a seventh-tier mage..."

Roland clenched his jaw in anger, but he managed to keep a straight face; the Consul had just poked his berserk button, his lack of magical power compared to the five other Paladins.

"I'm sure the King will remove you from your post whenever he emerges from his training," the Consul continued. "There's no need for you to get too comfortable in that spot."

"Do you have a problem with me?" Roland bluntly asked, deciding that his best course of action wouldn't be to dance around the issue.

"You're a *Central Territories* knight," the Consul explained. "I've never met a knight from the Central Territories who wasn't corrupt to the bone. And what's more, on this rare occasion that one of my Legions in the Northern Territories receives a squire from the *venerable* Knight Academy, you contact me wanting to take him away. What makes *you* so much more deserving than one of my knights that puts their life on the line and spills blood every day to keep the barbarians from marching through the gates?"

Roland took a deep breath; the recent raid wasn't big enough to be of much interest to many people in the south, but he knew there had undoubtedly been some casualties in cleaning it up. One thing he absolutely didn't want to do was to insult the memories of those fallen soldiers.

"Your knights are more deserving than most," Roland said quietly, carefully selecting each word to avoid offending the Consul. "They are some of the Royal Legion's brightest—certainly more so than the lazy bastards in the Western Territories. However, this one squire in particular is special. I met him in the Northern Vales last year, his family did me a great service. If possible, I'd like to protect him to the best of my ability."

Roland hoped that his reasoning would appeal to any honor Clovis might possess, but the Consul stared at him unmoved, his face passive and his body language all but hostile.

"I don't care about *your* honor," the Consul said. "If you wanted to protect this boy, then you should've made more of an effort, gotten him before he was assigned to my Territories. You're too late."

Roland scowled, then reached into his breast pocket. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to resort to this, but since we aren't making any progress, I guess I have to," the Paladin said as he pulled out August's letter demanding that Clovis cooperate with him.

The Consul opened the letter with far less reverence than Roland had carried it, and quickly looked it over. Roland resisted the urge to smile triumphantly as the Consul began to scowl.

When he was done, the Consul almost whipped the letter down onto the table between the two of them and shouted for his assistant.

"Sir!" the assistant said as he entered the room.

"Find me all the information on one 'Leon Ursus'! He was assigned to this fort as a squire a couple months ago!"

"Yes, Sir!"

The attendant immediately departed, leaving the two knights in oppressive silence. Neither man spoke until the assistant returned almost half an hour later. When the assistant entered the room, the Consul waved him over and took the small stack of papers from him. At the top of this stack was a light grey paper with the bright red seal of a blood priest upon it.

Roland's heart sank when he saw that paper, and Clovis pointedly avoided meeting his gaze, instead choosing to examine the paper. Slowly, the scowl on his face disappeared, replaced by a look of disappointment and dejection.

"It seems that, regardless of our disagreements, you've come here in vain," Clovis said. "The garrison that was stationed here sustained more than ninety percent casualties before I was able to arrive, and the squire you seek was among them. Leon Ursus is dead."

Chapter 196: Gathering in the West

Roland didn't stay the night at Fort 127, choosing to leave as soon as his meeting with the Consul was over, much to the chagrin of the guide who was denied the rest he greatly desired.

Watching the Paladin depart with his magic senses, Clovis smiled and glanced at his assistant. "Good work with those papers," he said, "getting them done on such short notice couldn't have been easy."

"I've unfortunately had to fill out quite a few of those recently," the assistant responded, referring to the hundreds of death certificates he'd been in charge of making for Jean's garrison. "However, I am concerned, Sir, that Sir Roland may realize that the documents are fake and that he was lied to."

"No need for concern!" Clovis said with a booming laugh. "If it ever comes out that Sir Leon isn't dead, then we can simply say that he was misidentified as deceased! These little mistakes are fairly common after battles, especially when the death toll is so high and so few people are left to identify the fallen."

"Still, Sir, you lied to a legal Paladin."

"We'll see who's legal when the King returns," Clovis said. "That arrogant prick, walking in here demanding answers from me, hiding behind a Prince... I wouldn't give that man who grew up in the capital the time of day!"

Roland wasn't of noble birth, but pointing that out wouldn't help matters in the slightest, so the assistant held his tongue for fear of encouraging another rant about the nobles in the south—he'd suffered through more than a few such rants from the Consul, and wasn't keen on hearing another.

Just before the two returned to work, a messenger burst in through the door, covered in dust from the road and gasping for breath.

"Sir!" the messenger wheezed between breaths.

"What is it?" the Consul demanded.

"Count Whitefield... Sir! He's... left the... Northern Territories!"

"What?!" the Consul shouted in surprise. With a quick glance out of the window in his office, the Consul confirmed that the Count's camp was still there. "He left his territory with his army in the field...? Where did he go?"

—

There were several important cities along the western coast of the Bull Kingdom. Aurelianorum was one of them, but it wasn't the most powerful; that honor was reserved for the grand city of Valentia, the

capital of the Duchy of the same name in the south-western reaches of the Bull Kingdom, ruled by House Duronius. In the years since the fall of House Raime, the Duronians rose to be acknowledged as the most powerful noble house in the Kingdom.

House Duronius had the most money, the most mages with experience and training, and the largest territory with a population base to match.

In the Ducal Palace of Valentia, the air was charged; those who knew what was about to happen knew that this was about to become the biggest center of power outside of the capital for a short time. Servants scurried around making sure the palace was spotless and sufficiently stocked for a great number of guests of extremely high rank. The guards stationed at strategic locations around the palace were all on alert, for any disturbance to the events that would take place within the palace would be blamed on them, and they'd likely become intimately familiar with the headsman's block as punishment.

The center of attention was a meeting room deep within the palace. This room had vibrantly-colored floor tiles arranged in such a way that, along with the massive black onyx table in the center, it appeared to be an enormous blue eye. Around the edges of the room were shallow alcoves with marble statues, and the vaulted concrete ceiling was covered in soft white lights and a painted map of the entire Kingdom.

This meeting room was already about half full, with more than two dozen of the most powerful men and women of the Bull Kingdom seated around the table—nobles all, including Duke Euphemius Decimius and an ugly, rotund, red-faced man that the Consul of the North would've recognized as Count Whitefield. Each was allowed to bring only two of their most trusted knights or other members of their household, who stood a respectful distance away from the table, though the room wasn't big enough that they were out of earshot. Over the course of about half an hour, the room filled up until almost every seat at the table was filled.

"It gladdens my heart to see so many of my friends here today," came a pleasant voice from above the table. The eyes of all the nobles in the room were drawn upward, to a balcony off a small gallery where six figures could be seen. The man in front, who had just spoken, was recognized by every noble there; he was Prince Octavius, Second Prince and presumptive heir to the Bull King.

"Welcome, all of you!" the Prince continued in a smooth and crisp intonation. "If I could ask for your continued patience, those of us up here will join you in only a matter of moments."

With that, the Prince and his group turned and disappeared into the gallery, causing the rest of the nobles to burst into quiet whispers.

"Did you see that?" one noble softly muttered to his neighbor with a hint of concern in his voice. "The Second Prince brought *two* Paladins with him!"

"I saw," the neighbor responded. "Those two were the Sapphire and Earthshaker Paladins!"

"The Paladins are sworn to His Majesty! What are they doing *here*?!" another noble angrily wondered aloud.

