

Storm King 371

Chapter 371: Interrogation II

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

For a moment, Leon contemplated making some kind of quip about how many papers the man had, but he decided that after the questions he'd just gotten about Tiberias he wasn't going to press his luck.

"If possible, I'd like to discuss a few things in your military record," Lucius said.

"The Legions are outside of the Arbiter's jurisdiction," Leon replied with a stony glare.

"So you don't want to answer any questions we have about these matters?" Lucius asked, returning Leon's glare with the probing look he'd been giving since the younger knight had first sat down.

Leon thought about it for a moment, keeping in mind the implications if he were to refuse to answer questions. Lucius had given him the ability to back out of this before in favor of an interview with a lawyer present, but Leon also knew that doing that wouldn't reflect well on him if he were to suddenly bail after talking about Tiberias.

In the end, he decided not to take that right; he'd answer what he could. Were he completely innocent in everything, backing out might've just been his decision, instead. It would've been smart and completely understandable, but Leon didn't want anyone looking any deeper into any potential connections he had with Tiberias. If he had to suffer through a few more questions to ensure that, then suffer he would.

"I'll answer what I can, but don't expect me to tell you everything you might want to know," Leon warned, regretting his decision to not make use of a lawyer's services beforehand, as it left him stuck without one.

"Just getting a few of these confusions cleared up will be more than enough, I assure you, Sir Leon," the investigator replied.

He made a show of shuffling around a few more papers before finally jumping back into it.

"For the record, please state the location you were sent to following your time in the Knight Academy and the name of the knight you were assigned to squire for."

"Fort 127 in the Northern Territories, I was to squire for Sir Samuel."

"How long were you there before the warlord Hakon attempted his invasion?"

"I believe it was technically a raid," Leon pointed out, a brief smile on his lips at being so pedantic. "I was there for about a week, as I recall. It's been a while, so my memory's a bit fuzzy."

"Right. And it says here that it was during your first supply run that you ran into an advance group of Valeman soldiers--"

"*Warriors*, not soldiers," Leon corrected again, to the annoyance of Lucius.

"*Warriors*. It was during your first supply run that you ran into a group of Valeman *warriors*, and only four of your squad managed to survive, not including your assigned knight?"

"Correct," Leon confirmed.

"Following this encounter, you took charge of the remains of the squad and led them back to the Fort, activating a flare in a nearby tower to warn them of the approaching danger yet losing two more of your subordinates along the way. Is all this accurate?"

"It is," Leon confirmed.

"Did you have any prior relationship with this warlord who led the attack? This 'Hakon Fire-Beard'?"

Leon blinked in surprise, but he quickly and unhesitatingly responded, "No I did not."

"He was a powerful warlord and you were a promising young fighter. I can't imagine it would've been too strange if you two knew each other before this raid began..."

"I'm from the Brown Bear Tribe, we're a *long* way away from Hakon's home territory!" Leon shot back. "I *knew* of the man before the raid, let's be clear about that, but I had never met him before, and I only knew his name because it was on the lips of the refugees who fled from his conquests into other Vales!"

"So you say, but don't you think it's a bit suspicious that a Valeman raid *just so happened* to begin a matter of days after you arrived at the Fort? What was more, *somehow* one of the more powerful and respected knights in the entire Fort was killed leading you beyond the fort's wall, and you got nearly all the rest of the soldiers in that squad killed. Can we both agree that this sequence of events might raise a few eyebrows?"

"Perhaps it might be suspicious to some," Leon said in an ambiguous tone. "Is there something you wish to accuse me of, Sir Lucius?"

"There are no accusations being made here, Sir Leon," Lucius said, smiling at him. "At least, not *yet*."

"So, Fort 127 fell to the warriors of Hakon Fire-Beard, and you and a handful of survivors holed up in a tower and waited them out until Sir Clovis, Consul of the Northern Territories retook it from the barbarians."

Leon patiently waited for the man to get to his point. From the way he was speaking, it didn't even seem like he wanted Leon's input.

Perhaps seeing Leon's look of impatience and mild disdain, Lucius smiled a bit and brought his narration to a close. Or, at least a pausing point.

"Tell me, Sir Ursus, would it seem at all strange to you that in a fort of about five hundred trained soldiers, the only survivors were a handful of people and you, a kinsman of those who had attacked the fort in the first place?"

"First," Leon venomously began, "if you had ever *been* to Fort 127, you'd know that it was hardly staffed with qualified people. Second, I and those who stood with me survived because we holed up in a strong defensive position and we fought like demons of war. That I happened to come from the Northern Vales is coincidental."

“Funny you should bring up demons, because Sir Clovis had a few experts in demonology among his retinue, and they reported signs of demonic power being utilized during the assault.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Leon said fast enough that even he was a bit taken aback. After the questions about Tiberias, Leon had readied himself for further bombshells and probing questions. The unstated question was clearly meant to throw him off, and Lucius with his smug grin and staring eyes seemed to revel in trying to chip away at Leon’s stoic exterior. However, even with this ‘revelation’ of demonic power being detected, Leon remained externally unshaken, though within he was a bit of a mess.

He calmed down a little when he felt the attention of Xaphan welling up from his soul realm. The demon didn’t take any sarcastic cracks at Leon, he simply said, [I’m with you if you need me, boy,] and kept quiet. If Leon needed the demon’s power for any reason, Xaphan was ready to be called upon.

[Thanks,] Leon whispered back.

“Why is it not surprising?” the investigator asked when Leon didn’t verbally follow up.

“They brought a *werewolf* with them when they attacked, is it really that much of a shock that they might bring a demon worshipper as well?”

Lucius didn’t respond, which encouraged Leon quite a bit. He also didn’t seem to have much information from the rest of the survivors from Fort 127, as he wasn’t asking Leon about why he was able to use fire magic below the fifth-tier.

“Is that sort of degeneracy common up there?” Lucius asked with a condescending look as if he were looking at a pig rolling around in the mud and taking it as proof that he was superior.

“In some places,” Leon said. “I’ve only heard stories, I had never seen a demon worshipper before I came south, let alone a full-blown vampire.”

Lucius paused for a moment as he stared at Leon, his grin unmoving. It felt a bit like he expected Leon to simply melt away before him and immediately confess to whatever it was that he might be guilty of.

But Leon’s face remained impassive. He gave away nothing that Lucius might be able to use against him.

“Is this it?” Leon asked after a long moment spent waiting.

“You seem to have a history of defying orders, Sir Ursus,” Lucius stated. “First when you endangered the peace talks with the stone giants, and then when you left on a solo mission behind enemy lines during the war with Talfar.”

“I was both pardoned and punished for both of those incidents,” Leon pointed out.

“Of course, and we’re not about to try and subject you to double jeopardy, but a case could be made to remove you from the Royal Legions with that kind of track record...”

Again, Lucius paused to see if he could get more of a reaction out of Leon with that veiled threat, but again, Leon seemed not to care. In fact, Leon gave the investigator a slight shrug, as if to say that he didn’t care that much.

“Sir Ursus,” the investigator began, leaning forward and finally taking his eyes off the younger knight, “there are a lot of people who don’t think that you deserve to be here. In fact, they want you gone. You don’t respect authority, and you don’t have the breeding to walk among us as an equal. Your reckless actions, even if they have worked out in the end, are those befitting of a savage, not of a knight in the service of the noble Bull King.

“So, *Sir Ursus*, is there anything you want to say to defend your conduct?”

Leon almost smiled at the man’s obvious provocation. “I thought this was an interview, not an interrogation, and certainly not a trial. What need have I to prove my worth or justify my place to someone like *you*?”

“And what do you mean by that?”

Leon began to release his aura and a slight hint of his killing intent, but even that was enough to send a shiver down the spine of the investigator, and the poor transcriber completely froze in fear, the ink from her quill leaving a large blotch on the page.

“You’re weak,” Leon said, leaving it at that. He could’ve said a lot more; Lucius was disconnected from Leon in almost every way, and the only power over him that Lucius had was in this investigation. Even then, the questions had been vague enough that, by now, Leon knew they had nothing solid on him—at least, not yet. Had they enough to go after him, Leon knew he’d probably be in prison by now, not politely asked to answer a few questions.

The man’s power to harm Leon was, by his own admission, limited. No conclusive evidence pinning him to Tiberias’ death, no evidence pointing to Xaphan’s presence, and no strong leverage from his own mistakes. Leon may not have had the backing of Prince Trajan anymore, but that didn’t mean he was going to fear some fourth-tier bureaucrat sent by the Arbiters, who hold no sway over Legion matters anyway.

In other words, Lucius’ personal opinions were essentially worthless in Leon’s eyes, and it took extraordinary willpower for Leon not to throw that in his face. His common sense won out on that front, at least, but Leon hoped that the slight upturn in his lips conveyed his cocky contempt well enough.

After shaking off the effects of Leon’s aura, Lucius quickly composed himself and decided that Leon wasn’t worth getting angry at for that little show of force. He and his fellow investigators had many more people to question in the coming days, and he had more questions for Leon, anyway.

“So!” Lucius practically shouted in his attempt to show that he wasn’t as shaken as he was, “After Prince Trajan demoted you for your reckless solo attack on the Talfar forces, did you hold any resentment toward him?”

“None.”

“None at all? He busted you down from Tribune to no rank at all. That had to have hurt your finances.”

“It did. But it was justified. My actions were reckless, and I begrudge Prince Trajan none for punishing me as he did. In fact, given the circumstances, His Highness’ punishment was rather lenient; he could’ve had me sent to the headsman’s block if he were so inclined.”

'A shame he didn't,' Lucius uncharitably thought as he finally got to his final and most important few questions.

"Sir Ursus, it's no secret that Prince Trajan was close to Prince August and that you were close with Prince Trajan. Did you ever see or hear anything outside of the public eye that might have indicated their relationship wasn't so cordial?"

"I neither heard nor saw anything of the sort," Leon stated.

"Never? Prince Trajan wasn't angry with Prince August? Prince August was never frustrated or resentful of Prince Trajan's prominent place in the Royal Palace?"

"Not that I ever saw," Leon replied. If anything, Leon figured, August was probably loyal to Trajan even in death. Trajan awakened August's blood, after all.

"And did you ever see anything that might have indicated that Prince Trajan and Prince August might have been collaborating on any secret projects?"

"No."

Lucius went back to staring at Leon. He could keep pushing, but Leon's face indicated that the young knight wasn't going to say what Lucius wanted him to.

'No matter, someone else will say them...' Lucius thought as he broke eye contact with Leon.

The investigator was quietly relieved in his decision to stop questioning Leon. The barbarian's killing intent made it clear enough that Leon truly deserved that appellation, but that didn't make Lucius any more comfortable when Leon was releasing it. He was ready to go.

"I think we'll call this round of questioning to a close, then."

"We're done, then?" Leon asked as he began to stand up, not even waiting for Lucius to confirm it.

"We are," Lucius said, barely stopping Leon from walking to the door, "but we're likely to have more questions in the future. Do us all a favor and don't leave the city."

Leon grunted in acknowledgment, and then swiftly departed, finally giving Lucius and his scribe a reprieve from his potent killing intent.

Outside, Leon didn't stick around. He was in a foyer that branched into several dozen small rooms just like the one he had just left, and there was an investigator from the High Arbiter in each one of them, questioning a member of Trajan's retinue. As Leon walked out of his room, another knight that he vaguely recognized walked in behind him.

Leon didn't stick around to talk to anyone, though. All he wanted to do was to return to Minerva, tell her that he was done for the day, and then go home. That interrogation, for that was what it had felt like to Leon, had put him in a terrible mood.

Unfortunately, his plans were not to come to fruition, for he was barely out of the foyer when he spotted Prince August walking down the corridor towards him, flanked by Roland and half a dozen attendants, and a full dozen other guards.

“Sir Ursus!” August said with mild familiarity as soon as they spotted each other, preventing Leon from ducking through a nearby doorway or doubling back the way he came.

“... Your Highness...” Leon muttered as he made a slight bow to August.

“You’re just the man I was looking for, I was wondering if I could have a few minutes of your time?”

Leon clenched his jaw in minor frustration, but he couldn’t easily refuse such a blatant invitation. His curiosity, at the very least, wouldn’t allow it, even if his frustration demanded that he go home and unwind.

“I can spare a few minutes for Your Highness,” Leon replied through his clenched teeth.

His general reluctance and poor mood weren’t lost on August, but the Prince clearly didn’t think it mattered or that his business was more important, for he smiled at Leon and said, “Wonderful! Why don’t you accompany me back to my office?”

Chapter 372: The Support of Your House

August led Leon and the rest of his entourage back to his office, chatting with Roland the entire way. Leon did his best to pay attention to what they were saying, but the combination of knowing that they were in public and likely weren’t going to talk to each other about anything of note and the veritable interrogation he’d just gone through weighed on his mind too much for him to pay too much attention.

Upon arriving at August’s office, the Prince turned to Leon and asked, “We have some business to wrap up, could you wait outside for me?”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Leon said with a quick bow, and he took a seat in one of the chairs by the door of the office.

August, Roland, and the rest of the group proceeded into the Prince’s office, leaving Leon relatively alone. There were still plenty of secretaries and assistants working at desks in the room outside of August’s office, but none were paying much attention to Leon. Still, after all of those questions, Leon craved some solitude to process everything and to figure out what to do next. He briefly considered getting that solitude by retreating into his soul realm until August sent for him, but he decided against it, preferring to stay alert while he remained in the palace.

He didn’t know where the Earthshaker Paladin was, after all, and if the man was bold enough to kill Trajan, then Leon couldn’t expect safety anywhere except his own home and the Heaven’s Eye Tower. But his immediate concern wasn’t Earthshaker, it was Lucius.

He was asked questions about Tiberias. His competency as a knight was questioned. Lucius had even insinuated that he had sympathies with Hakon Fire-Beard’s Valemén and that he might have been somehow involved in the raid they launched on Fort 127.

If he were honest, those last two points were simply infuriating. They made him want to perform some impromptu dental surgery on Lucius with his fists, preferably with his gauntlets on, but those questions didn’t worry him. Rather, it was the questions regarding Tiberias that truly unsettled Leon, for that was the one thing that he was both guilty of and able to be punished for.

Leon was so disturbed by the prospect of the investigation being reopened, even though he didn't think much would come of it—especially with Naiad gone—that he barely even thought about August and why the Prince had led him back to his office until the door opened again about fifteen minutes later and people started filing out. A few moments later, Roland followed them out, leaving the office devoid of people save for August.

"Sir Ursus," Roland said as he approached Leon.

Leon glanced up, giving Roland nothing more than a slight nod as a greeting.

The Paladin didn't take any offense, and said, "It's good to see you again. I was actually hoping to catch up with you for a few minutes."

With his mind still elsewhere, Leon offered little more than a second nod of his head for Roland to continue.

"How are you holding up?" Roland asked he sat down next to the younger man. "This whole incident with Trajan has screwed up so much, and I know that you and he were fairly close..."

"I'm fine," Leon said, finally breaking his silence.

Roland gave Leon a bitter smile and a head nod of his own as if he knew Leon was lying and was letting him save face. That Leon seemed even more dour and emotionless than usual only reinforced Roland's belief that Leon was simply putting on a brave face.

In truth, while Trajan's death had hit Leon hard, the young knight was already making his peace with it. Lucius was the reason for his current poor mood, but Leon banished thoughts of the 'interview' he'd just sat through for the moment as he finally began to switch gears to the matter at hand.

"What business might His Highness have with me?" Leon asked Roland, hoping the Paladin would give him a straight answer.

"I'm not entirely sure, but there are a couple of reasons," Roland said, averting his eyes from Leon as he thought about what to say.

