

## Storm King 161

### Chapter 161: Consul of the North

“Thank you for your aid,” Xaphan said to the Thunderbird. It was still perched atop the throne staring down at Leon, where it had been since bluish-silver lightning had erupted from its feathers and banished the golden lightning cage around its descendant.

**[I have rendered no aid that would deserve thanks,]** the Thunderbird stated. Its tone was almost defiant, as if the thanks of a demon was an insult.

“But you released Leon and caused him to ascend! We survived because of your intervention! Proper courtesy requires that I at least thank you for it...” Xaphan argued.

**[A demon talking about ‘courtesy’?] the Thunderbird asked with some amusement. [And make no mistake, former Lord of Flame, I have bestowed none of my power unto my descendant; his ascension is the result of his own labors, not of my generosity.]**

Xaphan stared at the Thunderbird in confusion. “So, then, all you did was...” the demon began.

**[... To dispel the hold the storm had over my descendant’s mind,]** the Thunderbird finished.

Then, without another word and, more importantly, without giving Xaphan any time to ask any more questions, the Thunderbird took off back into the mists.

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Back at the fort’s main encampment, much of the rubble of the destroyed fortifications had been assembled into a makeshift execution platform. It had only been a day, but the three Legions the Consul of the North had brought to the fort had quickly and ruthlessly exterminated the Valemén who made it south of the wall, including the few thousand scouts dispatched to forage for food. But, there were a small handful of Valemén that had been taken prisoner, most of them for the sole purpose of a public execution.

Leon, Alix, and other remaining survivors of the fort’s garrison were present, plus several thousand soldiers from the three Legions. The rest of them were busy cleaning up the bodies from the fort and manning the wall in case more Valemén arrived.

Leon and Alix were up on the platform standing next to the Consul, the three Legates who led the Legions, and a handful of other Legates and Tribunes who were a part of the Consul’s retinue.

Six large wooden blocks were prepared for the last Valemén, including Hakon Fire-Beard and the heavily burned Hrorekr.

“... and so, for the crimes of invading his Kingdom, slaying his soldiers, and attempting to raid the villages of his subjects, Julius Septimius Taurus, Bull King and monarch of these lands, has granted me the authority to give you the most severe of punishments!” the Consul shouted. He was acting as formally as he could, but he had already condensed much of what was normally said in these situations. Leon could tell that he wasn’t of noble birth just from his speech, as almost any other noble would’ve taken an hour to say what the Consul had just said in five minutes.

“But,” the Consul continued, “before we begin, I would like to invite Leon Ursus, ranking soldier of this fort’s garrison to come forward and say a few words to the captives in the name of his fallen comrades!”

The Consul beckoned Leon forward with a smile and a wave, while Hakon glared at him with as much hate as he could express. The Great Chief couldn’t speak, though, as he and the rest of his surviving war party had been gagged.

Leon took a deep breath and then walked forward. He didn’t address the watching crowd of thousands of Legion soldiers, and when he spoke, he did so in a quiet and subdued tone that only those on the platform could hear.

“You came here without provocation,” Leon stated, making sure to mention some of the crimes that the Consul had just castigated the Valemens for, “and you slaughtered the good men stationed here. You attempted to kill myself, the soldiers I had taken responsibility for, and the soldiers who were responsible for me. For this, I will ensure that your bodies are not burned.”

The eyes of Hakon only grew more terrible and hateful, while the other Valemens paled and tried to scream at Leon through their gags. But, Leon wasn’t finished.

“You will never know the embrace of the Sky Mother. Instead, I will ask the Consul to bury you in the same mass grave that is being dug for the rest of your war party. You and your people will have to find peace among the bones of the Mountain Father, and hope his wrath isn’t so terrible when he asks you about the failure that brought you to him.”

The Valemens wailed and struggled against their bonds as Leon backed away, his piece said. The Consul behind him was rather amused at Leon’s statements, but he didn’t let that get in the way of what everyone was gathered there for; he gestured to the headsman, a fifth-tier Tribune, to come forward.

This particular Tribune was the man in charge of maintaining discipline within the ranks of the Legion, and as such, one of his duties was to behead brigands and traitors. That being said, brigands and traitors rarely survived long enough to be brought back for him to deal with, so he was a little out of practice. He awkwardly kicked the weakest of the Valemens down onto the block, where a pair of fourth-tier Centurions held him down, and then drew an enormous sword. The blade was almost comically large, far too large to be used in battle even for a fifth-tier mage, but it made for quite the spectacle as it flashed in the sunlight as it sliced clean through the Valemans’ neck.

The Tribune’s nerves were a little allayed with how smoothly the first execution went, and so, one-by-one, he started to work his way down the line of captured Valemens. Heads rolled, each one to the deafening sound of Legion cheers.

After a few moments, it was Hrorekr’s turn. Thethane had maintained some semblance of dignity, but that began to crumble as the Centurions forced him down onto the block. He turned his scorched head to Hakon, his eyes wide with fear, hoping that his chief could somehow escape and free him, praying that the Thunderbirds, the Sky Mother, of the Mountain Father would save him. His hopes and prayers continued even as the executioner’s sword swung down onto his neck.