The mumblings of the nobles immediately ceased once the doors opened and the Prince and his entourage entered the meeting room. The Prince himself was tall, heavily muscled, with warm brown eyes and brown hair streaked with gold. His handsome face was smooth but angular, with high cheekbones and a square lantern jaw. He looked every bit the heir to the Sacred Bull that the nobles expected, and his fifth-tier aura proudly emanated from his body.

Those at his back were even more impressive: a beautiful, statuesque blonde woman dressed in shiny blue velvet; a tall man whose handsome features were marred by a repulsive expression every time his eyes swept over one of the noblewomen in attendance; and finally, walking just to the right of the Prince, a man with hair bleached white and a face wrinkled by time, the Duke of Valentia.

Accompanying this illustrious group were two more people: one a scribe, and the other was Gaius acting in his role as Octavius' squire. Upon entering the room, Gaius quickly scanned the room for his father's face, who he expected to be in attendance. Unfortunately, he was disappointed, as Duke Tullius' seat was empty.

Octavius, the Duke of Valentia, and the two Paladins each took seats at the table, while Gaius and the scribe stood off to the side with the rest of the guards.

"Welcome! Welcome! It's wonderful that you're all here!" the Prince repeated.

"If Your Highness calls, who are we to decline?" one noble—a Count from the Southern Territories, Gaius guessed—obsequiously said to the Prince.

Octavius smiled gratefully at the Count, though Gaius noticed a slight tightening of the Prince's fists and narrowing of his eyes that he recognized from every time he'd seen Octavius called 'Your Highness'. In the short few months he'd been serving as the Prince's squire, Gaius had learned that not being formally named heir had left an extremely bitter taste in the Prince's mouth and that every time he was addressed as 'Your Highness' instead of 'Your Royal Highness', as he would've been if he were made Crown Prince, was a reminder of that fact. However, Octavius regained control over himself so quickly that Gaius didn't think anyone else noticed his anger.

"I'm sure you are all curious as to why I have summoned you here, especially since there are so many of you from different corners of our venerable Kingdom!" the Prince said, trying to jump right into things. However, before he was able to continue, he was interrupted by the sound of hurried footsteps just outside the meeting room.

The doors to the public wing of the palace burst open, and another man swiftly walked inside. He was dirty and dusty from the road, but his golden hair shone through. His features were almost identical to Gaius', if a little more chiseled and refined.

Gaius smiled and nodded at his elder brother, who did likewise.

"Sir Gratian..." Duke Duronius asked, drawing a curious look from the Young Lord of House Tullius.

"It's good to see you, but we had thought that your father would be the one joining us..." Octavius said.

"My father has decided to spend the rest of his life focusing on his magical training," Gratian explained.

"To that end, he has begun to pass his duties along to me. He hopes to be completely retired from public life by this time next year."

"I see," Duke Duronius said. A few other nobles around the table gave their muted congratulations to Gratian for ascending to his father's position, to which he looked duly grateful.

"I am terribly sorry for the lateness of my arrival," Gratian said to the Prince as he took his seat.

"Unfortunately, I was delayed on the road, but as my House pledged to arrive, I hurried here ahead of the rest of my followers without even stopping to clean up."

"It's quite all right, Sir," the Prince stated with a warm and inviting expression. However, Gaius could see the annoyance in Octavius' eyes. As the highest-ranking man present, it was the Prince's prerogative to make everyone else wait on him, and for Gratian to show up after him—even accidentally—insulted Octavius.

Regardless, the Prince didn't make a big deal out of it and pressed on, making eye contact with every man and woman seated at the table.

"I'm afraid I've called all of your esteemed selves here under grave circumstances. I'm sure you have all heard rumors about it, but now I feel that I must confirm your suspicions: my Royal Father has suffered an accident during training, and I fear he may not live long."

Gasps could be heard around the room, but many of them were a little too enthusiastic, either being from people who had already suspected something given the length of time the King had been absent, or from people who didn't disguise their excitement at the lack of central authority they had to answer to well enough.

"So Your Highness has called us here to follow through with our pledges to you," a slightly haggard-looking Euphemius stated. He was impeccably well groomed, but the sanctions placed upon him by Elise had clearly taken their toll; his cheeks were hollow, and his eyes were sunken from stress.

"Indeed I have," Octavius said. "Should my Royal Father never wake up, another monarch must rise to take his place. My elder brother has renounced all claim to the throne, that he may pursue a career with the blood priests of Lineage Hall. My younger brother, the Third Prince has also renounced his claim, that he may lead the life of a scholar in the Royal Archives. As my sisters have already expressed their desire not to contest my claim, this leaves only myself and my youngest brother as potential contenders for the throne.

"My Lords and Ladies, I must reiterate the belief of mine that August would be a terrible King. He is too weak, too frail, to be the leader this Kingdom needs. Beyond that, I have come across, admittedly circumstantial, evidence that he may have even been responsible for the current infirmity of my Royal Father!"

Again, gasps could be heard from across the table, but these were far more genuine; regicide was a terrible crime, and accusations of it were not to be taken lightly.

"What is your evidence for your claim?" asked Gratian skeptically.

"Not long after my Royal Father was discovered in his coma, I had the cooks responsible for his meals arrested and interrogated," Octavius explained with a look of utter hatred on his face. "One of them confessed that he poisoned my Royal Father on the orders of my youngest brother!"

"No Arbiter would ever take the word of a common cook as enough evidence to convict," Gratian responded. "Especially against the word of a Prince..."

"Indeed not, which is why I did a little more digging," Octavius continued, his look of hatred quickly changing to one of subtle pride. "It took me years, but I eventually managed to trace payments my youngest brother made to a certain alchemist who had been arrested in the past for suspicion of providing poison to assassins. Unfortunately, that alchemist has since disappeared."

"Hmm," Gratian hummed in thought. He leaned back in his chair and took a subtle glance at Gaius, who rolled his eyes with as much subtlety as he could.

'I wonder how many people will believe that story... or how many that will say they do. Most of them, probably. Or at least, those who crave more power... which is all of them,' Gaius cynically thought.

Octavius looked around the room and, understanding that he needed to keep pressuring the nobles for their support, passionately said, "My Lords and Ladies, what I ask is that here and now, before the inevitable happens and my Royal Father goes to join our Honored Ancestors, you all make declarations with your peers as witnesses that you will follow through with your pledges to me. Once I am King and no longer sharing a regency with that kinslaying bastard, I will have the power to bring him to justice!"

It was then that Euphemius spoke up, being the noble in the most desperate position and thus the one most motivated to ask the question they were all dying to know the answer to.

"Does this stand to reason, then, that the decrees that His Highness Prince August has made as Prince-Regent would be overturned?"

Octavius turned to look at the Duke. "That would, of course, depend on the decree. The unlawful ones will be immediately canceled. If you have any concerns over particular decrees, though, I would be only too happy to see what I can do about them now; I am still a Prince-Regent, myself, after all."

"His Highness August has begun a naked attempt to steal my assets!" Euphemius furiously said, just barely keeping his voice under control. "His Highness has made the claim that I have been growing and selling Silverleaf, and has ordered a full survey of my lands, in a blatant violation of my Ducal rights!"

"I see," Octavius said quietly. "I will look into this matter for you, my friend. Should I find it unlawful, I will cancel it immediately!"

Behind the Prince, Gaius smirked mirthlessly. *'Even here, surrounded by none but their most trusted subordinates, they still lie to each other and pretend to act within the bounds of morality and legality. As soon as that Prince scurries out of this room, he's going to have that survey canceled without even looking at it, so why bother with the song and dance?'* It hadn't even been half a year that Gaius had been serving under Octavius, but he already knew exactly how the Prince was going to handle this. He also had to admit to himself that had he been appointed Octavius' squire before his time in the Knight Academy, he probably wouldn't have cared about the obvious corruption, or even seen it as the right of the nobility.