"You don't know? You're one of Prince August's most trusted and powerful companions and you *don't know*?" Leon whispered in a tone that was, while not loud, both angry and disbelieving. "Are you sure you're not just trying to avoid the question for the benefit of anyone listening in?"

"There is such a thing as subtlety, Sir Leon," Roland replied with a rolling of his eyes. "These are dark times if a Prince is able to be assassinated in the streets. Makes it hard to trust people, and we're all just trying to scramble and find our new footing. By the way, I think His Highness will see you, now."

Leon glanced away from Roland and saw Prince August standing in the doorway

'Things must be worse for him than I thought if he's not waiting for me inside,' Leon thought to himself. As a Prince, August should be working in his office and forcing Leon to wait, not going to the door of his office and waiting on Leon.

With a bit of trepidation—he wasn't entirely sure August was waiting on him and he didn't want to embarrass either himself or the Prince in public—Leon rose from his seat and took a few hesitant steps

toward the Prince. August nodded to him, and Leon's pace grew confident as he strode into the Fourth Prince's office.

"You're looking well, Your Highness," Leon observed, noting the Prince's thicker musculature, increased stature, and slightly brighter hair. August used to be a fairly short person with little defined muscle and dull, dirty blond hair. He'd seemed so slight as to be sickly, and he was the exact opposite of the image a young, strong Prince ought to project.

Now, however, his body was densely packed with defined muscle, his aura radiated strong fifth-tier power, and his hair had brightened and seemed almost polished with how it sparkled in the light—each strand seemed almost full of life compared to the seemingly unhealthy hair color August had before.

"I'm *feeling* well, Sir Leon," August said, showing Leon over to the sofas by his hearth and taking a seat. Leon waited for a second before following suit. "I truly must thank you again for your small part in my awakening, I know you could've said no, and yet you were there that day. That means a great deal to me."

Leon sat and stoically stared at August. He had been at August's awakening ceremony because of his name—his *real* name—and for no other reason. Still, from his own experience of being stuck at the first-tier until his blood was awakened and the power he gained after, he knew how big of a deal it was on August's end, so he refrained from giving voice to any of the disrespectful remarks that were floating about in his head.

"I mean no disrespect, Your Highness," Leon said, meaningfully glancing at the clock on the wall, "but I *do* have some business that I need to take care of back home..."

"Of course, then let's put away the small talk and get down to business." August didn't seem the slightest bit offended at Leon's veiled rebuke and the implication he didn't want to be around the Prince, which raised Leon's opinion of him just a bit. He didn't know August all that well, but if there was one good thing he could say about the Prince, it was that he was a surprisingly humble man. "You must be aware of my and my brother's feuds, no?"

"They're rather hard to miss," Leon replied, the events surrounding the triumphal games flashing through his mind.

"Then it should come as no surprise that my brother's supporters are currently rallying their forces. Hiring mercenaries, readying their knights and men-at-arms, and confirming their population rolls in case they need to levy their peasants. All told, my brother could have an army of more than a million if he were to mobilize everything he has."

"I don't see how much that has to do with me," Leon replied with a look of relative disinterest that was both true and fake. He wasn't too interested in any offers August had for him, but he was still curious about what the Prince was going to put on the table.

"Most of Octavius' support comes from the Southern, Western, and Central Territories. Any support I've been able to raise has largely been confined to the Eastern Territories. The nobles of the Northern Territories are still largely undeclared, aside from a few notable exceptions like Count Whitefield and Marquis Grandison."

Leon couldn't suppress his scowl. He knew both of those names—the former was the man who had refused calls from Fort 127 for reinforcements during Hakon's raid, and then got into a conflict with the Consul of the North after the raid had been put down. The latter had sent many of his knights into the Northern Territories to steal silkgrass and enslave the Valeman farmers who had been growing the material.

Suffice it to say, Leon held a great deal of antipathy towards both of them, though his enemies were numerous enough he hadn't devoted that much attention to either.

"Sir Leon, you could help me a great deal in the Northern Territories..." August said, letting his statement hang.

"I don't see how I can, I'm just a Valeman," Leon said with a smile.

"Of course you are," August said, smiling back at him. "However, if you *weren't* a Valeman, I'm sure—"

"I'm just going to stop you right there, Your Highness," Leon interrupted. "I'm a *Valeman*. If anyone were to claim otherwise, I would publicly deny it, and probably distance myself from the person making those claims."

Leon was in no way tempted by August's offer. The Prince wanted Leon's name, he wanted the last member of House Raime to aid him in securing the Northern Territories, where House Raime was once based and where they had held an immense amount of sway. Needless to say, Leon had a lot of problems with that, most notably that it would require him to go public with his identity, and that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. There was nothing August could offer Leon to change that, even after the grilling Leon had just gone through with Lucius.

But Leon couldn't blame August too much for making the offer, even if that offer was infuriating. August was likely having trouble seeing past his own desperate situation, and Leon wasn't in much of a mood to remind August of House Raime's own circumstances.

"Your support would mean a great deal to me, Sir Leon," August said with an almost pleading tone. "It's no secret that my position is hardly secure, and anything that can help is not something I can afford to pass on..."

"I hope you're not meaning that as a threat," Leon said with a dangerous smile, though August's tone hadn't suggested it was.

"Of course I don't mean it in that way," August replied, leaning back into his chair. "My family is complicated. I have three brothers, but only one of them would I consider family. Beyond that, I have two sisters and a mother, and all three will be in some kind of danger should Octavius take the throne.

"My mother would likely be killed. She's my father's favorite concubine, and from what I know, the Queen hates her. She wouldn't last an hour after my brother's coronation. My younger sister would likely fare better, perhaps a political marriage if she's lucky. My older brothers and sister would be fine, though likely exiled in all but name, unwelcome in court or at any other official gathering. Octavius means to destroy my family, Sir Leon, and I can't let that happen."

"And why would he want to do that?" Leon asked, his eyebrow raised in skepticism.

"I'm not sure, perhaps to cut down on the possibility of their children or even my siblings themselves threatening his hold on power. Either way, he's already proven that he's willing to kinslay to get what he wants and hold what he has."

Leon's eyebrow remained raised, but his expression morphed from one of skepticism to one of muted surprise. He knew that Minerva had secretly pledged the retinue to August in order to see the Earthshaker Paladin brought to justice, but he hadn't been aware of exactly how much she had shared with Prince August.

"Yes, Sir Leon, Dame Minerva told me everything she knew when we met; I know that Octavius was the one who had my Uncle murdered. I even had a good conversation with Caecilius learning all the details he had to share. That I will do my absolute best to bring justice to those who've killed my uncle hardly needs to be stated."

"I'm all for that, Your Highness," Leon said. "However, my identity will not help you with that."

"I disagree. It's been almost two decades since House Raime was supposedly killed off," August began, causing Leon to cringe a little when he mentioned House Raime by name, "but its name still carries a lot of weight among the nobles of the Northern Territories, especially those who live on the Great Plateau. The support of your House would help me greatly in making some in-roads there that I haven't been able to make."

"In revealing my identity, you will be revealing me to my enemies," Leon matter-of-factly stated. "I understand your desperation, especially since it's the fate of your loved ones at stake, however not only will I not be a puppet in your little pissing match with Octavius, I will also not make myself incredibly vulnerable just for you. I will follow Dame Minerva until the Earthshaker Paladin and all the rest who were responsible for Prince Trajan's death have been dealt with, and then I'll probably leave this Kingdom."

August sighed dramatically as he slumped down in his chair in a most un-Princely fashion. "I'm sorry to hear that, Sir Leon. I'd hoped that you could provide me with greater aid than simply that of your sword arm. What was more, I was hoping that House Raime could be revived through you. I think even restoring you to the Archduchy of the Great Plateau would've been arranged..."

Leon didn't bite this bait. He cared not a whit for the Great Plateau, and in fact, he actively didn't want landed titles. That would tie him down to a static position, force him to settle in the Bull Kingdom. While he was sure he and Elise could easily find happiness in Teira, his goals were much higher; he couldn't reach the Nexus, find his mother, and restore the Thunderbird Clan if he was stuck on Aeterna administering a relatively small spit of land for the rest of his life.

"What a shame, oh well," Leon said, pointedly not trying to make his sad tone convincing.

"Well, if your sword arm is all I'll have, then I'll take it regardless," August said, rising to his feet. "I'm sorry we couldn't work something out, Sir Leon, but despite this, your secret will still remain safe with me."

"Thank you," Leon replied as he, too, stood up. He trusted August was intelligent enough not to reveal that particular bombshell, even with his own problems distracting him, as that could attract the attention of those who'd nearly wiped out House Raime. It would also invite embarrassment when Leon

publicly denied his heritage, and that wasn't something August could afford right now, not when he was so vulnerable and in need of allies.

August walked Leon to the door where the latter gave the former a shallow bow and departed. Leon didn't even look back as he left the Royal Palace and started to make his way back home.

It hadn't been entirely clear to Leon amidst the grief of Trajan's death what exactly he wanted out of the Bull Kingdom anymore, but as he walked home, things started to fall into place in his head. He didn't want to swear his loyalty to anyone else ever again. Trajan would be the last man to have such loyalty from him, at least as far as Leon intended—he wasn't a soothsayer, after all.

From now on, Leon intended his loyalty to be conditional, almost the point of being transactional. He followed Trajan for his lofty if unrealistic ideals. He followed Artorias because Artorias was his father. No other authority figure would get his loyalty as those two had.

Of course, Leon wasn't intending to break his word and start using people as tools, back-stabbing his way to the Nexus. Rather, he simply didn't want to be tied down anymore. Being in the Legions was restrictive, being in the Forest of Black and White equally so. Swearing allegiance to a Prince or to a King would, like owning territory in the Kingdom, tie him down and keep him from doing what he needed to do.

There would be no more of that. Once the Earthshaker Paladin was dead and his business in the Bull Kingdom wrapped up, as far as Leon was concerned, he would be a free man.

Chapter 373: Octavius' Plans

Octavius smiled as he sat back in his chair in his office, thinking about the future. Victory was sweet, and the taste of it following Trajan's killing only made Octavius thirst for more. There were so many people to punish, so many things that only *he* could do to return the Bull Kingdom to what it should be, and he wanted to get started right away.

But he suppressed that urge to get started working on things right away. Trajan had only just been buried a few days ago and Octavius was still technically in mourning, even if mourning was the furthest thing from his mind. What was more, several of his other plans had already been implemented, and he had to wait for them to bear fruit before he could proceed.

The wait was killing him. For almost a decade, now, the King had been indisposed, leaving only himself and *the bastard* in charge of the Kingdom. Everything that would happen in the next few weeks had been a long time coming, and Octavius could practically feel himself vibrating in anticipation.

But still, he had to wait. Everything would come in due time, and him hovering over the shoulders of his subordinates as they tried to work wouldn't accomplish a damn thing, no matter how much Octavius wanted to do just that right now.

Fortunately, the preliminary findings of some of his plans walked right in the door in the arms of the Sapphire Paladin and a few other of his personal stewards.

Octavius smiled at Sapphire, blatantly letting his eyes wander up and down her body. Unlike when Earthshaker did so, however, Sapphire greatly enjoyed the attention, going so far as to strike a few slightly provocative poses for her Prince.

After a few moments spent appreciating his lady's beauty, Octavius acknowledged the rest of those who had entered his office with a curt, "What do you have for me?"

He didn't even let them take a seat first.

"Your Highness," the highest-ranked of his stewards began as he retrieved a few pieces of paper from the stack he was holding so that he would get the information he had to relay correct, "the questioning of Prince Trajan's personal retinue has concluded, and we've made some progress toward your goals, but not, I fear, as much as we've hoped."

"Explain," Octavius demanded, glaring at the man. The steward was a kindly, grandfatherly old man, but if Octavius were to order him to strangle his own children, he'd do so without hesitation.

"We made sure that the most prominent knights were questioned regarding all matters that could possibly be tied to them, but I'm afraid the reports we've gotten from the office of the High Arbiter aren't encouraging. In the case of Sir Adalgrim, Sir Leon, and Dame Minerva, just to name a few, most of the additional charges that *could* be levied against them would go nowhere."

"There is still merit in levying them, if only to tie them up in the courts while we make our moves," Sapphire pointed out.

"Of course there is," the elderly steward replied, "however, the ultimate decision, in this case, will likely be made by the High Arbiter since she has personally stuck her nose in this business. If we bring charges against, let's say Sir Leon for his connection to the death of Lord Tiberias last year, the High Arbiter wouldn't sign off on it. There just isn't enough evidence."

Octavius suppressed a scowl. It wouldn't normally be so difficult to put most of Trajan's old knights out of commission with a little exploitation of the justice system, but with the High Arbiter now personally overseeing all matters connected to Prince Trajan and his assassination, attempting to do so would be very dangerous, politically speaking.

It was paramount to Octavius that he wasn't publicly seen engaging in such tactics. All other considerations had to come after that. There were gains to be made there, especially since Octavius knew that August had met with both Minerva and Leon, but it was too great a risk if he were to bring anything but an iron-clad case against either of them for any kind of wrongdoing.

It just pained him to miss such an opportunity. Octavius had been trying to get some dirt on prominent supporters of August and Trajan like Leon and Minerva for more than a year, but his attempts had constantly been foiled. His rather blatant endeavor to search Leon's villa following the vampire attack had been stopped by Trajan, as had many of his other investigations into other knights. Leon, in particular, Octavius wanted to bring down, if only for the humiliation of the young knight defeating his chosen gladiator during the triumphal games.

Still, even if he hadn't enough to bring down Trajan's old retinue, he still had enough on other people supporting August for his plans to work.

"Very well, we'll forget about Trajan's old retinue for the time being," Octavius said as neutrally as his disappointment would allow. "How about the rest of our targets?"

"We've been having much more success on that front, Your Highness," the steward replied. "We can prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that many of Prince August's lower-leveled stewards have been engaging in practices that could be seen as corrupt, though to my knowledge, most lower-level officials often engage in similar practices. Bribery and the like, nothing too crazy. Regardless, it's enough that within perhaps a week or so, there will be some arrests taking place among some of Prince August's low-ranking retainers."

"Hopefully, we'll be able to get them to flip on some more influential people," Sapphire added.

"Indeed. Even if they don't, though, we'll get *something* we can use on them, even if we have to twist the truth to suit our purposes..." the steward replied.

"Focus on those who are vulnerable, don't manufacture evidence unless it's absolutely necessary," Octavius ordered. "If people like Minerva and Leon aren't vulnerable, then we'll let them be until we can strengthen our position. Besides, while a force of two thousand can't be ignored, Minerva's hardly the most influential woman around, and Leon is nothing more than a barbarian with little strength. How much can they hurt us even if we leave them alone? Focus on August's support, erode his base and make him desperate."

"And then he'll be right where we want him to be..." Sapphire said, clearly relishing the words.

"Yes," Octavius said. "We can still fail at this point, so be cautious, don't rush. The High Arbiter's involvement complicates matters, but we can still do this if we're careful. How are we coming along on the other front?"

"Our people are ready, they need only be questioned," Sapphire said.

"August will be laid low by their testimony..." the steward added, a vicious grin forming on his face.

"Good..." Octavius murmured as his eyes drifted over to the windows of his office.

It didn't quite sit well with him that he had to do this. He was the Crown Prince, and soon to be the King! Such scheming should've been beneath him, and it would've been if his father had simply confirmed what had been obvious even as far back as when Prince Herculanius joined the blood priests; that *Octavius* was to be his heir, not August.

"When I'm King, all of this will be unnecessary..." he muttered. "These problems—August, Minerva, that Valeman savage, even that upstart peasant Roland—they shouldn't be so out of my reach... Once I'm King, I'll make sure *no one* is so immune to my wrath ever again..."