Hakon struggled against his chains as he watched histhane’s head hit the platform and roll away, accompanied by a spurt of blood. His eyes were wild with hate, but that hate was tinged with the fear of

knowing that he had come to his end, and that he had led all of his friends to the same end he found himself in.

With the memory of Eirik, Ulfr, Bragi, Hjalmar, and Hrorekr, and all the rest of his dead thanes and tribesmen fueling him, the Great Chief threw himself against the block, straining to get free of the chains attached to his wrists. His muscles bulged and the wind started to pick up, but the chains were enchanted, and Hakon didn't go anywhere. The Centurions appeared at his shoulders, and they firmly pushed him down onto the block, even as he tried to scream and bellow and roar through his gag. He couldn't even properly channel his magic with the enchanted manacles on his wrists.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the flash of the executioner's sword, and everything went dark.

The watching Legion soldiers cheered, and few cheered harder than the remaining survivors of the fort's garrison. The garrison had taken more than ninety percent casualties and seeing those who inflicted those casualties lose their heads was immensely gratifying.

After a few seconds, the Consul raised his arms, calling the soldiers to order. The cheers and celebrations died down almost immediately.

"With the punishment meted out to these invaders, we have a far more honorable and dignified event to get to! Leon Ursus, step forward!"

Leon paled when thousands of eyes suddenly turned to look at him. He had been fine speaking with the Valemen because they were still the focus, whereas now, everyone's eyes were specifically looking at him. The Consul of the North smiled at him and encouraged him to come forward with a friendly wave. Alix pushed him forward as well, which brought him out of his shy paralysis.

"Don't worry, you don't need to say anything more," the Consul whispered to Leon, seeing the young man's nervous and apprehensive expression. "You only need to kneel."

Leon's eyes went wide as he realized the implications of what the Consul just told him to do. He slowly got down onto one knee, facing the Consul and the crowd behind him.

"Leon Ursus!" the Consul boomed, his voice echoing over the entire crowd. "You have led the defense of this fort when all other officers stronger than you were killed! You were only a squire, but you kept almost fifty of your fellow soldiers alive until reinforcements arrived!" As he spoke, the Consul drew his sword and raised it above Leon. Then, he slowly lowered it to touch Leon's left shoulder, and then his right.

"Your brave actions have brought honor to your King, to your Kingdom, and to all the King's Legions! For your bravery, wits, and strength in battle, I now pronounce you 'Sir' Leon Ursus!"

The crowd practically exploded as the Consul returned his sword to his sheath and extended his hand to help Leon back to his feet. Leon stared speechlessly at the Consul, not knowing what to say or do next.

"Well done, son. You can return to that young lady's side," the Consul said with a smile.

Leon hurried back to Alix and the rest of the high-ranked soldiers, several of whom clapped his shoulder in celebration. Meanwhile, the Consul called a few more soldiers up to receive honors, to the exuberant celebration of the crowd.

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After the ceremony that followed the execution, the Consul ordered Leon to his tent.

“Sir,” Leon said in greeting when the Consul’s adjutant showed him inside.

“Ah, *Sir* Leon, I’m glad you’re here. How are your injuries?”

After the battle, Leon had collapsed into and passed out in his cot, and when he came to, both of his arms had been wrapped in high-quality healing spells. His broken arm and most of his other injuries had completely healed, but many of the burns from using Xaphan’s fire were still raw and peeling.

“I’m doing well, Sir,” Leon answered.

“Good to hear! Well, have a seat, I’d like to talk with you a bit,” the consul said good-naturedly as he waved his hand at a triclinium, a grouping of three chaise lounges around a small table. Leon knew from Artorias’ lessons that such an arrangement was usually reserved for very intimate conversations between nobles, though the style had faded from fashion in recent centuries.

Leon stretched and reclined into one of the lounges, while the Consul took a seat in the one opposite.

“So, Sir Leon, I understand you were sent here from the Knight Academy,” the Consul began.

“Yes, Sir, I was...” Leon said, wondering how the Consul knew that despite having only known the former for less than a day, having completely forgotten that he’d told the Consul that himself before passing out from his wounds the day before.

“Well, I have to say that a third-tier—now fourth-tier—mage being sent to such a remote location is incredibly strange and must mean you have enemies...” the Consul said. Leon frowned, and the Consul continued when it was apparent that Leon wasn’t going to verbally respond. “I received a letter from the capital a few days ago concerning you. It seems a Paladin has been looking for you. I have also received several letters from the Legate in Cyrene requesting that I rescind your orders assigning you to this fort and send you somewhere more befitting your strength and training.”

Leon’s eyes grew wider and his frown grew deeper with every word the Consul said.

“I take it from your expression that you don’t like one of those things... Let me guess, it’s the one about the Paladin?” the Consul asked with an arched eyebrow. Leon didn’t answer verbally, but he slowly nodded. “I’m not surprised, I can’t stand those fuckers down in the capital either...”