"Duke Decimius is not the only one wronged by that brat in the capital!" shouted the fat red-faced Count Whitefield. "He's had that base-born bastard Clovis *invade* and occupy my territory, all because of a tiny Valeman raid!"

“That is most concerning,” Octavius stated. “Again, I must stress that I must look into this matter in greater detail, but I assure you that if I find anything amiss, then I will immediately order Sir Clovis to return his Legions to Cyrenaica.”

Count Whitefield sat back in his chair with a poorly disguised smile of triumph on his round face.

With those two requests heard, other nobles began to speak up and air their grievances with the status quo or how August had been running things, and Octavius promised to look into all of them, with the scribe he brought furiously scribbling as the meeting continued. Every lord and lady at the table seemed to have a problem they wanted him to solve, and the Prince was only too happy to hear them out.

“My friends,” Octavius said once he had heard from all those who had something to say, “as I’m sure you are all aware, my youngest brother would restrict the privileges of the noble elite and replace all of you with the base and the common if he ascends to the throne! That is not what this Kingdom needs! The strength of a Kingdom is the strength of its leaders, and there are no finer leaders than those with the breeding for it! I would put a stop to the rampant dismantling of noble privilege that has gone on for the past millennium, for if we do not lead the commoners, then who will? And if we are to lead them, then we need the resources to do so!

“Now, I ask you all again, should the worst come to pass, will you support me as your King? Will you all assist me in my endeavors to bring my criminal and power-hungry brother to justice?!”

With the promises he’d made beforehand, Octavius received nearly universal support from the gathered nobles, with the vast majority of assembled nobles reaffirming their promises of support. All had given him offers of support in one form or another before, but those were in relatively secret and private settings or were years old, and so weren’t reliable. Now, however, they spoke their words of support before the rest, and so were bound by honor to support Octavius.

There were a few who didn’t seem so fervent in their support—the Tullius brothers, who shared a nervous look as the rest of the nobles cheered for their chosen Prince, and the silent and serious Duchess of Vesontio, who hadn’t spoken a word since the meeting began even as the other nobles practically choked on their own tongues in their haste to bring up their problems with Octavius. The Brothers Tullius knew that Prince August wouldn’t go down without a fight, but with Gaius acting as Octavius’ squire, Gratian’s hand was forced, and he had to support the Prince against August. The Duchess, however, gave no indications as to what she was thinking, and continued to sit in her chair, her classically beautiful face as unmoving as stone.

‘This will mean civil war,’ Gaius thought ruefully as he glanced at the vast support Octavius received despite Gratian’s and the Duchess’ lack of enthusiasm. ‘Hopefully, it will be delayed until my squireship comes to an end and I can leave the Prince’s service. I would rather not be by this irredeemable scumbag when the war kicks off...’

Chapter 197: Octavius

The meeting was over, and Octavius had succeeded in formally gaining the support of almost every high noble who showed up. Even Gratian eventually voiced his support despite some initial reluctance. The only person who didn’t was the Duchess of Vesontio, who left the meeting as soon as it was over having not said a single word throughout the entire affair.

Still, the amount of support Octavius received was overwhelming, and his face broke out into an enormous smile as he and his followers left the meeting room. The two Paladins and Duke Duronius were just as elated as the Prince, but Gaius and the scribe were much more muted in their reactions to what had just taken place—not that any of them truly cared about what the scribe thought.

“You’re no longer needed. Leave,” the Earthshaker Paladin growled at the scribe, who paled at the sight of an annoyed seventh-tier mage and made himself scarce as fast as his legs could carry him. The Paladin then glared at Gaius, who the Paladin had come to dislike in the short few months they’d been acquainted, but as the latter was the Prince’s squire, the Paladin had no authority to dismiss him.

For his part, Gaius ignored the Paladin’s obvious antipathy and stared straight ahead. The Paladin clicked his tongue in mild irritation, but didn’t say a word and turned his icy grey eyes back to the Prince.

Upon reaching their destination, a small and intimate terrace overlooking a radiant garden, the Prince asked, “So, what’s our next move? The Legions?”

“That would be best, I think,” Duke Duronius said as he slid his aged body into a luxurious armchair and turned his clear grey eyes out to survey the garden. “The amount of support Your Royal Highness received was overwhelming, but that common-born bastard back in the capital has been making some headway with the Royal Legions. We need to do likewise; no matter how strong those nobles are, not even they can stand against all forty Legions.”

“It’s not like they’d have to fight all of them at once, though,” Octavius said with a frown as he took a seat next to the Duke.

“Of course they won’t, but just standing against the seven Legions in the Western Territories would be a daunting task even if all of our forces managed to assemble,” the Sapphire Paladin said softly. With a glowing smile, she sat down next to the Prince and laid her hand atop his own.

“Then how do we get the Legions on our side?” the Prince asked.

“I can speak with the Consul of the West,” Duke Duronius said. “I will impress upon him how much respect you have for him and how much you value his service. I also happen to know that his personal finances are extremely modest, so if I offer him some ‘help’ in that regard, he should be amenable to our cause.”

“Thank you, Grandfather,” Octavius replied, ignoring the Duke’s lack of formality in addressing him.

“Please, my boy, there’s no need for thanks,” Duronius said. “It’s the privilege of the elderly to spoil their grandchildren. Now, if only *some* members of my family would stop playing around and have some kids of their own...”

Knowing that he was being called out, the Earthshaker Paladin said in a defensive tone, “Let my elder sister handle the matter of succession! I have no interest in making babies!”

“You see how my son disappoints in this regard?” Duronius responded, playfully poking at the Paladin. “Both of my daughters have made names for themselves, one as my heir and the other as the Queen! And yet my only son is content with being nothing more than a pet brute!”

“Perhaps it’s best he not reproduce, lest his greed and arrogance contaminate the rest of the Kingdom,” the Sapphire Paladin said, joining in on the good-natured teasing of her fellow Paladin.

“Oh, you two wound me so,” Earthshaker said, his words dripping with sarcasm. “However will I live with myself knowing that I won’t pass on my blood?”

“I’m sure those maids you have tied up in your room will help take your mind off your everlasting grief, Uncle,” Octavius said with a wicked grin.

The Earthshaker Paladin’s face twisted into an ugly predatory smile, to the surprise of none of the others. But, the only one who reacted at all to the knowledge that the Paladin had imprisoned women in his room was Gaius, standing quietly in the corner. The other four chuckled at the thought of Earthshaker forcing himself upon unwilling common women, while Gaius had to look away to prevent his revulsion from being too obvious.

It wasn’t the first time that something like this had happened. Gaius had come to the unpleasant realization that this was a regular occurrence several weeks prior when the Prince had him deliver a message to Petrus Duronius, the Earthshaker Paladin. When he’d arrived outside the Paladin’s chambers, he heard screaming coming from within. Gaius immediately entered the room and was in the process of drawing his weapon when he saw what was happening on the bed, and the looks of pain and terror on the faces of the three restrained women as well as Petrus’ utter glee.

In that moment, Gaius lost all respect for the Paladin. His opinion of the latter only grew worse when instead of stopping due to the interruption, Petrus invited him to join in. It was all Gaius could do to merely hand over the message and not to draw his weapon. Had his sword left its sheath, Gaius knew he would’ve been killed instantly by the Paladin; he was still only a third-tier mage, hardly a match for even a naked seventh-tier mage.