The Prince's face twisted into a sadistic smile that utterly eclipsed the one his steward wore, though it was gone but a moment later.

Even with these small setbacks, Octavius was in a fine position. Trajan was dead, and he had more than enough in the works to bring down August.

"There has been much talk of civil war should my father die," Octavius mused aloud, "but I will ensure no such travesty ever takes place. August will be dead before I take the throne, and it will be by the hand of justice that he loses his life, not assassins in the dark..."

“That’s a shame,” came a voice from the doorway, suddenly sending no small amount of panic running through those in Octavius’ office—if what they were discussing were to leak, it would be all of them who would become intimately familiar with the headsman’s block instead of August. Fortunately for them, the speaker turned out to simply be the Earthshaker Paladin. “I was hoping you would allow me the honor of killing the bastard Prince, but I suppose one was enough.”

The Paladin sauntered into the office as if it were his own, lazily throwing himself into a chair by Octavius’ desk without even asking first, to the derisive and judgmental stares of the others in the room, though notably not Octavius.

“I’m glad you understand, Uncle,” Octavius said. “Some fun must be saved for others, after all.”

“Though it brings me some amount of pain, I must admit that you’re right in this case,” Earthshaker admitted so frankly that it would’ve been rude if their relationship wasn’t so familial, though that still didn’t stop Sapphire and the stewards in the room from giving staring daggers at him.

“I suppose that’s it, then,” Octavius said with some impatience. “We’ve done what we can, now we just wait for the chips to fall.”

—

Within the Hall of Justice, the central administration building for the Arbiters, thousands of people worked away. Some were investigators, looking into cases on behalf of the Arbiters when the King’s own investigators either couldn’t or wouldn’t. Others were paper-pushers, dealing with the Kingdom’s bureaucratic apparatus so that others could do their jobs without interruption. Still others were Arbiters of various rank, their assistants and secretaries, accountants, and everyone else that such an important arm of the government required.

Three days after Trajan’s retinue had been called in for questioning, the answers they had given had been analyzed and many a suspicious eyebrow had been raised. More than fifty knights had to be called back to be questioned again, though Leon, Minerva, and Alix were not among them—at least, not yet.

The information revealed over the course of these interviews started to paint a picture to the High Arbiter, one that she didn’t like. It was one of conspiracy and potential regicide, one that depicted someone of extremely high stature committing treason of the highest order.

Without delay, she began to sign off on arrests and expanded her investigation to include those in the service of Prince August, setting the Hall of Justice practically aflame with activity. Dozens of low-ranking knights were either detained for questioning or *strongly* encouraged to sit down for interviews by the High Arbiter’s investigators.

One man, however, escaped such a fate. His encounter with the agents of the High Arbiter began when his arrest warrant appeared on the desk of a relatively mid-level bureaucrat in the Halls of Justice.

This bureaucrat wasn’t a rich man, but he wasn’t poor, either. He was just a cog in the machine, signing off on warrants and just about any other paper that crossed his desk. To him, it sometimes felt like the only thing he did all day was sign his name on the indicated lines. Oftentimes, his monotonous job got to be so much that he barely even read the papers he was signing, even though it was technically his job to ensure that each one had been properly reviewed.

The day he got the arrest warrant for Justin Isynos, however, he stared at the paper for several long minutes before he finally signed it. Following the few strokes of the quill needed to sign his short name, he rose from his desk and left to take an early break. His work would pile up, but in this case, he had other, less *formal* business to take care of.

He wrote a quick note and took a ten-minute walk over to the Royal Palace where he located the desk of an acquaintance of his. She wasn't at her desk, so he had to wait for another ten minutes, but that didn't matter to him. When she did return, he and she barely spoke a word to one another, simply sharing the same space long enough for the man to pass the note and depart.

After reading the note, the woman burned it and left her office again, to the surprise of her assistant. Ignoring said assistant, the woman passed on the note's information to another official in the palace, a young steward who worked in Prince August's retinue, who paled and got to his feet.

This official then moved as fast as he was capable of without discarding his dignity and drawing attention to the small Isynos estate. It would've been an easy thing to pass the information along under normal conditions, but Justin hadn't gone to the palace that day, insisting instead on doing his work from home. The official stayed in the estate for a matter of minutes, just long enough to pass along word of Justin's arrest warrant, and then made his way back to the palace.

The High Arbiter's agents arrived at the Isynos estate barely two hours later, but they found the place completely deserted. No Justin Isynos, not servants, no stewards, no papers, not even furniture. It was like the man had simply packed up and left without anyone realizing it, leaving his villa completely empty.

Chapter 374: Arrests

Things returned to some semblance of normal for Leon in the days following his questioning by Lucius, though that didn't mean that his life was without stress. After those questions about Tiberias, Leon fully expected there to be some follow-ups, because, at least in his mind, they shouldn't have asked those questions without having some suspicions about his role in the nobleman's death.

Fortunately for Leon, nothing came down for him, but after about a week it became clear that he was stressing about the wrong thing.

The first inklings Leon had that something in the capital was going wrong was when Alix and several other familiar knights showed up at his front gate, frantically ringing his doorbell. Leon, of course, let them in, and Alix practically ran into his villa, leading the three others she had with her.

Understanding that she didn't want to talk out in the open, Leon ushered them inside without a word and didn't take his eyes off the gate until it had closed completely and sealed the temporary gap in the villa's defenses that it made. Then, he turned around and hurriedly followed Alix inside.

"What's going on?" he asked, wasting no time with pleasantries.

"Shit's goin' downhill, fast!" said one of the knights, a young third-tier woman who was clearly from more rural regions based on her accent.

"People are being arrested left and right!" Alix loudly said. "We don't know where it's going to end, but they're clearly targeting Prince August's supporters! Minerva has the rest of the retinue getting ready for something violent, and she sent us to make sure you were ready, just in case!"

"Does she think anything might actually happen to us?" Leon asked as he conjured his sword and black armor out of his soul realm, almost as if he thought something was about to attack the villa.

"No! Nothing like that!" Alix quickly said, soothing some of Leon's fears. With the exception of perhaps Elise, Alix was the person who knew Leon best in the city, and if his readied armor and weapons weren't proof enough, she could tell from his body language and rapidly focusing aura that he was ready to storm the Royal Palace if necessary.

"We're not goin' ta war, least not yet," the other third-tier knight said.

The remaining two knights kept their peace, though they were both weaker than Alix and the other knight according to Leon's magic senses. He knew none of their names, but their faces were familiar enough that he knew they served under Dame Minerva.

"There's... something else," Alix hesitantly said.

"Here?" the other knightess asked in mild exasperation.

"Now's better than later," Alix replied.

"Explain," Leon demanded, having no patience for games when a major enough play was being made that August's people were being arrested.

"An arrest warrant was made for Justin Isynos," Alix said as she carefully studied Leon's reaction. She expected something fairly subdued, some small indication that Leon would know what that meant, but the reaction she got was much stronger than she had anticipated.

"What?!" Leon shouted loud enough that his villa seemed to shake.

"Yea, an' people were sent ta his villa, an' he was gone!" the other knightess explained, seeming to defer to Alix's judgment when it came to giving Leon the details.

"Define 'gone'."

"Packed up and left, seemingly," Alix said. "No furniture in his home, no servants, no Isynos, it was an empty villa! Even the yacht he had docked in the lake was gone!"

Leon stepped back from the conversation a bit, a hand on his chin as he thought about what this meant. Clearly, Justin had been tipped off that he was going to be arrested, as Leon hadn't heard anything about him leaving before this. Leon quickly projected his magic senses, searching his surroundings for the people that had occasionally watched his home, and sure enough, they were all gone.

There were a couple different ways that Leon could interpret this news. The first, and the most ignorantly hopeful, was that Justin had packed up and left the city for good, never to trouble Leon again. More likely, he was simply moving him and his underground with his identity possibly compromised, and that would make him much more difficult to track. Leon had derided a great deal of peace of mind knowing that the Spymaster and some of Trajan's knights had been keeping an eye on Justin's

movements, but with him gone, there was no guarantee where he was or what he was doing. With Naiad out of the picture, that meant bad things for Leon. The situation might even devolve to the point of needing to rely on Xaphan's power, and that wasn't a bridge that Leon was willing to cross just yet.

But then, something else occurred to Leon, something almost as disturbing as Justin's apparent disappearance.

"Why tell me this?" Leon asked.

Alix stared at him for a moment, an odd look appearing on her face for a brief moment. She was one of the few people in the Bull Kingdom who knew his identity, thanks to a careless comment made by Emilie, and she likely had an inkling of why Leon was so interested in Justin. She put on as appealing a look as she could, and said, "We were ordered to do so by Dame Minerva. She knew that you were involved in whatever Prince Trajan was doing in regard to keeping an eye on Justin Isynos' movements. We weren't given any more information, but I believe that Dame Minerva is expecting some kind of report on that matter once we get to the Royal Palace."

Leon frowned a bit. "Any particular reason why she's interested in this matter or is it just because he's gone?"

"I can't say for certain, Sir," Alix responded.

Leon gave the others an exaggerated shrug to try and tell them that the matter with Justin Isynos wasn't that important, but it had mixed results. They didn't quite know the severity of what Leon believed Justin was guilty of, but they could tell that it was an important matter. Fortunately, they also knew that this was above their pay grade, and they asked no questions of Leon about the matter.

"Well, then, no more time to waste," Leon said. "How quickly do I need to get to the palace?"

"As soon as you can," Alix replied.

Leon, despite the situation, couldn't suppress a smile. "I don't suppose any of you are clear on matters regarding flying in and out of the Royal Palace?"

A few eyebrows went up in interest, but only Alix answered.

"You have to report to the first gate on the bridge to the palace island, and you'll be grounded from there on," she explained. "If you don't, they'll probably try and shoot you down. It's highly illegal to fly within a thousand feet of the palace island."

"Oh," Leon said with more than a hint of disappointment. He could understand that, even with flight being a terribly uncommon ability, it still wasn't unheard of, and that the Royal Family and the Bull Kingdom's government, in general, didn't want people freely flying around the Royal Palace. If they did, it would kind of defeat the purpose of trying to control people's entrance and exit to the palace by funneling them over the one bridge.

Still, flying at least to the bridge was going to be more than far enough.

"Why are you asking?" Alix asked, her eyes wide with excitement. She knew what he had been working on for months, but she wanted him to confirm it for her.

“Come and see,” Leon said, but instead of walking out of the back door like she thought he was going to, he led her back toward the front door, closely followed by the other three knights.

Lounging in the stable was Anzu, sleeping almost literally spread-eagled over his huge cushy bed, his legs twitching and his beak clicking in his sleep—he was probably dreaming about hunting. It hurt him to disturb his not-so-little-anymore buddy, but Leon knew Anzu would love to do this, so he silently indicated for the other knights not to get too close, and then he gently began to shake Anzu’s wing shoulder.

Anzu was deep in sleep, and it took a moment or two for him to fully wake up, and when he did, he shot straight to his paws, his now enormous wings spread, and his head raised in preparation to peck out the eyes of whoever had disturbed his sleep. However, when he saw Leon standing before him, he immediately calmed down, retracted his wings, and nuzzled up to his human, his show of affection nearly pushing Leon right over.

“Is he...?” Alix began, her eyes practically shining like stars despite the circumstances under which she had come to Leon’s place.

“He’s ready,” Leon replied, a rare unabashed smile on his face. “Help me with his saddle.”

A few minutes later, Leon, the four knights, and Anzu were standing in his front yard, Leon atop Anzu like a horse, his legs tucked in right behind the griffin’s wings and reins in his hand. Anzu himself had both a saddle and what almost seemed to be a helmet that the reins were attached to.

“Where should I go once I get to the palace?” Leon asked, practically gloating at the star-struck gaze of the other knights. Anzu himself seemed to be enjoying the attention, too—either that, or he was just eager to take off, as his wings were furling and unfurling in a way not unlike that of a runner stretching their legs.

“Find Dame Minerva, she should be in Prince Tra- I mean, in *her* office,” Alix responded, her answer bringing her joy at seeing Anzu ready to fly back down to dour seriousness.

“I’ll see you there, then,” Leon said. He then rubbed Anzu’s neck and whispered, “All right, Anzu, let’s go.”

That was all the encouragement Anzu needed, and he immediately began to run forward and spread his wings. After only a couple dozen feet, the griffin flapped his wings, creating a great burst of wind magic that sent both him and the riding Leon soaring right over the outer wall of the villa. With another flap of his wings, Anzu carried Leon and himself even higher, high enough that the unnatural wind current that suddenly seemed to appear under Anzu’s wings didn’t interfere with anything below them.

Despite everything going on, for the few minutes it took Anzu to carry Leon over the noble district and to the bridge to the palace, Leon was happy. The wind blew through his hair, he could feel his weight shifting around in response to Anzu’s movements, and it felt like the sky belonged solely to him and his griffin.

But it couldn’t go on forever, and not even five minutes after taking off from his villa, Anzu brought Leon back down in the square in front of the bridge where carriages were to be parked—only mounted

animals could be brought over the bridge without special permission, and even then, they couldn't go further than the stables.

It was a smooth ride, and Leon only had to direct Anzu with a few vocal commands—Anzu was quite the smart animal, and that was all he needed to know where Leon wanted to go. Once on the ground, he only needed a single command to begin trotting over toward the first gatehouse at the end of the bridge.

Leon and Anzu made for a conspicuous pair, with the dozens of people in the square staring at the two of them. Griffins were rare mounts in the Bull Kingdom, but fortunately, no one tried stopping Leon or Anzu until they approached the gatehouse. Even then, a quick flash of Leon's Heaven's Eye ID got him through the gate. Ten minutes later, Anzu had been left in the palace stables and Leon was walking through the front gates of the palace.

Immediately, Leon could tell that something was up in the palace. Even in the main entrance hall, people were rushing from one place to another with an urgency that Leon had only seen following Trajan's death. He didn't stop to try and listen in to any conversations, though, and simply flashed his ID again to the guards at the door and made his way to Minerva's office.

Upon arrival at his destination, he found the halls and rooms surrounding Minerva's office packed with knights from Trajan's retinue, nearly all of them armed and armored as if expecting that someone would try to storm their small section of the palace.

These knights parted to allow Leon in his distinctive black armor to pass, and he reached Minerva's office without difficulty. He found the knightess behind what had once been Trajan's desk with all the remaining sixth-tier knights in Trajan's retinue in the office as well.

"Finally, we're all here," Minerva said once Leon closed the door behind him.

"What's going on?" Leon asked.

"Dozens of August's retainers have been arrested over the past day alone," Minerva explained, and no one in the room so much as blinked at her lack of formality when speaking August's name. "It should be obvious that someone's making a move, and it's undoubtedly Octavius. We don't know who might be next, so I wanted everyone ready to resist."

"If someone comes to arrest us, we're going to resist?" Leon asked, his question dripping with both anticipation and apprehension. Arrests could always be walked back, and charges dropped, but actively fighting against anyone who would come to arrest them would be rebellion.

"They're not going to take any of us," Minerva declared, her sharp eyes sweeping over the rest of the knights in the office. "Octavius and Earthshaker killed Prince Trajan, they won't get any more of us!"

Leon gave her a skeptical look, as did many of the other knights in the room. If things did get violent, then people would die on both sides. It was effectively impossible to follow through on her declaration, but it was the sentiment that counted, and it was at least well-received by the majority of the remaining command staff of Trajan's retinue.

Before anyone else could add their voices to hers, a messenger burst in through the door and cried out, "Prince August has been arrested!"

Chapter 375: A Prince's Arrest

August couldn't keep the scowl off his face as he leaned back in his chair and stared out of his window. Behind him in his office sat Roland, the Brimstone Paladin, and about half a dozen others in his retinue. Everyone was silent as they waited on August to speak.