After delivering the message, Gaius had immediately returned to the Prince and informed him of what the Paladin was doing, and the Prince laughed it off. Gaius tried to press the issue, but the Prince didn’t care.

Gaius had done a lot of thinking since then. He had no idea what might have happened to those girls and contemplating the possibilities of their fates kept him up at night, his face burning with shame at his inaction.

And now there were more women in the Paladin’s chamber.

It took a while for Gaius to mask his disgust, but fortunately, the others didn’t pay him any mind; he was only a squire, little more than a noble servant to the Prince. Had he not been Octavius’ squire, he guessed they would’ve paid him far more attention given his status as the son of a Duke. As it was, he was perfectly happy being ignored.

“Anyway, my boy, I should get back to work,” Duronius said. “I’ll write to the Consul of the West and invite him to a small feast, then I should go and relieve my daughter of the Ducal duties I’ve forced upon her of late...” Duke Duronius himself was an old man, being more than two centuries old, and had been leaving more and more of his responsibilities as Duke to his eldest daughter and heir to prepare for his retirement.

The Sapphire Paladin smiled sweetly at the Duke, and Octavius nodded respectfully.

Reading their mood, Petrus said, "And I have some training to get to. I will see you soon, Nephew."

Both of them left, but the Sapphire Paladin and Octavius weren't alone yet. Looking back at Gaius, finally acknowledging the presence of his squire for the first time, Octavius dismissively jerked his head toward the door. Gaius silently bowed and excused himself, doing his utmost to keep his eagerness to leave from showing.

And then Octavius was left alone with the Sapphire Paladin.

"So, how are you, really?" the blonde woman asked. She reached over with her free hand and laid it across the Prince's chest, then rested her head on his shoulder.

For a moment, it seemed like the princely demeanor wasn't going to drop, but then Octavius' hands clenched, and his eyes narrowed in anger and frustration.

"Those fucking bastards didn't show me *any* respect today! I should've had all of their heads chopped off and their lands confiscated! Especially that Vesontio bitch and *fucking* Gratian Tullius!"

"That would hardly buy us the support we need among the nobility," the Sapphire Paladin responded.

"It would feel fucking fantastic, though!" Octavius stated as he leaned back in his chair.

"Don't worry, my love, we're going to get your fine butt on the throne soon enough," the Paladin said, raising her head to look Octavius in the eye and giving him a smoldering look.

"It won't be just my ass on the throne, though," Octavius said as he pulled the beautiful blonde woman closer to him. "Every King needs a Queen, after all, and I can think of no one better to stand by my side than you."

"You flatter me," she replied with a bashful look that she had spent a long time perfecting.

It had the intended effect, as Octavius couldn't help but lean in to kiss her while she seemed so embarrassed. As he did, the bashful look on her face disappeared, and her eyes widened in glee as she imagined herself upon the Queen's throne.

The Prince began to paw at her clothing, but her hands almost instantly appeared to slap them away.

"Ah!" Octavius cried out in pain and surprise. "I'm sorry, my love, you just got me so worked up I lost myself for a moment..."

"Don't worry about that, my Prince, there'll be time enough for that when August is dead and you're acknowledged as the true King of this land."

"Yes..." Octavius replied as he pulled her closer. "Once my brother is dead, everything will work out perfectly..."

He started thinking about how to accomplish this task; murdering a Prince was no easy feat, even for another Prince. It would require a subtle touch, something more than simply paying a cutthroat to do the deed or to bribe someone in the palace kitchens to poison him.

‘No, this will require some thought, some careful planning... But once it’s done, I will show everyone why I deserve to be King! Even Father will see my genius! I will show him the mistake he made in not declaring me Crown Prince!’

Gaius was perfectly happy leaving the terrace when he was ordered to do so. Getting out and walking around for a little while was a far better use of his time than staying there and being ignored. In fact, he was so all right with it that he was actually a little surprised; a year or two ago, such treatment would’ve been the worst possible insult the Prince could’ve given him.

But, he didn’t only like getting away from the Prince to escape being treated as if he was beneath notice, he also enjoyed the time it gave him to think. And now, as he slowly walked through the opulent halls of Duke Duronius’ palace, he found himself thinking of the women in Petrus’ room and his inaction for the other girls he knew about. After a few minutes, his thoughts then turned to everything he’d done since he left Lentia more than a year ago—his over-the-top arrogance due to his status, ordering the Snow Lions assaulted in the streets, his rage and antipathy toward Leon.

Gaius came to a halt in a deserted hallway. *‘Is this me? Is this who I am?’* he asked himself. There might have been a time when such abuse of commoners wouldn’t have bothered him, but there are few things that will change a person more than repeated defeat and humiliation, both of which he suffered at the hands of Leon and the other Snow Lions.

‘No. I can be better than that.’

With a newfound determination, Gaius turned around and began walking with purpose rather than the troubled shuffling through the halls of only a few moments before. If he wanted to be a great man, a great knight, then he’d have to act like it. Those girls were innocent, and he wasn’t going to leave them to the depravities of Petrus Duronius.

It occurred to him that, while Petrus couldn’t kill or injure him since he was still a squire to a Prince, Octavius would surely charge him with treason if the Paladin were to make a big deal out of this. However, that was only if he were to be caught, and he had already thought of a plan to help in that regard.

Chapter 198: Risking Treason

Gaius’ first destination was the Prince’s bedroom. If he wanted to save those girls in Petrus’ bedroom, then he’d need something of the Prince’s first. Octavius often had trouble sleeping, so he kept strong Somnos Incense by his bed. There were a few servants scurrying about, but Gaius was able to slip in undetected and take a few sticks.

Once the incense was in hand, it was off to Petrus’ small wing of the palace complex. There, Gaius thought he would have a harder time moving around without challenge, as it was a place he had no business being. However, there weren’t any servants in Petrus’ chambers, so a surprised Gaius found that he could move through those marble halls with greater ease than his squireship afforded in the Prince’s chambers.

Then again, the Earthshaker Paladin’s proclivities weren’t something he would want to broadcast, so it made a certain kind of sense that there weren’t any servants. Gaius put that out of his mind and focused

on the task at hand, quickly locating the door to Petrus' training room while hoping the Paladin wasn't using his magic sense.

Judging by the flow of magic he was able to sense from the hallway, he could tell that the Paladin was busy training within. With a nervous smile, Gaius lit the incense and stuck the sticks under the door and anxiously waited. If Petrus were to notice what was happening, the Paladin would burst out of the training room and capture him, and Gaius didn't want to think about what Petrus would do to him with no one around to witness it. Making matters worse, since the Paladin was training and was thus channeling his magic, he would be far more resistant to the incense.

But, despite all of his doubts and fears, Gaius had committed to what he was doing as soon as he lit the incense; even if he tried to run, he wouldn't get far with a seventh-tier mage on his heels. He could now only wait for whatever came next.

After several minutes, he thought he heard a dull thump from within the training room. It took the young nobleman another minute to work up the courage to risk opening the door just a crack and take a peek inside. The round training room wasn't that big, but it was sparsely furnished giving it a spacious feel. The only decoration in the room were several statues of naked women in a handful of alcoves, which Gaius found extremely tasteless. In the center of the floor was a sandpit for physical training, and Gaius could see an unmoving figure within, slumped over.

Gaius stared at that figure, knowing that it was Petrus. The Paladin didn't move for several minutes, bringing a smile to Gaius' lips. Somnos Incense would keep the fifth-tier Octavius out for about ten hours, but Gaius would consider himself lucky if Petrus would be unconscious for even half as long, so he needed to move fast.

Springing up with the burning incense sticks in hand, Gaius took off toward Petrus' bedroom while extinguishing the sticks; it wouldn't do if he were to accidentally knock himself out, nor would it be ideal if the Earthshaker Paladin discovered them when he awoke. The Paladin's bedroom wasn't far, and he found it unlocked, so he slipped in as carefully and quietly as he was able. It was then that he saw the two young women shackled to the huge four-poster bed on a raised dais in the center of the room. They were both awake and clearly in pain, and they shrunk away from the sound of the door opening and closing. They were blindfolded and gagged, and so couldn't do or say anything other than to whimper and futilely struggle against their restraints.

Worse than even that, however, were the bruises, welts, and cuts that covered their bodies. They were naked, so Gaius could see exactly how badly Petrus had hurt them; there was hardly a single square inch of their bodies that wasn't covered in bruises or cuts, and while it turned his stomach, the sight of what Petrus had done also hardened his resolve to see this through.

Gaius swiftly crossed the room. Hearing his approach, the two young women struggled to get away and tried to scream.

"Shhh," Gaius whispered, trying to calm them down. "Sir Petrus has been knocked out, I'm here to get you out of this place!"

The ladies stopped struggling at his words, but they remained tense. They only started to calm down when Gaius stepped forward to remove the blindfolds and gags, pausing only to grimace in disgust at

the bloody rod and knife still on the bed. Before he reached for the blindfolds, Gaius covered these implements with the bedsheets.

"Do you know where the key is for your chains?" Gaius asked the first girl, deciding not to waste time with explanations.

Still a little nervous as to Gaius' intent, it took a moment for her to respond. Eventually, though, she figured that her situation couldn't get any worse even if she told him.

"He keeps it in his bedside table," she answered, her deep blue eyes drifting toward the table in question.

Gaius almost ripped the drawer of the end table off in his haste to find the key. Once he did, he opened the shackles as fast as he could.

The girls quickly crawled off the bed. Gaius breathed a sigh of relief when it seemed that most of the damage Petrus had done to them was superficial, but he frowned a little when they turned back toward him and stared at him in suspicion. The girl who appeared a little older even stepped out in front of the other, as if to shield her from him.

He could tell that they didn't trust him, even if he had undone their restraints, but given the circumstances, he couldn't really blame them.

"We should hurry," he said, looking around for something the girls could wear. "Do you two happen to know where Petrus put your clothes?"

The older one stared at him for a moment, then nodded slowly, much to Gaius' surprise.

"Good, then get dressed as fast as you can, we need to leave quickly."

"Why?" she asked.

"I knocked Petrus out with some Somnos Incense, but I don't know how long he'll be out. We need to get you two out of here before he wakes up!"

"We won't get far..." the older one stated with a look of dejection.

"When the Earthshaker Paladin finds us, he's going to kill us!" the younger one cried out in fear.

"He won't," Gaius replied. "Besides, the only thing that's guaranteed is that staying here is a terrible idea, no?"

The ladies glanced back at the bed, then slowly nodded their agreement.

"Right, so we need to get you two out of here as soon as possible! And then you can leave this place behind you forever!"

"And we'll be fugitives in our own city," the older girl said.

Gaius frowned, but in the few months since he'd arrived, he'd come to know the palace layout like the back of his hand; he knew where Petrus kept some of his emergency funds, and he didn't think the Paladin truly needed all of what he had set aside.

“That’s not a problem...” he said, and he informed them of his idea.

“That...” the older one said with a thoughtful look.

“It’s only an option if we move quickly!” Gaius said, urging them onward.

Both girls glanced at each other, then to Gaius, and finally at the bed, still covered in blood stains.

“We’ll do it,” the older girl said.

“Then let’s get a move on,” Gaius said.

Fortunately, Petrus didn’t bother disposing of the girls’ maid uniforms when he dragged them back to his chambers, so the ladies found their clothes on the floor nearby and quickly dressed. The three then made their way out of the bedroom and to the Paladin’s private vault, though Gaius had to slow himself down as the ladies didn’t have much strength to walk. Petrus didn’t keep it locked, but Gaius wasn’t too surprised; the Paladin probably kept most of his valuable items in his soul realm and most of his wealth in a Heaven’s Eye vault; this was just a place to store some liquid assets in case of emergency.

That being said, Gaius and the girls still found a dozen gold bars and a crate of silver coins. Each of the girls took a gold bar, hiding them in the folds and frills of their maid uniforms, and Gaius escorted them toward a seldom-used entrance to the palace. With that much gold, they’d have more than enough money to leave the city in short order and live comfortably far away from Petrus and Valentia.

As the girls hurried through the secluded servant’s entrance and toward the distant crowds, Gaius couldn’t help but feel a little bit of dread for the consequences of what he’d just done. Seeing the happy and relieved expressions of the ladies to have escaped the palace, he knew he had done the right thing, but now that they were gone he couldn’t help but worry about what might happen to him if his part in this was found out. This could easily end with him on a one-way trip to the headsman’s block.

At the very least, though, he was confident that Petrus wouldn’t notice the theft of the gold bars for a while and that it would take a while for the Paladin to think of a socially acceptable excuse to send people after the girls, assuming he ever managed to do so.

Gaius turned back toward the palace and began walking back. Whatever happened, he would face it with as much dignity and composure as he could, sure in the knowledge that what he’d done was right.

For now, though, he needed to find somewhere to be, somewhere that wasn’t just wandering around the palace alone. And he knew just the place.

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“So, how are you doing, little brother?” Gratian asked Gaius as he pulled the younger man into a warm embrace. “Father and I have been worried about you being here in the hands of Prince Octavius...”

“I’m doing just fine, brother,” Gaius said, even though he felt like the bit about his father’s worry was a lie. “Although, if it’s all the same to you, I’ve been here for the past hour or so.”

“What...?” Gratian began, only to cut himself off from continuing. Gaius had an uncharacteristic look on his face, with shame, anger, satisfaction, and anxiety all playing out before his eyes. “Just tell me this, brother, have you been abused here? Is there anything you need to speak with me about?”

"I appreciate your concern, Gratian, but truly, I'm fine. Just sick of the Prince and House Duronius and their depravities," Gaius answered, brushing aside his elder brother's concerns. "For now, just know that it's for the best that our story is that I've been here since the Prince dismissed me, not stealing a few sticks of Somnos Incense and knocking out Sir Petrus, and certainly not freeing rape victims from Petrus' bedchamber."

Gratian stared at his younger brother, his mouth ajar; he had no idea how to respond. Eventually, he simply gave up and wordlessly waved Gaius further into his guest quarters. They sat in silence, eating and drinking whatever Gratian's servants brought them. It took a little while longer, but Gratian managed to get Gaius to explain what had just happened.

"Outrageous!" the soon-to-be-Duke exclaimed, barely managing to keep his voice under control. "To be noble—to be *royal*—means to be better than the common man, and to be a man is to be better than an animal! To act so lawlessly, to treat the commoners that we are supposed to rule so brutally, Sir Petrus deserves a death *most* painful!"

"Indeed he does," Gaius said with a sigh, "but how much more can we do? I've already freed the ladies he was keeping, and if he takes any more I'll certainly do my best to free them too, but beyond that, we're essentially helpless to take action. Petrus' little sister is the Queen, the mother of Prince Octavius! His father is Duke Duronius, the richest noble in the Kingdom! And more than that, he's one of only six Paladins! He's essentially untouchable!"