After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, August finally bitterly asked, "No sign of him?"

"None, Your Highness," Roland responded.

August uncontrollably grimaced, and it took him a few seconds to regain control over his face.

"That's a shame," he muttered as his facial muscles settled back into something resembling his normal expression. "Justin Isynos never struck me as the type that would cut and run when things got hot..."

"Your Highness, he may have gained enough of the King's confidence to be made Exarch of Calabria, but in the end, he's still a foreigner," one of August's aides said. "There's little to stop him from abandoning this Kingdom if he feels it no longer welcomes him..."

"That hardly explains how he knew about the warrant out for his arrest before the High Arbiter's agents arrived to take him in," Brimstone added with a frown almost as deep as August's had just been.

"Is there something about these matters that you find suspicious?" Roland asked.

Brimstone practically rolled his eyes. "There was *nothing* at his home, not a discarded article of clothing, not a single piece of furniture, not even a few wheat grains left behind in his pantry! He clearly had enough time to quickly pack up and leave, indicating that he was either not planning on staying with us in the first place, or he had enough of an advance warning that he should've said something to us in the first place! Maybe he's even been involved in all the other arrests that have been taking place, and he's just using this as a cover while he talks to Octavius behind our backs! Whatever the case may be, he clearly had the opportunity to work with us on this problem and chose not to do so. Of course, I find that suspicious, not to mention infuriating!"

"Regardless, he's gone," August interrupted before things got too off-topic. "Justin Isynos is gone. Dozens of others are gone, too, arrested on various charges. How do we handle this? Those people weren't highly ranked, but they still handled important functions. We need to replace them as soon as we can, or we need to get those charges levied against them dropped."

"That won't be so easy, Your Highness," one of August's stewards said. "These charges come directly from the High Arbiter. She won't drop these charges for anything. This will go to trial unless our people reach some plea deal where they admit wrong-doing. Either way, this is going to greatly damage our cause."

August sighed, knowing that he was right. None of those arrested had been noble—so far—so they couldn't even lean on that side of things to lessen the impact. Octavius had taken a huge chunk out of August's bureaucratic apparatus and it would be months before it could recover. With Trajan gone, August didn't have months to spare.

"Your Highness," Roland hesitantly began. "I... I believe that we may need to consider leaving the capital..."

“What?!” Brimstone shouted, his disbelief echoed in the faces and shocked mutterings of the other stewards. “We can’t do that!” Brimstone continued. “We might as well abandon the entire Kingdom if we abandon the capital! Just let Octavius roll back the centuries of progress that this Kingdom has made in breaking the power of the nobility! All the work we’ve done to protect the institutions of this Kingdom would be undone!”

“I’m not sure we have much of a choice,” Roland said as calmly as he was able to. “Your Highness, without Prince Trajan, we simply don’t have the support in the capital to ensure your safety, especially with Octavius taking the opportunity to strike and remove so many of your supporters. It may not be the best or the most desirable option, but I believe that at this point, the only way we’re going to win this struggle is by force of arms. As much as it pains me to admit this, I think that Octavius has outplayed us here, and we would be better served in the Eastern Territories, where you can consolidate your supporters and prepare for the inevitable.”

“And what *is* inevitable?” one of the other stewards angrily asked Roland.

“War,” the sixth-tier Paladin replied. “War is inevitable. Octavius has too much support for us to win, at least unless we were able to securely win the support of the high officials and more individual Legions—neither of which I think will happen without Prince Trajan in our corner. Already, there are delays in reports coming in from the East that I can only assume are signs that support for us is waning without Prince Trajan.”

“How are things in the North?” August suddenly asked.

“Not looking too bright there, Your Highness,” August’s first steward answered. “Sir Clovis still refuses to pledge loyalty to you, but he at least hasn’t declared for Prince Octavius, either. Most of the nobles in the western portions of the Northern Territories have pledged themselves to Octavius, but given how poor and sparsely populated those regions are, there isn’t much of a reason to concern ourselves with them.”

“What about Teira?” Brimstone asked.

“Still in complete political turmoil,” the steward replied.

“*Turmoil?*” August asked. “I didn’t realize things were that bad up there...”

“As far as the commoners are concerned, things *aren’t* that bad,” the steward explained. “However, ever since the fall of House Raime, the other noble Houses in the region have been trying to press whatever claim they have on the city that they can come up with. The Exarch stationed there has been able to keep the violence from spilling out into the streets, but there has been a spike in assassinations that have left the city’s bureaucracy hollowed out. The local nobility is far too wrapped up in trying to claim the legacy of House Raime to worry about the Kingdom’s politics.”

August frowned. He wanted nothing more than to march Leon right up to Argent Palace, make his identity known, and settle that whole thing immediately. Doing so would probably even bring the rest of the Northern Territories in line, perhaps even winning Sir Clovis’ support. However, August knew from his meeting with Leon that such an act would bring him absolutely nothing. With Leon’s connections with Heaven’s Eye, August couldn’t imprison him—not that he wanted to in the first place—and Leon would just disappear if August were to reveal his identity.

‘Actually, doing so wouldn’t bring me nothing—nothing would actually be preferable—it would bring me more embarrassment than I could handle...’ August bitterly thought to himself. The Prince momentarily thought about simply giving up on the Northern Territories, but he couldn’t do that, not when he’d increased the number of Legions there to twelve.

As August was contemplating how he ought to respond to these losses, the sound of shouting leaked through the door. Given the room’s sound-proofing wards, the shouting had to be *loud* to leak through, and it quickly drew the attention of the office’s occupants.

“What is—” Brimstone began, but before he could finish the thought, the door burst open and the Sapphire Paladin walked right on in. She was dressed in dark blue trimmed in gold, tight pants that accentuated the shape of her legs, a modestly cut but loose-fitting shirt, and sported an almost murderous glare that filled the entire room with her immense killing intent. Only the Brimstone Paladin could fight it off quickly enough to stand, but Sapphire didn’t simply stand in the doorway; she sauntered in with more than a dozen fifth and sixth-tier Legion knights at her back, and from the sounds of it, even more soldiers just outside the office.

“Prince August,” she formally declared, locking eyes with the Prince in question, “you are under arrest for the murder of Prince Trajan.”

“*What?!*” August shouted, his shock and anger at the words that had just passed Sapphire’s lips freeing him from the fearful freezing effect of her killing intent.

“What is the *meaning* of this?!” Roland shouted as he rose to his feet and began to channel his magic power.

“It is exactly as it sounds,” Sapphire hatefully spat. “Prince August has been indicted by the office of the High Arbiter for his connection to the murder of Prince Trajan. He will be confined to his living quarters until the trial date.”

“Those charges are nothing but slander!” Brimstone roared as a long two-handed blade appeared in his right hand, though he held it as easily as he would a butter knife.

“Then that will be proven in court,” Sapphire replied, a smile playing at her lips as she regarded Brimstone’s implied threat. She didn’t bother retrieving her own weapon from her soul realm, but the same could not be said for the rest of the knights at her back, who immediately armed themselves with an eclectic collection of weaponry. Some bore more conventional weapons, like swords, daggers, and hatchets, but a couple with less battle experience than their power would suggest had larger axes, one had a halberd, and one eccentric even had a swordstaff.

“Put down your weapon,” Sapphire commanded Brimstone. “I don’t want to have to kill a fellow Paladin, but if you give me no choice, then I will.” Brimstone still refused to lower his weapon, and killing intent began to roll off him, causing the blades of Sapphire’s companions to begin to sway in uncertainty. “This arrest order comes from the High Arbiter herself,” Sapphire repeated. “If you get in the way of justice being served, then you will be considered complicit and slain where you stand.”

Roland stood up to join Brimstone, but the stewards that were in the office remained seated, varying levels of fear on their faces. They were bureaucrats, and though most of them had relatively great magical power, they were not warriors by any means. If Roland and Brimstone were to resist this, then

they would be fighting alone, and they both knew it. Still, neither backed down, and Roland even retrieved his own sword and silver armor from his soul realm.

Sapphire gave her two fellow Paladins a shallow smile, and her aura spiked as she called upon her power. Brimstone and Roland did likewise, but before any violence could break out, everyone was stopped by a quiet voice saying, "Stop."

Everyone froze, though their auras were still raging; a fight could break out at any moment. Slowly, all eyes in the room turned toward August, save for Roland and Brimstone, who chose to keep their eyes firmly fixed on Sapphire, and 'looked' at August through their magic senses.

"Stop," August said to his two Paladins. "There is to be no fighting in the Royal Palace."

"It's good to see you have the sense to surrender when you've lost," Sapphire said, her tone still tense and angry, though with an undercurrent of mockery and smug pride. "A shame your sense didn't stop you before you ordered the death of your own uncle."

"You—" Brimstone began as he took a step toward Sapphire, but he was stopped again by August.

"I said stop!" the Prince shouted at his Paladin, finally drawing Brimstone's eyes and full attention. "I would not see blood spilled here!" the Prince said again. "If this is how it's going to be, then this is how it's going to be. Roland, Saturnius, please stand down. I trust your judgment, and I leave things in your more than capable hands."

With that, and to the shock of his watching stewards, August calmly walked forward and presented himself to the Sapphire Paladin.

"I will surrender to you. Is there a need for restraints?"

Sapphire smiled at the Prince, and August was almost convinced that she was going to say yes. However, she simply said, "If Your Highness will come quietly, then I don't see why there would be a need for that..."

"Thank you," August said with genuine gratitude. He expected that Octavius would've preferred he be dragged out of his office bound in dozens of feet of chains, but at least the Sapphire Paladin would allow him this one scrap of dignity.

"Then let's go," Sapphire said, holding her hand toward the door in a clear indication that August would have to go first.

August spared his people one last glance, but he remained stoic and gave away none of the tumultuous shock and anxiety that was twisting his stomach into knots. He simply gave them all one last nod before departing from his office. Sapphire and her entourage closely followed, with Sapphire being the last woman out of the door so she could keep an eye on Roland and Brimstone.

As soon as they were gone, the office descended into stunned silence. They knew that this meant it was over, that they had lost. It would've been one thing if Octavius had personally sent over his people—which he technically hadn't as Sapphire wasn't his direct subordinate—but these knights had come under orders from the High Arbiter. With her name backing Prince August's arrest order, they couldn't reasonably do anything without being branded as traitors.

“What...” Roland quietly began, not knowing what to do or say. “What... do we do now?”

Chapter 376: Fallout

The entire office was quiet as the grave as they processed what the messenger had just relayed to them: Prince August had been arrested.

After a beat, Minerva rose to her feet and said half with anger and half with disbelief, “WHAT?!”

Her sixth-tier aura crashed down upon the second-tier messenger, and he almost found himself kissing the floor from its weight, and the auras of the rest of the knights in the room weren’t helping. However, he was one of Trajan’s own knights, and so he managed to stay on his feet, if barely.

“Just... just a few... minutes... ago!” he struggled to say.

Minerva just stared at him for a second or two more until she realized what she was doing and retracted her aura. Fortunately, the rest of the knights also lifted the pressure they were inadvertently exerting upon the messenger at about the same time.

“Explain!” Minerva succinctly demanded.

“The Sapphire Paladin showed up at his office about half an hour ago!” the messenger desperately said, almost tripping over his words in his rush. “She declared to everyone around that Prince August was being arrested for the murder of Prince Trajan!”

The news stunned the entire room. Jaws hung open, eyes went wide, and no one, not even Minerva or Leon, said a word.

After a moment, Minerva immediately made for the door, with Leon and the rest of Trajan’s remaining sixth-tier knights behind her. They wound their way through the palace making for Prince August’s office. Each one of them had murder in their eyes, and their killing intent alone practically left frost on the walls of their path. No one got in their way, not even the guards. The news was still making its way around the palace, but even those who hadn’t yet heard weren’t going to stand in the way of almost a dozen murderous sixth-tier knights when they looked like they were on the warpath.

That being said, many Royal Guards in the palace took notice, and if violence broke out, they readied themselves to put a stop to it.

Their journey slowed as they neared August’s office. Those close enough to hear or to see everything that had happened firsthand had congregated around the office to gawk, though it had been long enough that the crowds were starting to disperse, either to go home early or to return to work. Regardless, those who were still gathered around August’s office were little more than magically weak bureaucrats, and they couldn’t get out of Minerva, Leon, and the other’s way fast enough.

Their group was only stopped in the atrium outside of August’s office where his assistants and secretaries worked, none of whom were still at their desks. Only Roland and a few of his personal knights stood guard in the room. Leon recognized one of the knights as Dame Sheira, one of the knights who had come north during Roland’s search for Heartwood Amber, but he was in no mood for reunions, or even to speak.

“What happened?” Minerva demanded as she closed the distance with Roland. The Paladin had seen her and the rest coming, but their combined killing intent was so intense that even he hesitated before calling out to them, resulting in Minerva asking the first question.

“Prince August was placed under house arrest,” Roland said, quickly fighting off the fear the killing intent instilled in him.

“Why?!” Minerva continued, wanting to hear it from Roland and not just a messenger.

“He was *accused* of killing Prince Trajan,” Roland answered, “but we both know that’s not true, don’t we?”

The Paladin gave Minerva a knowing look, but she grimaced in response and seized a handful of his shirt. “Inside,” she growled, dragging him into Prince August’s office. For his part, Roland let this happen. Minerva still had command of two thousand of the finest—and nominally politically neutral—knights in the capital, and that was a force that couldn’t be ignored.

Leon and a couple other knights followed, including Dame Sheira, who gave Leon a quick nod of acknowledgment that Leon reluctantly returned.

As soon as everyone was in August’s office, Leon closed the door and Minerva asked Roland with a tone that could freeze an erupting volcano in seconds, “What in the name of all the Ancestors happened?”

Roland’s face twisted in frustration and anger as he relayed to Minerva what had happened, how Sapphire had burst in and declared that August was being arrested by the order of the High Arbiter and how he and Brimstone almost decided to fight the knights sent to carry out the arrest warrant.

Once his story was finished, he waited for Minerva to respond. However, what followed was an awkward silence as Minerva closed her eyes to think over what this would mean and how it would affect the matters that she cared about. On the one hand, it would prevent civil war if August were to be arrested and convicted, but on the other, Trajan’s real killers would get away.

After minutes of silence, Minerva opened her eyes to glare at Roland, and said, “We’ll speak of this later.” She then led Leon back outside and the rest of her knights back to Trajan’s old office. Roland didn’t try to stop them, and the knights moved without a word.

Their meeting resumed once they were back in the office and the door was closed, but now, the topic had moved from how to respond to August’s people being arrested to how to respond to August himself being arrested. The former could be recovered from, but the latter was a crippling blow to August’s efforts to claim the throne, and since they had tied their wagon to his, August’s arrest left them in a terrible position.

“So... what now?” one of the younger of the sixth-tier knights asked the group once the facts were laid out.

“It seems clear to me that Octavius has won,” another said. “There’s little point in supporting August now, he’ll likely be getting a one-way trip to the headsman’s block in the next couple of weeks, as I can’t imagine the trial for something like this will wait long.”

"We can't let that happen!" a third knight passionately protested. "If we lose Prince August, then those who murdered Prince Trajan will be left unchallenged!"

"What if August really *was* responsible, though?" a fourth knight asked, an expression of doubt and uncertainty on his face. "We don't know anything for certain, all we have is the word of a ghost that it was the Earthshaker Paladin that killed Trajan. We quite literally don't know *anything* else!"

"Exactly," agreed a fifth knight. "If this order truly comes from the High Arbiter herself, then surely they must have *something* on August if they're willing to arrest him after so quick an investigation."

"I don't trust this," Minerva disagreed. "We all know that Octavius has been stymied at nearly every turn by either Trajan or August, and now, in a matter of weeks, both Princes have been taken out of commission. Let's make things clear; Earthshaker is Octavius' maternal uncle, he would never support August's claim to the throne, and what's more, he'd never work with Trajan on anything, they hated each other far too much. Trajan and August were close, and Trajan's support for August never faltered—there was never any cause for August to have Trajan assassinated. However, Octavius benefits greatly with Trajan gone, even more so if he can blame August for the deed, which it seems to me he somehow managed to do."

"Trajan helped August to awaken his blood," Leon softly stated, adding his voice to Minerva's. "Neither would harm the other. This is Octavius' work, with the Earthshaker and Sapphire Paladins as his tools."

Many of the other knights nodded their heads in agreement with Minerva and Leon, but a couple were still hesitant and clearly full of doubt. Minerva and Leon both commanded their fair share of respect within the retinue, but the High Arbiter wasn't a woman so easily dismissed. If she felt it necessary to arrest August, then it would be incredibly difficult to argue against that decision until the trial began.

"So... we're still going to support August?" a knight asked.

"I think we should," Minerva replied. "However, we shouldn't come right out with it, we still need to keep our heads down until the right moment."

"We can't let him lose his head," Leon said.

"We won't..." Minerva said, a dark look on her face.

It took only a little bit more convincing, but the rest of the knights whose resolve had wavered with this nearly-cataclysmic setback were mollified, at least for the time being, and the retinue remained on course. The meeting was ended, and the knights left to see to their own subordinates, leaving Minerva and Leon alone in the office.

"What are you going to do?" Minerva asked Leon. Even now, he still didn't have any official position in the retinue, with Minerva seeing more use coming from him as a loose agent rather than a member with a formal command, even if he acted as her *de facto* second-in-command. He was still only a twenty-year-old kid, and, in her opinion at least, he would be better utilized for his power and ferocity in battle and for his name recognition in Trajan's retinue rather than planning and leading other knights or any tactical insights he may have. To that end, Leon was the freest person in the entire retinue—a member without a doubt, but one with few responsibilities and a great deal of autonomy, and so long as Minerva was in charge, that wasn't going to change.

"I don't know," Leon said. Even without any formal position to fill, he wasn't able to act as decisively as he wanted. "If it were up to me, I'd put my blade through the Earthshaker Paladin's heart after he goes to sleep tonight, but I'd warrant you don't want me doing something like that?"

"Ancestors no!" Minerva cried. "That would be foolish and reckless, and if it *has* to be done, then we'd be doing it as a retinue! Killing that cretin is not a pleasure for you to enjoy alone, and neither is it something that I think any one knight in this Kingdom is even capable of without help!"

Leon, despite this refusal, couldn't help but smile. It wasn't the act itself that Minerva had a problem with, it was how sudden it was and that he wanted to do it alone that she argued against, though he had to admit that her succinct statement about how realistic it was was hard to argue with.

"In that case, I think I'll go and speak with Elise and Emilie. I don't think there's anything either can do for us in this situation given Heaven's Eye's usual position regarding local politics, but it can't hurt to ask."

"That might actually help, you should do that instead of something doomed to fail," Minerva responded.

"How about you? What are you going to do?"

"I need to speak with all the other knights," she responded. "The other sixth-tier knights will do their part, we can count on that, but keeping this retinue together without the resources of a Prince isn't an easy thing to do. I can't pay them as well as Trajan could, so I have to keep them going with promises of vengeance and backpay when August is made King. Now that August has been arrested, I think most of my time will be spent simply keeping all of us together."

Leon nodded in sympathy. "... Need any help with that..." he hesitantly asked. With his rather lacking social skills, he doubted he could be of any assistance, but he had to ask anyway; waiting at home for things to happen that he couldn't respond to was truly grating.

"No, I don't think that's a good idea," Minerva said with a sarcastic smile. "We need the retinue to stick together, and if you're the one speaking to them, I don't think that we'll inspire the kind of confidence that we'll need to keep everyone united."

"I wouldn't bet against that," Leon smiled self-deprecatingly. "On that note, I should get going."

"Right. Can we still use your villa as a place to meet?" Minerva asked, not wanting to impose. Leon had agreed to do this for her before, but she hadn't invoked the agreement in the weeks since, so she needed to know that it was still on the table before she brought anyone around. "It's still the most secure place I know of that isn't in the Royal Palace, and that makes it an ideal place to meet with people in private."

"Feel free, just try to let me know ahead of time," Leon said.

With that, he departed the office, then the palace itself. There was nothing for him to do there anymore, and so he retrieved Anzu from the stables and made his way back across the bridge.

Again, despite everything, he couldn't help but feel a rush of excitement as Anzu took off with Leon strapped into the griffin's powerful back. Anzu was large enough that even fully armored, Leon didn't even weigh a fifth of what the griffin did, which made carrying him terribly easy for the albino griffin.

Anzu's pure white wings beat, summoning great gusts of wind that carried him and his rider into the sky and over the noble district below. The Heaven's Eye Tower could be easily seen in the distance, and Leon steered Anzu in its direction. At the speed that Anzu flew, they arrived in a matter of minutes, where Leon was once more forced to leave Anzu in the nearby stables. Fortunately, with his connection to Elise, Anzu was at least led to much nicer stables than he'd been in at the palace, where he'd been forced to wait in a cell built to accommodate a horse where he couldn't even stretch his wings properly.

However, once Leon walked inside the Tower, he was informed by the attendant that came forward to help him that Elise had already gone home for the day, despite it being barely noon.

What was more, she had been accompanied by Valeria Isynos.

Chapter 377: The Suspended Guard

When Leon heard that Elise had left the Heaven's Eye Tower with Valeria, he immediately turned around and left. He'd gone there to speak with his lady and with Emilie, but the news of Elise being with Valeria instantly superseded that business. It's not like he was expecting any assistance from Heaven's Eye regarding the current politics of the Bull Kingdom, anyway, but the idea of Elise spending time alone with Justin Isynos' daughter mere days after he disappeared greatly troubled him.

His head cleared a bit as he retrieved Anzu and began the rapid flight home. Valeria was Elise's friend, and despite her familial connections, he remained skeptical that Valeria herself was involved at all with the business that had left his family ruined. Still, it was better not to take any chances, and he urged Anzu to go faster as they flew over the noble district. Anzu responded with a joyful high-pitched cry and flapped his wings harder, his wind magic carrying Leon and himself at such a swift speed that they landed in Leon's front yard barely even five minutes after taking off from the square around the Heaven's Eye Tower's front door.

If anyone else had done what Leon and Anzu had just done, namely bypassing the front gate of the villa's outer wall by flying or jumping, the villa's defenses would've activated and hit them with enough lightning to fry an elephant several times over. However, Leon had taken a blood sample from both himself and Anzu and added them to the enchantments that defended the villa. The enchantments thus recognized them as friends, and the defenses were not activated. The only other people who could possibly enter the villa from above were Elise and Naiad, since Leon had used their blood in his enchanting work as well.

When they landed, Leon leaped off Anzu's back and hurried toward the door without bothering to return Anzu to his stable. Anzu was happy with the arrangement and sprawled out on the grass, though Leon's anxious attitude had the griffin's eyes following him as he made his way through Elise's gardens toward the front door.

However, before he reached the villa proper, the door opened to reveal Elise, smiling at Leon's return but also clearly a bit worried about something from the way her brow had furrowed. Leon relaxed seeing his girlfriend physically fine, but he ran over anyway and took her into his arms in a brief hug.

"We have a guest," Elise breathed into his ear as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Valeria?" he asked.

“Yes,” she confirmed with a tone of mild surprise.

“I came from the Tower,” Leon explained, and Elise nodded in understanding. She then turned around and let Leon inside.

What Leon found himself looking at was far from what he had feared, or even from what he’d expected. He’d feared that Justin Isynos had found out who he was and sent Valeria to do something to Elise to strike at him. On the other hand, he’d expected Valeria to simply be spending some time with a good friend while she had some time.

What he found instead was the silver-haired woman sitting at his dining table with her head resting face-down on her arms which had been folded over themselves on the table. Her hair was disheveled and splayed out over her arms and shoulders, completely concealing her face, and her dark blue and silver clothing was wrinkled and not entirely put on correctly, revealing far more of her shoulders, upper chest, and thighs than her shirt and skirt otherwise would’ve.

As Leon walked in, Valeria slowly raised her head off her arms and looked him over. Her eyes were unfocused and bloodshot, and she was rapidly blinking as if she couldn’t quite see straight. Her face was covered in tear streaks and what little make-up she wore on her lips and around her eyes had smudged.

She looked like a mess, to put it simply, and it took Leon completely by surprise. He glanced over his shoulder at Elise with a questioning look, but she brushed past him to sit back down at the table and take one of Valeria’s hands into her own, getting Valeria’s attention as she did so.

Usually, Valeria was impeccably well-dressed and perfectly groomed, with her hair either in a single braid or a loose ponytail, which combined with her stoic and taciturn nature to give her a great air of dignity and poise. This was such a departure that all hostility Leon may have felt vanished in the space of a single heartbeat, and he quietly returned the armor and sword he’d equipped when he left his villa not long ago back into his soul realm.

Leon stood there in the doorway not quite sure what to do with himself. Valeria was clearly going through something, and he had no idea how to *feel*, let alone how to conduct himself at this point. He occupied himself for a moment glancing out of a nearby window to make sure Anzu was fine, and when he saw his griffin lounging in the grass, he turned back to the ladies and, with a quiet, but deep sigh, he walked over and joined them at the dining table.

As he sat down, Valeria’s eyes turned back to him and he finally saw some recognition in those deep blue sapphires. She seemed to panic a bit and did her best to pat down her hair into something a bit more presentable than the tangled mess it had become, but she swayed in her seat and she failed to tame the silver jungle. After a couple quick moments, she simply gave up and nervously smiled at Elise.

“How are you doing?” her red-haired friend asked. “Feeling a bit better now?”

Valeria took a couple seconds to respond as she cleared her throat and blinked her eyes clear, but then she quietly nodded.

Leon gave both ladies a questioning look. If he didn’t know any better, he’d have said that Valeria looked drunk, but she was a fourth-tier mage and alcohol had little effect upon her...

"I found our friend here at the Heaven's Eye bar," Elise explained, immediately banishing those thoughts from Leon's head.

"You... must've gotten into some strong stuff, then," Leon awkwardly said as his brain locked up on what to talk about.

"My... um... my father is missing..." Valeria explained, and Elise pulled her a bit closer so she could wrap an arm around her silver-haired friend's shoulders for comfort.

Leon nodded in sudden understanding. He was a bit of a mess after Artorias had died, and though Justin didn't seem to be dead, he could at least empathize with what Valeria was feeling right now with her father suddenly disappearing.

"I was... also..." Valeria tried to explain, but her voice caught in her throat and a few tears fell from her eyes. Elise rubbed her shoulders and whispered a few consoling words to her, and Valeria quickly pulled herself together enough to finish her sentence. "I... was also suspended... from the Royal Guard... And my knighthood might be taken from me!"

"Ahh... my sympathies..." Leon muttered as understandingly as he possibly could, which wasn't much and even came out a bit sarcastic as a result. Fortunately, Valeria was a bit too drunk to notice, let alone take offence. She'd lost her father, her job, and her status all in a matter of days. She was one of the most composed people he'd ever met, but that much loss, especially in such a short period of time, could make anyone crack.

"It's going to be all right," Elise whispered to her still relatively drunk friend. "We're here for you, you've still got us."

Leon kept his face as impassive as he could, but inside he couldn't help but grimace. He didn't really want to be 'there' for Valeria, but he didn't want her as his enemy, either. There was still a part of him that liked her—in a non-romantic way—and if they could be friends, he felt like he could probably live with it. In another life, he could easily see them being great friends, or even something more, but after what happened with Artorias and what he had learned about the fall of his House, he just didn't see it happening.

And so, when Elise looked to him to say some comforting words, he found himself unable, and he remained silent even as her expectant gaze turned upset and angry.

[Leon,] whispered Xaphan from his soul realm.

Leon's eyebrows shot up in momentary surprise at the demon's sudden greeting.

[What is it?] he responded.

[Do you still like this girl?] Xaphan asked, his tone oddly neutral and lacking even a hint of mockery.

[No!] Leon emphatically declared. [What makes you even think so?!]

[Well, that over the top reaction definitely does,] Xaphan replied, momentarily letting his tone turn a little less serious. However, before Leon could reply, the demon continued, [I'm just saying, she's still drunk right now. Will there ever be a better time to ask her questions? There's a good chance that she won't remember anything you talk about tomorrow morning...]

Leon frowned slightly as he thought about that possibility. With Valeria in her current state, there was also the possibility that she'd be more open to further questions, but if Leon were to ask, then he'd be taking quite the risk. There was no guarantee that Valeria wouldn't remember the questions asked of her, and Leon didn't think he'd be up to killing her, his own insistence that he didn't like her notwithstanding. She could even guess who he was if he wasn't careful with what he asked.

But the possibility that he could glean a few extra details from her right now was very appealing. *How* to ask the questions, though, was another matter entirely. Leon decided to think about it while talking about something else for the moment.

"Prince August has been arrested," he said without any preamble or preparation.

Elise's head whipped around to look at him in shock, but Valeria was still stuck in her own world, and her head came back to rest on the table.

"What?!" Elise replied.

"A little over an hour ago," Leon explained. "Apparently on charges of killing Prince Trajan. I think that the reason Justin Isynos may have fled the capital was to escape similar charges..."

At the mention of her father, Valeria looked up again and began trying to blink some of the blariness out of her eyes. She clearly understood what Leon was saying because she stared at him for a few moments before grabbing a nearby glass of water and downing the entire thing.

"What... what was that?" she asked.

"I was told about Justin Isynos' disappearance just before August was arrested. Many of August's other subordinates have been arrested in recent days, and I think it's safe to say that Lord Isynos may have been on that list."

"No..." Valeria whispered. "No, my father would never be involved in something like that..."

It sounded to Leon and Elise like just something that any young woman would say in defense of her father, but if what Leon suspected about Justin was true, then slaying a member of the Royal Family was hardly something he'd be unwilling to do. However, Leon had to admit that if he were in Justin's shoes, trying to have a Prince killed would be an exceptionally stupid thing to do, as it would draw a ton of unnecessary attention and had the potential to backfire terribly. Or at least, it would if he were operating on the assumption that Justin was still intending to be a public actor. If Justin was doing away with his cover, then it wouldn't really matter what he did, though Leon failed to see how murdering Prince Trajan benefitted the man in any way. Adding onto that, Justin had left his daughter behind, so he doubted the man was simply abandoning his public persona.

He could easily see Justin being involved, but in this case, Leon agreed with Valeria and thought that Justin likely wasn't involved in Trajan's murder.

"I don't think he did, either," Leon said, drawing a curious look from Elise and one of gratitude from Valeria. "The general consensus between myself, Dame Minerva, and August's own staff is that Octavius was to blame for Trajan's assassination. I don't think that Lord Justin had anything to do with Octavius, not when he was working so closely under August."

"He didn't!" Valeria insisted. "My father would've told me if he were doing something like that! He wouldn't just leave... he wouldn't just leave me here if he was..."

"Does your father keep you in the loop regarding his actions under normal conditions?" Leon asked, trying to phrase the question as inoffensively as he could. He didn't want to be too obvious that he wanted information on Justin, but he also couldn't just let this opportunity go.

"U-usually..." Valeria said, but her tone wasn't at all convincing.

"How about the rest of your family?" Leon inquired as neutrally as he could. "Do you have much knowledge of what the rest of your family is involved in?"