'I suppose I could've just killed him when he was unconscious,' Gaius mused. 'No, that's going a little too far. To weaken the Kingdom by killing one of its seventh-tier mages would trigger a huge manhunt for the killer. I can't imagine that would go well for anyone...'

"Still, to be associated with a man like him turns my stomach!" Gratian growled. "You know, there were rumors about that man years ago, rumors about how he treated women in the capital. Rumors about how he treated captured citizens of the Talfar Kingdom when we last warred with them eighty years ago... I never put stock in them, but now... You need to be careful around him, little brother."

"I understand," Gaius replied. "I'll do my best not to take unnecessary risks, but I also have a responsibility to do what I can to mitigate the damage he does."

"You should just resign your position and return with me to Lentia," Gratian said with an incredibly concerned look on his face.

"I can't do that, our family has already pledged our support to Prince Octavius. Besides, call me paranoid but I think suddenly resigning after several girls Petrus was playing with escaped would seem mighty suspicious, no?"

"That doesn't matter, you shouldn't even be here!"

"And yet, I am. And I must make the most of it," Gaius said as he stared into his brother's eyes. Gratian could tell that Gaius was serious and wasn't going to be talked out of this, but his own mind was racing to figure out what he and House Tullius should do, now that he had been informed by someone he trusted implicitly of the company the Prince kept.

"We've already pledged our support, so we can't back out," he said slowly, working through the problem out loud. "If Father were to catch me sabotaging this alliance he made with the Prince, then he'd have me disinherited in a heartbeat... Still, I can't have us getting too close to the Prince. We will only provide as much support as honor dictates. Beyond that... I will have to speak with Father..."

"I understand. I'll keep you as informed as I can about what's going on here," Gaius said.

"Thank you..."

Their conversation stopped there, as there wasn't much else for them to say on the subject. Eventually, Gaius had to return to Prince Octavius' side and was surprised to find a sour and surly-looking Petrus. Fortunately, no one leveled any accusations against him, or even brought up the subject of Petrus being knocked out, robbed, and deprived of the girls he was imprisoning.

By the end of the day, it was clear to Gaius that he'd gotten away with it, causing him to feel a swelling of pride in his chest he hadn't felt in a long time.

Chapter 199: Princess Cristina

Most of the nobles in Leon's cycle from the Knight Academy had been spread out among the Central and Western Territories, along with the most outstanding commoners. The rest of the commoners were sent to the Northern, Southern, and Eastern Territories.

The majority of the Snow Lions had gone east, and a few went north. More than twenty-five of the thirty-six third-tier nobles, however, had prestigious posts in the Central Territories. Due to the status of their families, going somewhere other than the capital or to the warm and comfortable west would've been a grave insult, so they were all but guaranteed enviable squireships regardless of how well their units did in the FTX.

Valeria, Asiya, and about half of the noblewomen in the Crimson Tigresses, however, were guaranteed their squireships in the capital for a different reason: that was where the royal harem was located. The Bull King had only one wife, but had taken a great many concubines to ensure he had as many heirs as possible, as was tradition.

The harem was where all of his consorts lived, alongside his female relatives that weren't legal adults yet and all the female attendants that served them. It would be considered extremely inappropriate for men to guard such a place, but since the Royal Legion wasn't that popular of a vocation for young ladies, most of the best female talent from every cycle in the Knight Academy was sent to squire for a female knight that guarded the harem to make sure the guard unit was properly staffed.

And so, while they were a little disappointed at the predictability of it, neither Valeria nor Asiya was surprised to learn that they would be staying in the capital and squiring for knights in this unit. What did come as a surprise was exactly what their duties would include; upon arrival, they were assigned to the personal guard of the Bull King's youngest daughter, Princess Cristina.

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It was a beautiful day to be outside in the capital. The sun was shining, the air was warm, and the wind was gentle. It was a day that just begged for Cristina to go out and spend time in the royal gardens.

Walking around the bright and colorful gardens was one of her favorite things to do, especially since it got her out of the harem.

There were about a hundred women inside who were official consorts of her father, the Bull King, but only three of them had any children. The Queen had Prince Octavius, while the King's former favorite concubine had given him the First and Third Princes, as well as the First Princess over the course of a century. She was old now, and the King moved on to a new favorite about a quarter of a century ago, Cristina's mother, who had also borne him Prince August.

These three women were the highest ranked within the harem, and the rest of the consorts could be cruel and resentful due to their positions. Unfortunately for Cristina, she was only fifteen, still too young to leave the harem. Taking walks through the private gardens was the closest she could get to getting away.

But now, even that one simple pleasure she had was failing to lift her spirits.

"You're going to ruin your hair if you keep doing that," Asiya said with a gentle smile.

Cristina was currently sitting on a bench around a circular stone table in a gazebo. She was pressing her head into the cool stone of the table and slowly rocking back and forth, causing her shiny black hair to slowly splay out more and more across the table.

"Mmm, don't care," Cristina answered with a light and breezy tone.

"Your head servant will, and she'll give me an earful if you come back with tangled locks."

Cristina was silent for a moment before she slowly lifted her head and playfully stuck her tongue out at Asiya, causing the older woman to giggle and respond in kind.

"I'm just so *bored*!" Cristina exclaimed. "There's *nothing* to do here except sit and listen to those hags constantly criticize everything I do!"

"You have one of the most extensive libraries in the entire Kingdom at your disposal..." Asiya mentioned.

"Already read everything worth reading," Cristina said bitterly.

"... How about learning to sew, or to carve?" Asiya suggested. "There's plenty of material to do both around here..."

"Uggh..." Cristina moaned in disgust. "I'd rather come out here and watch the grass grow than sit with a needle and thread in hand, and carving sounds only marginally better than that..."

"Hmm," Asiya responded with a frown. Before she could continue offering suggestions, though, she saw a hint of moving silver out in the surrounding hedges and bushes. She immediately leaped to her feet and started calling out, "Over here!"

That flash of silver turned out to be Valeria's hair, gleaming in the early afternoon sun. She had just finished her duties with her assigned knight and was wandering the garden looking for Asiya. Hearing her friends shout, Valeria quickly made her way through the garden paths and arrived at the secluded gazebo.

"Hello, Your Highness," she said with an extremely formal attitude to Cristina, whose head was still on the table.

"Heyyy," Cristina mumbled back.

"Bored?" Valeria asked.

"Mm hmm," the Princess responded.

"Well, there's an easy way to fix that," Valeria hinted with the ghost of a smile tugging at her lips.

Cristina's head instantly shot up, her soft brown eyes narrowed in anger and a touch of fear. "No! The last time you dragged me into training I was so sore that I could barely move for a week!"

"No Royal should ever shirk their duties," Valeria commented seriously. "Your Highness needs to be strong, for Your Highness' own sake and for the sake of the Kingdom."

"You make it sound like the Kingdom depends on me," Cristina murmured.

"It does, to an extent," Valeria replied. "It relies upon all of its leaders, and as a Princess, that includes Your Highness."

"Puh! I don't like training!" Cristina pouted.

"I think Val is just a little frustrated that she hasn't had a good fight in eight months, not since the Knight Academy sent us off," Asiya said with a smirk. "She wants someone to spar with, someone on her level."

"Isn't that you?" the Princess asked, cocking her eyebrow at the Samar girl.

"She refuses to spar with me," Valeria explained, shooting Asiya a playfully nasty look.