The moment the question was out of his mouth, he realized that it had been a mistake. Valeria's eyes immediately grew angry, and even Elise's eyes took on a hard edge as she glared at Leon. Still, Valeria seemed to feel the need to respond.

"My family wasn't involved in any of this!" she shouted.

"Leon, maybe we should change the subject?" Elise suggested, but the look in her eyes made it clear that it wasn't a suggestion.

Leon almost agreed. He came so very close to letting the matter go. However, as he looked at Valeria, who seemed about ready to tear into him if he were to insinuate at all that her family was doing anything abhorrent or criminal, he decided to do something reckless and possibly incredibly stupid.

"I... don't like asking these questions," he admitted, "and I'm certainly not asking on behalf of anyone else. It's just... there are things that I want to know for my own peace of mind."

"What do you mean?!" Valeria asked, still angry and ready to drunkenly challenge Leon to a duel to maintain her family's honor if she had to.

"I remember telling you that I met one of your clansmen in the Northern Vales, a certain 'Adrianos Isynos'. Do you remember this?"

Valeria's eyes widened a bit in recognition, and her anger seemed to cool a little with that remembrance. Elise, meanwhile, stayed quiet as she listened. She didn't want to upset her friend when Valeria was in such a state, but she also wanted to know what Leon was getting at.

"I... do..." Valeria whispered. "What about him?"

"While he was in the Northern Vales, he made a terrible impression upon my father, to the point that it came to blows," Leon explained, trying to keep things vague and only telling the partial truth. "My father later died of his injuries sustained during his fight with Adrianos..."

Both Elise and Valeria's eyes went wide with that bombshell. Elise knew that Leon's father had had been killed by his and Leon's enemies, but she hadn't known that Valeria's family had been involved. However, what Leon said didn't quite match up with what he had told her about his father's death, and her glare intensified as she fought back the urge to interrupt.

Valeria, for her part, almost locked up in shock. She didn't want to believe that a member of her family was responsible for killing Leon's father, but it suddenly made his interactions with her make so much

more sense. Everything, from his initial wariness of her and the challenge he made on the first day of the Knight Academy to his increasing coldness after she confirmed that Adrianos had been affiliated with her family all became crystal clear to her, even in her not-quite-sober state of mind.

“Leon... I...” she whispered in horror. She had no idea what to say. If her own father had been killed by someone, she’d stop at nothing to gain her vengeance against the killers and everyone affiliated with them, and that Leon had suffered such a blow from an adopted member of her family wasn’t something she knew how to respond to.

“They got into an argument,” Leon explained, “I don’t know what about, I wasn’t there, but supposedly Adrianos and his companions had acted rudely to my father’s friend after the Paladin Roland had supposedly led them back south, and my father chastised them for it. I only arrived after the fight ended, when my father had already been mortally wounded.”

Elise’s eyes narrowed in suspicion; Leon was directly lying at this point, or maybe he’d lied to her when telling her about his father’s death, but she remained quiet for the moment to see where Leon was taking this. He had to have a reason, after all, he wasn’t the sort of person to just make something like this up... or so she hoped.

“I hope you don’t blame me too much for being a bit relieved when I learned that Adrianos went missing in the Vales, but I also hope you don’t blame me for being incredibly curious as to what he and those who had accompanied him were doing up there...”

Leon’s golden eyes locked onto Valeria’s and wouldn’t let her go. She couldn’t quite think straight under that pressure, even with the shock helping to rapidly sober her up.

“I don’t know...” she eventually whispered. Leon was momentarily disappointed, thinking that that was about all he was going to get out of her, but a few seconds later, she continued, “My father doesn’t tell me about things like that. He had a lot of things going on in his life, and I have my own duties to fulfill. He’s just... he has his own goals and I don’t have much to do with them.”

“What are these goals?” Leon pressed, his hands clenching up into fists as his aura began to grow chaotic and violent.

Valeria didn’t respond, still shocked as she was at this revelation.

“What could be so important that Adrianos would come back after the Paladin and the knight that he served had both left?!” Leon asked.

“I... can’t say,” Valeria muttered.

“Really?!” Leon almost shouted. He could understand it if Valeria legitimately didn’t know, as she was barely more than a child at the time, just as he was, but if she knew then he wanted her to say it. “He didn’t tell you at all what he was doing up there, not even *who* he was with?!”

“I don’t know!” Valeria shouted back. “I don’t know anything about that!”

Leon glared at her, his gaze not wavering for several long seconds. Valeria glared back, daring him to challenge her again.

In the end, Leon decided not to push it. For the time being, at least, he decided to take Valeria at face value and believe her when she said that she knew nothing. There would plenty more time for questions later, after he grew much stronger and could challenge Justin on his own.

He sighed, then whispered, "Very well. If you don't know, then you don't know."

Valeria leaned back in her chair looking almost aggrieved, but slowly, her gaze turned apologetic.

"I'm... sorry about your father," Valeria whispered. "I didn't know... I can't imagine..."

"What's done is done," Leon simply replied, his tone bringing the conversation to an abrupt end.

The three sat at the dining table in a long, awkward silence before Valeria eventually decided to try and leave to figure her situation out. She was effectively out of a job even if she was still technically a knight in the Royal Legions, and as a result she'd lost her barracks room. She also didn't want to make things complicated with Asiya by continuing to stay at her estate as she had been for the past few years, so she wanted to find someplace to stay while she decided on her next course of action.

Elise, however, wasn't about to turn her friend out on the street and offered Valeria one of their guest rooms—not the rooms that Naiad had used, however. Leon heard this offer, and even after Elise gave him a hesitant, questioning look, he didn't say anything against it. Elise took his silence to be tacit acceptance and dragged Valeria over to show her where she'd be sleeping off the remaining alcohol in her system.

Leon stayed seated at the dining table lost in thought. With everything that had been happening lately, Valeria wasn't the only person who had a situation to figure out.

Chapter 378: An Open Mind

After the heated discussion with Valeria was over, Elise took her silver-haired friend over to one of the guest rooms to let her sleep off the drink that still had a weak hold over her mind. Leon was left alone in the main living room, his mind constantly switching between thoughts of Artorias and Trajan, leaving Leon feeling deeply uncomfortable and unable to focus on anything other than his current problems.

August had been imprisoned, and that made more legal routes to revenge terribly unlikely. If things went far enough, then Leon would simply deal with the situation as he did with Tiberias, regardless of the consequences. He'd been sitting around amassing power for too long, and he was sick of the steady additions of new enemies that never seemed to stop. The Earthshaker Paladin had to die. Octavius had to die. It didn't matter how, their lives had to end, and Leon wanted nothing more than to do the honors with his own blade.

The Valeria problem, however, was one that Leon had no earthly idea how to deal with. He didn't pick up on any deceit when Valeria told him that she didn't know what her father was doing, though he figured she definitely knew more about the situation than she was letting on. Still, she had never done anything to him, at least as far as he knew, and she was one of Elise's best friends. He couldn't just slit her throat in the night even if he wanted to.

He couldn't stifle a groan, and his face fell into his hands. Things were only made worse when he remembered that Xaphan had been watching, and he could still feel the demon's attention.

[Got something to add, demon?] Leon bitterly asked.

Xaphan was silent for long enough that Leon wasn't sure he'd respond, but he did.

[... No. I understand what you're feeling. It's never easy, having a close personal connection with someone who should be your enemy. You can't just kill people like that, even though your life would be so much easier if you did.] Xaphan's tone was soft and soothing, and it took Leon completely by surprise. There wasn't so much as a hint of mockery or sarcasm in the demon's voice at all, and it struck Leon completely speechless.

[I'm not sure I believe her when she said she didn't know why Adrianos was up there. It's clear to me that they were there to kill me and my father, but...]

[Play it by ear. Keep her close, keep an eye on her. Her father will come for her, I think, so prepare for when he does. Even if she isn't directly involved, she can still be useful.]

Leon frowned in distaste. He could confront his enemy face-to-face, but there was something about what Xaphan suggested—keeping Valeria close like she was a hostage—that he wanted nothing to do with. Still, there wasn't much risk in keeping her close, so long as he took the proper precautions. Wards, armor, perhaps even a magically binding oath of the sort that Naiad imposed upon him if he were feeling particularly nasty...

'Actually, fuck that last option...' Leon thought to himself. He reveled in his personal freedoms, and he didn't think he could impose such restrictions upon anyone else, even if he had undeniable proof that they had murdered his father. He'd rather face them in battle than control them in such a way. Naïve? Perhaps. Stupid? The case for that could be made. Risky? Absolutely.

But he still didn't think he could do it.

'Well, at the very least, if she's around more, maybe she'll let something slip that I can use. Or I can build her trust enough that she tells me the truth of her own volition...'

A few minutes passed in silence as Leon contemplated these things, and Elise came back into the room. She slowly walked over to him, her expression grave and her aura heavy.

"Let's talk," she said to Leon, and she gestured toward their bedroom.

Leon nodded, rose from his seat, and followed her to the more private setting.

Once in their bedroom, Elise sat down on the edge of the bed and said, "You told me that you didn't know who the assassins who killed your father were... What's more, the story you told Val of your father's death doesn't match what you told me at all..."

Leon sighed, sat next to his lady, and said, "It does, to a certain extent."

Elise sat in silence, quietly waiting for Leon to continue his explanation. She didn't appreciate lies and falsehoods, and she didn't want to think that Leon had lied to one of her best friends just a few moments ago.

Before he continued, however, Leon projected his magic senses just to check on Valeria. She was lying down in the guest bed with a complicated expression on her face, one that he felt was likely mirrored on

his own. He'd given her quite a bit more to think about in telling her that Adrianos had killed Artorias, and that was on top of her missing father and being fired in all but name from the Royal Legions.

But he didn't think she was listening in. It was always possible that she could hear them from the other side of the villa, but he doubted it. Thus, feeling confident that their conversation would be truly private, Leon continued.

"Adrianos Isynos was one of the five assassins that attacked my home the day my father was mortally wounded," he said. "My father managed to kill all of them, but he was poisoned in the process and died the next day. I had to bury him with my own hands..."

Elise rubbed his shoulder and pulled him in closer as he said this. She knew most of these details, but that one of Valeria's clan members had been involved was not something she had heard before. Leon had never told her that particular tidbit, afraid as he was of forcing her to choose between him and Valeria. Now, though, the secret was out—for Elise, at least, since he was certain that Valeria had been successfully misled into thinking that Adrianos hadn't been targeting Artorias even if he was responsible for Artorias' death—and he could no longer kick this can down the road.

"Is this why you've been so against the idea of you and Val getting together?" she quietly asked. "It's been pretty obvious that you haven't wanted to be around her much, though you've never said why..."

"I think that her family is responsible for the fall of House Raime," Leon stated, his voice quivering a bit with anxiety as he finally laid bare his suspicions to his lady about the family of one of her closest friends. "The timeline fits, they arrived here not long after Argent Palace was destroyed and my uncle and grandfather were killed, and Justin would fit the description of the man that Naiad fought after we took care of Tiberias."

Elise frowned, not quite ready to believe it but not refuting Leon's suspicions either. She had to admit that it made some sense absent anything other than Leon's word, and she didn't think Leon was a liar when he said that Adrianos Isynos was involved in his father's death, but she just couldn't believe that Valeria was a part of any of it.

"Would you say that there's... a *possibility* that her family as a whole isn't involved... that it was just Adrianos who was to blame?" Elise hesitantly asked. When Leon gave her a questioning look, she elaborated, "At the very least, it should be clear enough that Val herself had no part in this, right?"

Leon stared at Elise for a long few seconds before admitting, "I suppose anything's possible. I can't say for certain whether her family is the enemy I seek or not, and neither can I definitively say that she had no part in what happened. *However*, I will admit that I don't think she was personally involved."

Elise nodded, knowing that that was all she was going to get out of him. Before she let the topic go, however, she still had one thing left to say.

"She likes you, you know that, right?"

Leon raised a skeptical eyebrow at his lady. "Given our circumstances, I'll take that kind of information with a grain of salt."

Elise frowned again. "I can't stop you from doing that but I would hope that you trusted me enough to believe me when I say that she *really* likes you. I would personally prefer it if you kept an open mind

regarding her situation and that of her father. You don't know if you're right, and you don't want to alienate them if you aren't.."

Leon almost rolled his eyes in disbelief, but he managed to restrain himself and ask, "Are you saying that you still want me to get together with Valeria?"

"While I can't deny that that would be my ideal outcome," Elise shamelessly admitted, "I think in this case I can forgive you if you don't want to try. But, as I said, I just want you to keep an open mind. I don't think she means you any harm."

Leon's face twisted in doubt, but he could see from Elise's deadly serious expression that this was going to be a sticking point for her.

"I make no promises for the future," Leon said. "I'll keep an open mind and I won't make assumptions, but I'm not going to trust her or her family just like that. No promises."

"That's all I ask," Elise said as she took his hand into hers. "I don't have many friends, and I cherish those that I do have. So, I don't want to see the man I love in conflict with someone else that I love. I think that would just about kill me..."

Leon didn't respond out loud, but he squeezed her hand in comfort. There was nothing he wanted less than to cause Elise any kind of pain.

They sat there on the bed for a long while, neither keeping much track of the time. They didn't speak, they didn't get sexual, they simply kept hold of each other's hand and made sure the other knew that they at least had someone.

Leon especially needed this right now, and he struggled not to tear up. He had even fewer people in his life that he trusted and liked than Elise, and he'd lost a good many of them—first Artorias, then Trajan, and then Naiad, or so it seemed in the latter case. He couldn't lose Elise, too.

Finally, after a significant but undetermined time later, Elise broke their silence.

"How was your ride with Anzu?"

"... Better than I could've hoped for," Leon murmured. He'd barely even thought about his terrible equestrian skills that entire day since so much had happened. Leon had been somewhat apprehensive about riding Anzu into battle, but now he knew without a shadow of a doubt that Anzu trusted him completely. He had no more reservations about Anzu's abilities as a mount, only about what he might do if the griffin were to be injured.

Leon and Elise fell into an awkward silence, with Leon's stressed mind almost gleefully jumping on the excuse to think about anything than what had just happened. He lost himself into almost juvenile images of himself and Anzu charging into battle, each with glittering armor that he'd enchanted to be completely untouchable. However, he was jerked back to reality a few moments later when Elise spoke up again.

"So... Prince August has been arrested?"

Leon sighed, knowing that business this important shouldn't be put off for something as asinine as childish fantasies.

"Yes," he replied. "Trajan's murder is being pinned on him."

"What are you going to do about it?" Elise asked.

"Probably kill some people," Leon honestly answered. "This involved Octavius and the Earthshaker Paladin, though, so I have to choose my moment."

"What does Dame Minerva want you to do?"

"Wait," Leon bitterly replied. "Were it up to me, I'd already have Earthshaker's head on a spike."

"You'd have *tried* to put his head on a spike, you mean," Elise countered. "He's rich and powerful, to attack him would be foolish beyond belief. Remember that he's seventh-tier and has the money and resources to turn his estate into a fortress."

"... I know," Leon reluctantly replied. "We were going to stick with August and have him bring us justice, but now that seems to be off the table..."

"I don't want you taking unnecessary risks!" Elise's tone was practically commanding; she knew what Leon was like. She went along with Tiberias' assassination because she wanted the nobleman gone and in the grand scheme of things, he was essentially insignificant. The Earthshaker Paladin was anything but, and killing him would have deadly repercussions, assuming Leon could even pull it off, which, without Naiad, she didn't honestly think he could do.

"What would you suggest I do, then?" Leon asked.

"Stick with Dame Minerva. She's smart, Trajan trusted her for a reason. Do what you need to do, but don't do anything reckless that isn't needed!" Elise pulled her hand out from Leon's, put both of her hands on his cheeks, and pulled his head around to face her. "No matter what happens, I want you to come back to me!"

That one last demand almost broke Leon. He had to clear his throat a few times and blink away the moisture in his eyes before he could respond.

"No power in the universe could take me from you," he whispered. "No matter how far apart we are, I'm yours, and you're mine."

"Good," she whispered. "That's the way it ought to be."

"On another topic," Leon said, taking both of Elise's hands back into his own, "I'm fairly sure I know the answer to this, but is there anything Heaven's Eye can do to help out?"

"No," Elise immediately responded. "Our hands are tied, this will be an internal matter. We can't do anything."

"A shame," Leon said, thoroughly unsurprised. "That's fine, I suppose. We'll just do what we have to ourselves."

"Do you have any specific ideas?" Elise asked.

"I'd have to consult with Minerva first, but I do have... *an* idea that I could use your input on..."

"What is it?"

"I told you that August requested my help, do you remember that?"

Elise nodded.

"Well, he also told me that the primary reason why he hadn't renounced his claim to avoid conflict with Octavius was because of both his mother and Princess Cristina. He's worried that they would suffer if he were to lose the struggle for the throne."

Again, Elise frowned. She wasn't familiar with August's mother, but she knew Cristina, and she was quite fond of the young Princess. Cristina wanted nothing more than to leave the harem and see the outside world, which Elise could sympathize with.

"In that vein," Leon continued, "I had an idea while we were sitting here. We have Valeria here, and we know Asiya very well. That means that we have eyes and ears in the Royal Harem, and if necessary, we could probably get those two out of the capital. If we could spring August, then we could have some leverage over him."

"I don't want to see Cristina used as a pawn!" Elise objected.

"Nor would I ever want to use her as such," Leon responded. "Perhaps my language was a bit too callous. What I meant was that we could do a favor for August, and in turn, he's indebted to us enough to follow through on his promise of justice, or at least to stay out of our way while we pursued it."

"You'd have to talk to Valeria and Asiya if you want to pull something like that off," Elise said, emphasizing that it would be Leon who would have to speak with her, "but other than that, I'm not entirely sure how practical that would be. How much would you gain if you did do that?"

"I'm not sure," Leon said. "Not much point in getting August in debt to us if he's in prison, though, but it was all I could come up with."

"If you spring him, it could technically be considered treason, especially with the security August will be held under," Elise mentioned, her hands tightening in Leon's grip. "Octavius wouldn't let him go, not after going so far to seize power. It would start a war."

"This war's been coming for years," Leon said almost dismissively. "I haven't cared much about it so far, but if it gave me the power to take on Octavius and Earthshaker, then I would start a thousand wars."

"Hmmm, would you really?" Elise asked doubtfully.

"... Well, maybe not a *thousand*, but I would do what I needed to do," Leon replied.

Elise sighed, but before she could say anything more, the villa's doorbell rang. Leon projected his magic senses and saw Minerva at the front gate with about a dozen other knights, not all of them from the retinue, accompanied by Roland and the Brimstone Paladin.

Chapter 379: Deadline

"Dame Minerva," Leon said without the slightest trace of levity as he showed his guests inside. Since this was obviously a Kingdom matter, Elise decided to leave and make her way back to the Heaven's Eye

Tower. With August arrested, there would be a great deal of upheaval in the Kingdom, and as a representative of Heaven's Eye, she had to make sure the guild was ready to deal with the repercussions.

"Sir Leon," Minerva responded just as seriously as Leon's greeting.

Roland and Brimstone repeated the terse greeting, but Leon hardly responded to them.

As they were sitting at Leon's dining table, Brimstone noticed the bowl of apples that Leon and Elise were using as the table's centerpiece.

"Hey, can I have one of these?" he asked Leon. Leon gave him a strange look, as if he were asking Brimstone why he was even asking under such serious circumstances, but the younger knight still nodded his assent a moment later. "Thanks," Brimstone said. "It's been a *long* fucking day, and it ain't even over, yet..."

With that, Brimstone gratefully grabbed an apple and took a massive bite while Leon surveyed the rest of his guests. Minerva and the Paladins sat with him at the table, as did a couple of the other knights whom Leon assumed were part of August's retinue since he didn't recognize them, even though they were sixth-tier mages. The rest of the knights stood a few feet away from the table, clearly not intending to join the conversation that was about to take place.

"So, has something happened that led you to bringing so many people to my home?" Leon asked, not wasting any more time with pointless chatter even though Brimstone's actions made it clear that his hospitality could've been better—at the very least, offering his guests a drink would've been polite.

"We wanted to speak with you, is that a problem?" Roland inquired, not bothered at all with Leon's business-like and somewhat standoffish attitude.

"Depends on the topic, I suppose," Leon replied.

"We'll try to keep it interesting, then," Brimstone said in between bites.

"Prince August's trial date has been set," Minerva said, wasting no time in getting to the point of their visit.

Leon's eyebrows shot up in surprise, and his eyes instantly went straight for the nearest clock.

"It hasn't even been three hours since his arrest," he observed. "They scheduled his trial damn fast..."

"He's a Prince accused of high treason, the Arbiters who will be presiding over the case will be clearing their schedules for the event," Roland said with a note of bitterness in his otherwise neutral voice.

"So, then, when is it?" Leon asked.

"Next week," Minerva replied. "We have that much time to come up with a defense, assuming it's even possible at this point."

"You think it isn't?" Leon could see the doubt and cynicism in Minerva's eyes, so he barely even needed to ask the question.

"They wouldn't have gone this far so quickly unless they believed they had enough to make these charges stick," Minerva said. "Obviously, they've fabricated evidence, probably getting many of August's supporters who were arrested earlier in the week to flip somehow. Regardless, I don't think things would've progressed to this point if Octavius weren't absolutely certain that he could take August out this way."

"What do you want to do about it?" Leon's aura began to intensify, making it clear enough that he was ready to fight at the drop of a hat. "We have Caecilius verifying that it was Earthshaker who murdered Prince Trajan, and he was, in all likelihood, acting on Octavius' orders."

"The word of a dead man won't be enough for the Arbiters," Brimstone said. "They're going to want a lot more than that. That means more than a single witness, that means physical evidence, that means a confession if one can be extracted. One man, no matter how powerful he was in life, is not enough to get August acquitted."

"And all of that is on the assumption that we'd be getting a fair trial, which I don't think we will," Roland added.

"I thought the High Arbiter was legendary for her fairness," Leon said.

"She won't necessarily be presiding, and even if she is, Royal trials are presided over by at least five Arbiters, often as many as nine or even thirteen," Minerva explained. "Octavius needn't corrupt the High Arbiter, he only needs to target the rest who will be assigned the case."

"He might not even need to do that," Brimstone said. "If his case is solid enough, the Arbiters would condemn August even without being corrupt. All Octavius needs is the evidence..."

"Sounds like all of you have quite a bit of this figured out, I don't see why you saw the need to come here..." Leon said with a sarcastic smile and an implication that he would like them to get to the point.

"We'd like some assurances from you..." Brimstone began, but a dark look from both Leon and Roland had the words dying in his throat before he could finish his thought.

"I think what my colleague *meant* to say," Roland said, "is that we would appreciate it if you were to aid us in our endeavors."

"I'm already working with Dame Minerva, is that not enough?" Leon asked.

"It's going to require more than just the retinue, that much is clear, I think," Minerva said. "I think what they want is for you to move out of Trajan's old retinue and into the direct service of Prince August."

Leon flashed all three of them a dangerous smile. None of them felt too intimidated, but they could feel his killing intent, and some of the other knights that had followed them to Leon's villa couldn't help but shiver in their seats.

"I don't want to be in *anyone's* direct service," Leon said quietly and slowly, enunciating every word to emphasize his seriousness.

It was a blunt refusal, and one that neither Roland nor Brimstone quite knew how to deal with. Neither had honestly thought that Leon would refuse; a period of reluctance, sure, but they thought that they

could eventually wear him down and get him on board. The way Leon made his statement, though, told them everything that they needed to know.

“What are you saying, Ursus?” Minerva asked, her tone taking on a hard edge.

“With Prince Trajan gone, what need have I to stay in this Kingdom?” Leon wondered out loud. “I have no attachment to this Kingdom, why should I linger when there’s an entire world out there for me to see? I can’t think of a good reason to stay...”

Left unsaid was Leon’s suspicion that if he were to stay in the Bull Kingdom, it would make it easier for his enemies to find him, whether that was Justin Isynos or whoever else. It would be better to leave, and he hoped that both Roland and Brimstone knew that, since they both knew his real name.

“Our goals are aligned, for now,” Leon continued as Minerva’s expression grew both worried and angry. “So long as they continue to be, then you can count on me. Until Octavius and Petrus Duronius are dead at our feet, I’ll follow all of you. After that, though... after that, I’ll likely be leaving the Kingdom. I’ll be leaving the Royal Legions for sure, at the very least.”

Roland glanced at Brimstone and Minerva who had been almost stunned into silence, sighed, and said, “Thank you for being honest, Leon. Not many people are so upfront with their intentions, these days. Would I be right in assuming that you’re holding yourself back for our sake?”

Leon cocked an eyebrow at Roland. He assumed the Paladin was talking about the fact that he hadn’t made any active moves against Octavius or Earthshaker, yet.

“You could think of it that way, I suppose,” Leon said noncommittally. “It wouldn’t be an *inaccurate* way to put things...” He was really holding himself back from doing something probably suicidal, but he was a little gratified in thinking that Roland thought him strong enough to deal with Earthshaker and Octavius on his own. If, that is, Leon was accurate in his assumption.

“Then we should move fast,” Roland said. “I would say that our own forces are as consolidated as we’re ever going to get. We need to make sure we can remain in contact with Prince August, and then we need to confirm a few things.”

“Such as...?” Minerva asked.

“You, for one,” Roland said, “or should I simply assume that you’re with us?”

“Fighting for August will get me Octavius and Earthshaker,” Minerva replied, glaring at Leon as she did. “So long as August remains true to the promise he made me, then I will remain true to him. And above all else, I will remain true to the ideals that Prince Trajan held dear.”

Leon cringed internally. He could see from Minerva’s expression that she was *not* happy about how little he cared the Bull Kingdom. Trajan had always attempted to use his power to aid the people of the Bull Kingdom, with concepts like vengeance taking a backseat to justice and benevolence. Whether or not Trajan was successful in his endeavors wasn’t for Leon to decide, but he knew that Trajan probably wouldn’t approve of his motivations for remaining in the Bull Kingdom. Leon wanted vengeance, not justice, and he was only staying the course laid out by Minerva to honor Trajan’s memory.

Shame burned in Leon's heart under Minerva's withering gaze, more shame than Leon ever thought possible, though he ignored it as best he could. It would take more than shame to make him change his mind.

"Fair enough," Roland said. "It would be best, then, if either you or Brimstone speaks with the Legates of the Legions that accompanied us east when we reinforced the Bull's Horns. They've been reassigned to the Eastern Territories, but they're still close enough to the Central Territories that they can aid us in whatever it is we decide to do."

"And you should try to get in contact with Prince August," Brimstone said. "Whatever we do must be coordinated with him, otherwise there'd be little point."

"I'll work on securing our entry and exit," Minerva said. She had more knights than the other two did—at least within the capital—and so she would fulfill the role of the muscle of their little group.

"I have my own thing I'm working on," Leon said, his attention momentarily turning toward Valeria in the guest room, still sleeping off whatever had managed to get her drunk earlier that day.

"What might that be?" Roland asked.

Leon almost didn't answer the Paladin, but he knew there wasn't much point in being secretive for its own sake.

"I'm looking into some contacts I have in the Royal Guard. Might be able to smuggle Princess Cristina out of the harem, along with her and Prince August's mother."

"Oh..." Roland muttered.

"We... didn't even think of that..." Brimstone added.

Leon could understand. Cristina and August's mother weren't politically active and stayed cooped up in the Royal harem all day. For all intents and purposes, they didn't exist according to most of the court.

"You sure you're able to get in there?" Minerva asked, her tone still short and terse after Leon's blunt admission that he wasn't going to stick with the Bull Kingdom.

"No," Leon honestly replied. "I just have a couple of friends in the guard who might be able to do something. I know they've gotten the Princess out before to watch the triumphal games, so if need be, I think we can get both ladies out of the city."

"That would be quite the balm for Prince August's nerves, I should think," Roland said. "Princess Cristina and his mother have always been his greatest concerns."

"Really?" Minerva asked with a tone dripping in sarcasm. "He doesn't ever show it."

"Of course he doesn't, why would he go wearing that sort of thing on his sleeve when he has so few friends in the capital?" Roland asked. He would've said more, but a quick glance at the clock stopped him from doing so. Rising from his seat, he said to Leon, "Thank you for your hospitality, Sir Leon. Sir Saturnius and I have a great deal of other work to do and must take our leave, but I hope to meet with you again and discuss how you might be able to assist us further, if you would be willing to do so."

"I doubt I would be, but I see little harm in sitting down to speak," Leon said, a wild look flashing across his face for the briefest of moments. He wasn't thrilled about the prospect of speaking with Roland, but since the Paladin knew his true identity and was still only of the sixth-tier, Leon figured it would be fine to at least hear the man out. It was probably only to urge him to help August's cause in the Northern Territories, anyway, and if anything were to go wrong, Leon still had Xaphan almost literally up his sleeve.

Roland nodded again, and he and Brimstone departed, pausing only for Brimstone to repeat Roland's thanks for Leon's hospitality, despite Leon's rather severe shortcomings in that department.

Minerva, however, remained in her seat, staring at Leon, looking away only to quickly order the remaining knights in the villa to wait for her outside. Leon raised an eyebrow as the knights filed out of his home, but he remained silent until they left. Minerva had a purpose for doing this, and he was going to let her begin first.

The knightess seated across from him made him wait what seemed like an eternity, as even after the other knights had left, she stared at him without a word. With how intently she stared, he couldn't take it for very long.

"Is there something you wanted to ask me, Dame Minerva?" Leon asked.

"A few new ways to stick people with sharp things... is that the only lesson you learned from Trajan?" Minerva responded. "Did His Highness not impress upon you anything more meaningful?"

Leon's stoic face twitched in a half-smile, half-frown, and he didn't know what to say.

"Are you a mercenary?" she continued, staring almost accusingly at Leon for what she saw as his lack of loyalty to Trajan's memory. "Now that he's gone, are you just going to pack and go, like any of this isn't your problem? You are, as you have stated, a Valeman, but that doesn't exempt you from the responsibilities that this Kingdom has given you. That Trajan entrusted to you."

Averting his gaze from Minerva, Leon almost cringed his bones into dust as he remembered the oath that Trajan made him swear when forgiving his rash actions in the stone giants' crater and taking him into his retinue.

"I understand the need for vengeance," Minerva said, her tone softening, "I have that same need. I want nothing more than to see Petrus Duronius strung by his own entrails. However, we can't lose sight of who we are and the ideals we stand for in the process."

Reluctantly, Leon nodded, if only to relieve some of his own discomfort at this confrontation. He knew Minerva wasn't saying that they should go easy on their enemies, but that they simply should keep in mind why Trajan did everything that he did and not to forget that in the course of their own endeavors.

"I... I will keep that in mind," Leon softly said. "I'm not going to change my mind about leaving the Bull Kingdom at some point, but I will keep this in mind..."

"That's all I ask," Minerva said as she rose from her seat and made to follow the Paladins out of Leon's home.

Leon stayed sitting at his dining table for a long time, even after Minerva left the villa, only rising to see her to the door and to shut the gate behind her and her followers. He had a lot to think about, and only two weeks to do it in, for he had to ready himself for the inevitable shit-show that was going to be August's trial.