"I'm confident enough in my own abilities, but I'm not what *you're* looking for," Asiya retorted. The hint of a blush came to Valeria's cheeks, as she knew exactly what—or rather, *who*—her friend was talking about, but she wasn't going to clarify for the slightly-confused Princess.

"Then can't you ask one of the knights around here? What about the woman you're squiring for... what was her name?" Cristina asked.

"Dame Aquileia," Valeria answered. "She's a sixth-tier knight, not really suited to spar against for me; she's too strong."

"Well good luck finding anyone who you can spar against, miss *fourth-tier*," Asiya said teasingly.

"It's not my fault I don't slack off in my training!" Valeria shot back defensively.

"No, but it does make any complaints of being unable to find someone to spar against hold less water."

While those two playfully bickered, Cristina crossed her arms on the table and rested her chin upon them. She stared out into the distance, as far as she could—which wasn't that far, given how thickly forested the area around the harem was, to keep the building private and sequestered.

"What is the city outside like?" she suddenly asked, interrupting the other two ladies.

"What do you mean?" Asiya asked, seeking something to narrow down what the Princess wanted to know.

"I've never set foot outside of the harem," Cristina explained with a sorrowful look. "My Royal Father told me that he would allow me to make my public debut when I turned fourteen, just like the rest of my siblings, but he hasn't come out of training in years, so I've haven't been able to leave and present myself to the court. I want to know what's outside! I want to see something other than *this* place!"

"The city is loud and crowded," Valeria said. If the Princess wanted to know, then Valeria was going to tell her without hesitation. "There are so many people out there that their body odor can make the entire city stink by mid-afternoon. They set up shops and try to attract customers with garish advertisement, painting the walls of their stores in bright colors trying to draw the eye. The sheer number of people make an ungodly cacophony that leaves your ears under a significant amount of pressure at all times. All told, the city is generally an overwhelming feast for the senses, and one that is rarely pleasant."

"Oh..." Cristina said quietly as her cute round face, which had rarely ever seen a frown, fell in dejection.

"It's not that bad!" Asiya almost shouted. "Don't listen to her, Your Highness! She makes it sound terrible! The capital has a great deal of charm and beauty, and isn't just noisy, smelly people doing everything they can to grab your attention!"

"But that is most of it," Valeria said with a thin cynical smile.

Asiya frowned at her friend, but instead of feeding her cynicism, she turned to Cristina and asked, "Is that what you want? To leave this place?"

"Yes, more than anything," the Princess responded without hesitation. "Unfortunately, I can't until my Royal Father comes out of seclusion and holds the ball that will present me..."

"Hmm..." Asiya hummed, thinking over the problem. "Well, to sneak you out of here would probably get us strung up on charges of treason, but that doesn't mean there isn't anything we can do..."

"What do you mean?" Cristina asked. Valeria glanced at her friend with a curious look as well, wordlessly asking the same question.

"It sounds to me like you need more friends!" Asiya exclaimed enthusiastically. "You already have me and Val, but you need more! And if you're not allowed to leave this place, then we can bring them to you!"

"Uh... I mean... what?" Cristina asked quietly; for all her talk about wanting to leave and see the world, she was still a shy and sheltered young girl, and being suddenly told to meet someone made her heart jump in anxiety.

"I... think I know what you're getting at..." Valeria said slowly. "If we were to introduce Your Highness to someone, it would have to be a person of status, and a woman that wouldn't raise any eyebrows at meeting a Princess... The only person I know who would be acceptable would be Elise..."

"She's perfect for this!" Asiya gushed.

"Elise..." Cristina quietly mumbled, seeking more information.

"The daughter of the Heaven's Eye Tower Lord here," Valeria explained. "She's a good friend of ours, and I'm sure she'll come if we were to ask!"

"She'll have to bring guards, and we might need to invite a couple of others to avoid rumors..." Asiya mentioned, "But it should be fine so long as it isn't too many!"

"I don't..." Cristina said nervously. "I don't quite know what to say..." She certainly wanted to experience the world and bringing other people to her was the best way for her to do that for the time being, but it was still a very sudden thing to spring upon her.

"No, Elise is super fun, she'll alleviate your boredom, I guarantee it!" Asiya said with a bright smile.

"I suppose..." Cristina whispered.

"Of course, we're going to have to ask the rest of the knights around here first," Valeria said as she planned this out in her head. "and having a few more respected knights around here for the meeting would also go a long way toward dispelling any rumors about Elise appearing here..."

"I doubt there would be any rumors," Asiya said after a moment of thought. "No one wants to make an enemy of Heaven's Eye, and spreading rumors about the Tower Lord's only child would be an incredibly effective way to get on their shit list..."

"Still best not to take chances," Valeria replied.

The three ladies continued to chat for about twenty more minutes, discussing the finer points of how and when Elise might be able to visit. By the time Cristina returned to the harem, she couldn't help but bounce with excitement, and not even the harsh eyes of the King's childless consorts could bring her mood down.

'I'm going to get another friend!' she thought with joy.

Chapter 200: One Year Later

"They're late," Alix said with a look of boredom and annoyance on her face.

"Not yet," Leon said patiently, "they still have a few minutes left before the appointed time. Besides, when have you known Dame Minerva to ever be anything other than perfectly on time?"

"Hmm, good point," Alix replied with a thoughtful frown. "Do you have any idea why we're here in the first place?"

"Prince Trajan only told me that we needed some experience to go with our training and that Dame Minerva had something come up that he wanted us to tag along for."

Alix sighed and resigned herself to more waiting without knowing why.

They were at the foot of the ramp that led up to the Northern Horn, waiting for Dame Minerva to arrive and tell them what was going on. Each was dressed in their full combat kit, as this was more likely than not going to be a violent job. Alix wore armor extremely reminiscent of that worn by Centurions: gambeson, some chainmail, leather skirt, boots, and bracers, and finally, a cuirass that Leon commissioned for her made of blood-red scales. Completing the ensemble was a full-face Legion

helmet, but instead of steel, it was made of the same red metal as the scales on her cuirass. At her side was a sword of a size that could be used with either one hand or both.

Leon was in his usual black and grey armor, but a silver griffin now sat in profile, gleaming on the chest of his cuirass, rather than a lion. At his side was Anzu, now grown to be about as big as a large dog. The griffin had lost all of his baby down and sprouted pure white feathers to complement his white fur—though his wings were still too small and weak for him to fly. His claws and beak were longer and sharper, but when he was around Leon, the young griffin was as friendly and tame as any house pet; however, in the rare times that Anzu was separated from Leon, he didn't allow anyone to get close to him without glaring and snapping.

While they sat waiting, Leon passed the time by staring out into the plains between the Horns, while Anzu napped and Alix watched the lowest gatehouse on the ramp like a hawk, as that was where Dame Minerva would appear when she arrived.

It had been a year since they returned from the Crater Tribe and joined Prince Trajan's retinue. Leon hadn't gained too much raw strength in that time, but he had been diligently training with Trajan to increase his endurance when using magic and to lay the foundations for the creation of his magic body.

Alix, too, had spent a great deal of time training, and her efforts were rewarded with ascension to the second-tier. They both had grown more powerful and more skilled overall, and they couldn't help but be eager to test themselves against an enemy to truly gauge how far they had come.

"Ah! She's here!" Alix cried when she saw the gatehouse open and Dame Minerva appear.

The lady knight glanced around and, upon noticing them, began to walk in their direction with a squad of soldiers in tow. She had shiny black hair of moderate length tied back into a ponytail and dark eyes that didn't miss a single detail of her surroundings. Her features were sharp and suited her serious attitude well; she was still beautiful, but not in a cute or delicate fashion. She was dressed in the standard officer's wear for higher-ranked members of the Royal Legions: dark green trimmed with gold thread, though she had decided not to add any garish medals or ribbons to her ensemble.

Minerva walked with a quick and deliberate gait past the stables and other buildings of the small village at the foot of the ramp, not caring about the sights or smells, focusing only on the task ahead of her. However, more than a few people took notice of her, and a few passing soldiers stopped and made short respectful bows as she passed. She was the sixth-tier mage in charge of the Northern Horn, one of the most senior Legates under Trajan's command, and the second-in-command of the entire fortress complex.

"It's good you're here," she said as soon as she came within comfortable speaking distance of Leon and Alix. Before the latter two could offer any kind of greeting, however, she continued, asking, "Have you been told anything of the mission that you're to accompany this squad on?"

"No, Ma'am," Leon instantly replied.

"We've gotten word from a village about a hundred miles away of a possible vampire attack," Minerva explained. "Sir Adalgrim's squad has been assigned to investigate. You two will be accompanying them. You will stay out of his way and observe, and you will *not* order his squad around, understand?"

The fifth-tier knight behind her nodded to Leon with a friendly smile; Leon was, after all, a knight in service to the Prince, and Adalgrim wasn't about to give the younger knight cause to complain to Minerva or Trajan about him. Besides, they were both fifth-tier mages, and the least they could do was to show each other at least a modicum of respect and civility.

"I understand," Leon quickly replied to Minerva.

"Good," she replied. Then, she turned to Adalgrim and said, "I will leave the rest to you." And with that, she turned around and made her way back to the Northern Horn, her excuse to get out and walk around in fresh air over.

"It's good to meet the two of you," Adalgrim said as he took a few steps forward with his hand outstretched.

Leon hesitantly reached out and shook it—he wasn't that thrilled at touching someone else, but he also didn't want to make an incredibly rude first impression. "So, what's the plan?" he asked.

"We're going to grab some horses, and then we're going to ride west for a few hours. The village is along the Gold Road, so it's a straight shot from here," Adalgrim replied.

"I see..." Leon replied unenthusiastically. In the year and a half since he'd left the Knight Academy, he'd only gotten back on a horse a handful of times at Trajan's urging. Despite this practice, he only considered his horseback riding skills marginally better than they were back then, and he certainly didn't enjoy riding horses now any more than he did then.

In contrast to Leon, Alix's eyes lit up in anticipation of the ride. The first time she had tried to ride a horse, it was clear that she was a natural. It came so naturally to her, in fact, that she had drawn the attention of a Tribune in charge of a cavalry unit who had almost tried to talk Leon into letting her join his unit—until he learned that Leon was one of Trajan's knights, and he tactfully held his tongue.

"Well, no point in wasting time here when we can talk on the road," Adalgrim said with a smile as he led his squad toward nearby stables. Since their group wasn't cavalry and none of them owned horses, they would have to rely on the horses within the post house stables, rather than using any of the well-bred warhorses stabled in the Southern Horn.

There was a small mountain of paperwork to get through before they could go, but in less than half an hour it had been squared away and the group of twelve departed the post house and began their ride west.

Leon rode up front alongside Adalgrim, with both of their squires behind them and Anzu happily bounding along beside Leon's horse.

"While we have a few hours to kill," Leon began, deciding to talk to take his mind off how uncomfortable he was in the saddle, "mind if I ask you about the specifics of the situation at this village?"

"Sure thing, we'd have to talk about this eventually," Adalgrim said with an accommodating smile. "So, apparently, several weeks ago, there were a few disappearances among the farmers in the outskirts of the village. There's only a few hundred people who live there, so the fact that these people were missing was noticed fairly quickly. From what we were told, many of the hunters went out to search for the

missing farmers, and one of them was found completely drained of blood and with puncture wounds on his neck.”

“A vampire?” Leon asked.

“Looks to be,” Adalgrim said, nodding his head. “So keep your guard up, this creature will have been consuming blood and sacrificing humans to whatever demon it worships for a long time to leave the kind of neat and clean wounds the village reported on their missing guy. And that means it will be strong and cunning to have evaded capture until now.”

“What are the chances that we’re going to have to deal with multiple vampires?” Leon asked. His lessons from the Knight Academy and from his father gave him the impression that vampires would, more often than not, try and turn humans into its servants by offering to share its power with them, much like how the demon it sacrificed to would share its own power.

“There were only five missing people, which should be enough to last a single vampire several months, if they’re bled slowly,” Adalgrim explained. “It’s been a week since the farmers disappeared, and there have been no new missing person reports, so even if there are multiple vampires, there shouldn’t be that many.”

“Sounds good,” Leon said.

“You think you’re ready for this?” Adalgrim asked.

“What’s there to be ready for? I’m only here to watch,” Leon said with a sarcastic smile.

“That’s only if everything goes according to procedure,” Adalgrim replied. He could hear the sarcasm in Leon’s voice, but he needed to make sure that Trajan’s young knight didn’t come back in pieces, so he said the obvious anyway. “Things can go badly very easily, and you need to be ready to defend yourself in the worst case scenario.”

“I’m confident in my ability to defend myself,” Leon quietly said.

‘The only thing I’m worried about is not fighting anything on this trip,’ he thought to himself. His hand instinctively went to his waist, feeling around for his nonexistent sword. He quietly clicked his tongue in displeasure, but Trajan had insisted on his not parading about putting his family’s weapon on display. Still, he couldn’t help but feel naked going out without its familiar weight at his hip, even though he knew that it wasn’t far away.

Adalgrim didn’t need to see through Leon’s face-concealing helmet to know the younger knight was smiling; Adalgrim could hear it in his voice, so he said, “I don’t need you running off the reservation here, don’t go doing something reckless just to prove yourself...”

“I like to think that I’m not a reckless person,” Leon said as he straightened his face out and wiped it clean of the smile that had been there. “I’ll stay with you the whole time, if you’d prefer...”

“I think that would be for the best,” Adalgrim responded. Leon was a fifth-tier knight, but he was also an eighteen-year-old boy, and the veteran knight wasn’t about to let some young buck with a chip on his shoulder run off looking for glory—though Leon’s calm and relatively quiet demeanor didn’t give Adalgrim the impression that he would do something to put the rest of the squad in danger.

Leon and Adalgrim continued to talk for a while longer about specific tactics that Leon should watch out for, none of which Leon wasn't already at least somewhat cognizant of from his classes in the Knight Academy. The younger knight was still grateful for the refresher course, though.

Soon enough, not long after midday, the village they were looking for appeared amid the thin forest that grew along the Gold Road. The village itself wasn't located along the main paved road, and the group had to ride about a mile and a half down a dirt road into the forest. Leon guessed that if the village were located on the Gold Road itself, it would be significantly bigger and wealthier.

The huts and hovels were a far cry from the beautiful stone bricks of the cities Leon had grown accustomed to since coming to the Bull Kingdom, but rather resembled what he had seen way back in Vale Town: homes made entirely of timber and wooden planks, with only the occasional larger place built upon a stone foundation. Despite this, he could still feel a few small currents of magic flowing through the walls, which he guessed powered ice and water enchantments for food preservation and hygiene purposes.

Even this far out into the sticks of the Bull Kingdom, the homes were more magically advanced than in the largest city in the Northern Vales.

"This is our destination," Adalgrim announced. "Somewhere out there, a vampire took five people and drained one of them of his blood. Hopefully, it's still around, because if it is, we're going to find it and kill it."