To that end, after about an hour or so of quiet contemplation, Leon finally turned his eyes back toward Valeria in his guest room.

Chapter 380: Leon and Valeria

Leon stood in the center of his villa, not entirely sure how to proceed. Valeria was still in his guest room, but he could tell that she was awake; she was staring at the ceiling, eyes wide open, clearly thinking about something important. Given everything that had happened to her over the past few days, Leon couldn't blame her for being a bit sleepless. She'd at least gotten some sleep for a couple of hours after their previous conversation, though.

But even though she was awake, Leon didn't know how to approach her. She now knew that Adrianos Isynos had killed Artorias, even if Leon lied to her about the most damning details. He hadn't intended to let even that much slip at the time, though, and he knew that he'd have to be very careful about bringing that topic back up, just in case she connected the dots and realized who he really was.

'Or maybe I could just tell her who I am and see what she does,' Leon thought without the slightest trace of seriousness. As much as he enjoyed Valeria's presence during their time in the Knight Academy, it would take some *exceptional* circumstances for Leon to tell anyone anything about who he was or where he truly came from.

Still, it was an entertaining thing to think about. He wondered how she would react if she knew the truth. Elise claimed that Valeria liked him, but Leon doubted that that would have her choosing him over Justin. Assuming that was what he even wanted her to do.

With mounting frustration, Leon ran his hands through his hair, groaned, and made his way into the villa's meditation chamber. He sat down and cast himself deep into his soul realm. It was time to train, but Leon knew that it wasn't training that he needed right now.

Opening his eyes on his throne, Leon lightly jumped down and exited the lantern, finding Xaphan burning down below him. While working on his Mind Palace, Leon had decided to throw Xaphan a bone and converted his bare platform into a proper pavilion, first by changing the material of the platform from white stone into sparkling black granite polished almost to a mirror shine, then covered the whole platform surface with a dome supported by eight marble columns painted black on the bottom half and blood red on the top half.

Then, after expanding the area of the platform a bit to make more room for Xaphan, Leon depressed it down in the center, creating a pit where Xaphan could burn at his leisure. As a finishing touch, he placed a railing-baluster in between the columns—he didn't think Xaphan was in any danger of falling from his pavilion, and Leon figured the demon wouldn't have been injured even if he did, but it made for a pleasant aesthetic improvement with this finishing touch.

The demon was as satisfied as he could be with these measures, and he was at least a bit more comfortable than he had been. Leon didn't know how demons usually decorated their own dwellings for

comfort, and with Xaphan perpetually on fire, he had no ideas on that front, either. At the very least, Xaphan didn't complain, so Leon considered it a job well done.

Flying down to the 'fire pit' that Xaphan now perpetually sat in within his pavilion, Leon sat down in a nearby chair and asked, "So, how's it going, demon?"

Xaphan, lost in the midst of a healing meditation he entered into while Leon spoke with Elise, barely even acknowledged Leon's presence for minutes. It was a long and awkward silence, but at this point, it was one that Leon was used to. He passed the time with gazing out over the halls of his Mind Palace that he'd constructed so far.

He'd mostly finished the outer layer of the top half of his Mind Palace, with halls encircling the lower portions of his mountain. A few smaller halls were closer to the top, and space had already been set aside for small forests and gardens. Of course, aside from murals and structural decorations, the halls themselves were mostly bare and unfurnished. Only a few of the rooms actually had any furniture in them, let alone anything of particular note.

Now that all of that was done, Leon's main problem was finding something to do with all of this space, and he couldn't decide if he wanted to do that before or after he began work on the underground half of the Mind Palace. If he were to be honest, he found the idea of actually *filling* these halls and their myriad rooms with stuff to be quite daunting. There were, without exaggeration, more than a thousand rooms just in what he had constructed so far, spread out over half a dozen primary halls and more than a dozen secondary halls.

It would take him a long time to give each of these halls purpose and to fill them according to that purpose. How long, he couldn't say, but he knew that he had a lot of work ahead of him on that front.

On another note, his soul realm had grown to a diameter of almost two miles. He knew that the border for the seventh-tier was ten miles, so all else being equal, he would have about a fifth of the power reserves of the weakest of seventh-tier mages. That didn't quite translate into direct magic power and battlefield prowess, but if he and the weakest of seventh-tier mages were to have a contest of pure magical endurance, the seventh-tier mage would beat him five times over.

Xaphan's flames began to flicker and roil, and Leon allowed his attention to return to his demonic partner.

"Did... you say something, boy?" Xaphan growled with some irritation at the interruption.

"Just asking how it's going," Leon said as nonchalantly as he could manage.

"Fine on my end, slowly but surely regaining my lost power," Xaphan muttered.

"Have you been enjoying this new chamber?" Leon inquired as casually as he could.

"It serves its purpose and is far cozier than what this platform was before," Xaphan answered.

"There anything I can do to make it better? What do your dwellings out in the Void even look like?"

"I'm not entirely sure about other demonic realms, but the Plane of Fire that most Fire Demons reside upon is about what it sounds like: an entire plane made up mostly of fire," Xaphan explained. The

demon could make a guess why Leon was here, but he was willing to indulge the young human in his distraction for the moment.

"Really? How does that even work? Is there anything solid around, or is it just all fire everywhere?"

"We couldn't well exist as a civilized people if we had no tangible materials," Xaphan said as he adjusted his position to better suit the conversation; he could tell that this might be a long one, what with how Leon was fidgeting, and that he might not return to his healing meditations for a little while. "Think of it as an ocean made of fire. Fire Demons 'swim' through this ocean as a fish would through the water. Much like an ocean, the Plane of Fire has a bottom and most of the lesser demons who live there work in the mines extracting physical resources for their betters. Adding to our material wealth are a host of other lesser planes that encircle the Plane of Fire, which many of the more powerful demons will transport from other parts of the universe. Many other demons who are summoned by humans into the Nexus' sphere of influence will bring back other items and resources, and sometimes material from the Nexus will be flung off into the edges of the universe during its Reconstitution.

"To put it simply, young human, we're not as resource-poor as it may seem."

"But you still need blood and worshippers? Or is that just to satisfy lust for power?" Leon asked, finding the entire concept of demon society fascinating, despite everything else that was going on right now.

"I suppose you can think of it that way," Xaphan said as his tone turned bitter and spiteful. "Most demons have little imagination and are unable to summon the ambition to rise to the top as I did. Other worthless degenerates simply believe that no amount of power is too much, and so whore themselves out to the dregs of humanity just for a few drops of blood. Rarely do the more powerful demons do such things unless they're truly bored or their lust for power overwhelms their reason."

Leon chuckled a bit at Xaphan's fairly harsh words. He knew that his partner had a strong dislike for blood sacrifices, and he was perfectly fine with that behavior. The last thing he wanted was a greedy demon demanding worship and sacrifice. Before he could ask Xaphan any further questions, however, the demon gave him a curious look and changed the topic of conversation.

"What are you doing here, boy?" the demon asked.

Leon paused for a long moment, wondering how exactly he should phrase his current problem.

"Valeria is still in my villa," Leon said as he looked away from the demon and started to nervously fidget. "I'm not sure how to handle her, I don't know what I should feel about her, and I don't think that ignoring her as I have been is a good long-term plan..."

"You like this girl, do you not?" Xaphan asked as he had several hours before, only this time his tone was far stronger and demanded a proper answer.

"Not particularly," Leon said. "Or, at least, not in a romantic way. She's strong, driven, and enjoys a good fight as much as I do, and her looks don't hurt, either. So... I suppose I should say that I *could* like her romantically if we were to get to know each other better."

"As I recall, you had a bit of a crush on her when the two of you were in the Knight Academy..."

"A fleeting thing, gone soon after leaving for my squireship," Leon replied.

“Not in her case, I think...” Xaphan murmured as he lost himself in thought. “I once counseled you to remain distant from her for your own safety. However, you now possess a far greater amount of power, both personally and in your connections. Through me, you have even more... Perhaps it’s time to get closer to her...”

“Why would I do that?” Leon asked, though he could think of a few good reasons why getting closer to Justin’s daughter could be beneficial, if incredibly risky.

“Subvert her intentions. Play upon her affections. Get close enough to her that she willingly gives you information about her family and, if it comes to it, chooses you over her family.”

“Sure, and while I’m doing that how about I invite a snake into my home and contract a werewolf to watch over a flock of sheep...” Leon sarcastically replied, though his voice was quiet and a contemplative frown crossed his face. He didn’t like Xaphan’s idea; he wasn’t that manipulative, and neither did he want to be. Besides, manipulating Valeria as Xaphan was suggesting was far beyond what knew he was capable of, especially when looking at it from a skills perspective.

[Go slowly, then,] a voice said inside Leon’s head, and he turned around to see the Thunderbird perched on a boulder near the entrance to Xaphan’s pavilion. [Having this woman so close to you could be a great blessing, one that shouldn’t be thrown away so quickly. You can use that to seek your revenge...]

As she spoke, the Thunderbird quickly morphed into her human form clad in light golden robes and stepped into the lantern.

“You barely have any idea of who your enemy is, you don’t even know if this ‘Justin Isynos’ truly is the man responsible for your family’s death.” The Thunderbird drew closer to Leon, standing over his sitting form like a statue of a goddess towering over a temple suppliant. “Even if he was the weapon used, you don’t know how big his organization might be, where he comes from, the motivations behind his actions, or anything, really. To pass up on his daughter almost literally falling into your lap would be... unfortunate, to say the least...”

Leon groaned. He hated the idea of using Valeria like that, even if she was his enemy. Perhaps that was naïve of him, but it was just how he felt. He could stab his enemies a thousand different ways, but such deceit just didn’t sit well with him.

‘But it might not be necessary...’ Leon suddenly thought to himself. He could honestly see himself becoming close friends with Valeria given their mutual interest in enchanting work and enjoyment of battle. Neither of them were particularly social, not even very loud; Valeria was the person who was most like himself that Leon had ever met.

If they were good enough friends, he might even be able to be completely honest with her, and she might reciprocate in kind.

‘A pipe dream,’ Leon thought, almost laughing at himself for thinking of it. Still, with both Xaphan and the Thunderbird advocating for him getting closer to Valeria, Leon was hard-pressed to refuse, even if he thought it wasn’t the best idea.

“Very well, then, I’ll go and talk with her...” he said, rising to his feet. The risks that this decision came with scared the hell out of him, but there was an undeniable part of him that was also excited and thrilled at the idea.

“Best case scenario, you find yourself another wife who can add to your growing power,” Xaphan said with some pride in Leon’s choice.

“Worst case scenario, she immediately goes to her father, tells him who I am, and they murder me,” Leon countered as he made for the throne at the top of his mountain, making it clear enough without stating it outright to the Thunderbird that he wouldn’t be training this day.

Despite this, a smile crossed the Thunderbird’s bronze face, and she briefly glanced off into the mists where she could feel the other being out there watching.

‘While we’re taking risks... I might as well go take one of my own...’ she thought, ignoring Xaphan completely as she transformed back into her avian form and took flight. *‘You’d better appreciate this, boy,’* she thought to herself as Leon settled back into his throne. *‘I loathe asking other beings for help, especially this contemptuous bastard.’*

As Leon’s consciousness returned to his physical body, the Thunderbird vanished into the Mists of Chaos, leaving Xaphan alone. Rather than return to his meditations, though, Xaphan decided to stay awake for a while and see how Leon’s situation turned out. He had to admit that watching things like this was quite entertaining, and he had to restrain himself from teasing Leon as he was so fond of doing.

For his part, when Leon awoke in his meditation room, he released his magic senses and saw Valeria up and about in her guest room. She seemed to be getting ready to leave, and Leon knew he hadn’t much more time.

He left his meditation room and, with as little hesitation as he could manage, walked right to her door and gave it a loud knock. He could through his magic senses see her pause as she was getting herself more presentable and stare at the door for what felt like a long time.

“Valeria,” Leon said just loudly enough for his voice to carry through the door. “I’d like to talk, if possible. And... apologize...”

He saw her quickly pull her silver hair back into a loose ponytail, straighten out her clothes which had wrinkled while she was lying down, and stiffly walk over to the door.

As she quickly opened it, her neutral expression broke down into one of sorrow and remorse, and she said, “I’m not sure you should be the one apologizing, given what one of my family members did to your father...”

Leon closed his eyes for a moment to keep a handle on his emotions, which wasn’t that difficult under normal conditions but under these circumstances was a titanic feat, and he briefly sighed.

“I spoke too quickly, I shouldn’t have sprung that on you like that,” he whispered. “We had an amicable relationship while we were in the Knight Academy, and I’m hoping we might return to that.”

Valeria stared at him, her eyes taking in every detail of his stony exterior, from his moderately tanned skin to his golden eyes. She sensed no deceit in him, and she subsequently nodded.

"I'd like that, too," she softly said before giving him an inquisitive look, silently asking him where he wanted to talk.

"Can you talk and fight?" Leon asked.

That question got an unintentional smile out of Valeria, one she found incredibly difficult to suppress.

"I can," she said, and Leon led her to his and Elise's training room. It was set up much like a dojo, with a sparring ring in the center, washbasins near the door, and weapon racks lining the walls. The ring in Emilie's estate was a raised platform of wood, stone, and cloth padding, and though Leon had a preference for sandpits after training with Trajan at the Bull's Horns, he wasn't able to convince Elise to allow their sparring ring to be turned into one—she believed, and rightly so, Leon had to admit, that if such a sandpit were to be created, sand would then get everywhere throughout the villa.

Upon arrival, Valeria immediately went for a short glaive with a pale white blade, a training weapon that was enchanted to stun instead of causing real damage. Leon chose a bastard sword of about equal size as his family's Adamant blade. Then, the two walked into the ring together and faced off.

It was essentially a repeat of their very first proper interaction when Leon had challenged Valeria to a duel in front of the rest of the third-tier trainees of their cycle in the Knight Academy, only instead of a spear, Valeria now wielded her preferred weapon. Additionally, any trace of drunkenness that she had a few hours before was now gone; whatever the alcoholic substance was that had put her in that state clearly lacked the power to keep her fourth-tier senses dulled for too long.

However, as Leon stared into her clear, sapphire-like eyes, he realized that he was going to have to hold himself back a bit. She couldn't use elemental magic, and it wouldn't be a fair fight if he were to perform such magic when she could not. While she had accepted his challenge despite knowing the difference in their power, Leon wanted a clean fight, so he stifled his power down to the fourth-tier as best as he could. He wanted this to be a contest of skill, not power.

"How have things been going for you, recently?" Valeria suddenly asked as she readied herself for battle, striking a powerful defensive posture. "You let me whine about my life, but I never got to ask you how yours was going..."

"Things have been *very* busy," Leon said, following Valeria's lead in not talking about everything he had told her about Adrianos and his father. He was willing to let that topic lie for the moment, but he was determined to bring it back up before the day was done. "Prince Trajan is go-... *dead*... and Prince August has been arrested. It looks like Octavius is seizing power, and all it'll take for him to do so is for the courts to rule against Prince August."

Leon settled into his own stance as he spoke, easily taking up one of House Raime's offensive stances, only changed a little bit by the Thunderbird's instruction. His feet were set widely apart, his left foot forward while his right prepared to lunge. His blade was raised at his side and pointed straight at Valeria, ready to stab forward. Valeria, in contrast, kept the blade of her glaive out in front of her with her feet spread and her center of gravity lowered. Even with Leon's greater strength, she was ready to block and deflect his attacks, to let him attack her at his discretion.

"Sounds like a lot to deal with," Valeria said, her mouth curling into a smile of anticipation as she wa