Not liking the knights in the capital wasn’t the reason Leon was apprehensive about hearing Roland was looking into him—and the Consul no doubt guessed that—but for the sake of privacy and politeness, the Consul said something generic about not liking nobles and left it at that. Leon was grateful for that, as he had no idea how he would explain his relationship with Roland, especially his own suspicions about the Paladin. He may have linked Adrianos Isynos to Valeria’s family, but he hadn’t ruled out the possibility that Roland was still involved in Artorias’ assassination.

In fact, the more Leon thought about Roland investigating him, the more nervous he became.

"Moving on," the Consul said as he noticed Leon's nervousness beneath the stoicism Leon had managed to return to, "given your training history and how well you performed during this incident..."

The Consul paused as he noticed Leon's slight frown.

"You disagree with something I said?" he asked with an interested smile.

"I do, Sir," Leon said with a grim expression. He told the Consul about what happened to Sam's squad, and how he had lost two of the four survivors on the way back south. "... and if you hadn't arrived when you did, the Valemen would have broken through the defenses in the tower and massacred the people I had gathered there. We wouldn't have lasted a single night on our own. I'd hardly call that 'performing well'."

Once Leon was finished, the Consul burst out into booming laughter. "HAHAHA, you're quite the arrogant little shit, aren't you?" he said once he regained control of himself.

Leon looked at him in confusion.

"I mean," the Consul explained, "that you're taking blame for something that isn't your fault! You could've handled what happened with your squad better, for sure, but those two dickheads who rushed an enemy that was numerically and magically superior might as well have committed suicide! That wasn't your fault! And you did quite well with the tower after the wall was breached. You gathered together as many survivors as you could, and you held for as long as you could with the resources you had available! Don't undersell that shit, you did good, kid!"

"I still could've done better," Leon said, thinking about the failure of the fire runes on the walls of the tower's ground floor to activate, as well as dozens of other tiny little details that he felt could've been improved.

"That's a good mindset to have! I know a great many nobles who would simply say, 'Well, I'm perfect, so the imperfections were everyone else at fault!' Asshats, the lot of them! I wouldn't have put them in charge of the fuckin' mess halls back in Cyrenaica! You're reflecting on what happened and looking to make improvements! That's what we need in the Legion!"

The Consul spoke with such passion that Leon didn't even try to argue; the Consul got particularly heated when talking about the useless nobles that he had seen, and Leon just sat back while he ranted.

"Anyway, as I was saying, fuckin' movin' on," the Consul said, slowly working himself back down from the fiery passion he just had, brushing a few errant strands of brown hair out of his eyes. "With your accomplishments, I agree with the recommendations from Cyrene, that you need to be reassigned."

The Consul waited a moment for Leon's reaction, which was a slight frown.

"What will happen to Alix?" Leon asked. His unofficial squire had grown on him during their flight back to the wall, training sessions, and defense of their guard tower. He didn't want to leave her at Fort 127.

"Oh, I don't mind if she comes with you. An official knight needs an official squire, after all," the Consul said after Leon explained who Alix was. "I'll make the arrangements and make her your squire. She'll go

with you wherever you go. Speaking of which, if you don't want to meet with Sir Roland and let him recruit you, I can have you sent somewhere else. Do you have anywhere you want to go?"

"Sir, you've already knighted me against the guidelines of the Knight Academy, I couldn't ask for more than that..." Leon humbly said.

The Consul then responded, "Fuck the Knight Academy and fuck the Legate who runs it! They can't do shit to me! If they don't like that I knighted one of the people they sent off, then they can chortle my nuts!"

The Consul continued on in that vein for a few more minutes, and when he was done, Leon fully understood that he didn't care about any potential repercussion from the Knight Academy; he was a Consul, one of the seven most highly ranked knights in the kingdom, if he wanted a squire, then all the nobles in the Northern Territories would trip over themselves to offer him their sons and daughters. Since the Knight Academy couldn't do anything to him except try to withhold their own trained squires, they were essentially powerless to do anything to him.

"Anyway, I've got a friend in the Eastern Territories, works as a diplomat for Prince Trajan down at the Bull's Horns. I can have you transferred to him instead of this dump," the Consul said.

Leon's eyes went wide for a moment before he regained control of himself. The Bull's Horns were a pair of fortresses on the border of the Bull Kingdom just like Fort 127, but that was the extent of their similarities. The Bull's Horns watched over the one land route into the kingdom from the rest of the plane, and as a result, was the single largest Legion fortress complex in the entire kingdom. Making it even more prestigious, three combat Legions were stationed there, under the command of the king's elder brother, Prince Trajan, who was also serving as Consul of the East.

Seeing the momentary expression on Leon's face, the Consul of the North smiled. "I take it you like that potential post?"

Leon slowly nodded.

"Then that's where I'll send you! Get your shit packed, I'm sending you back to Cyrene tomorrow! You'll hitch a ride on a river galley and head back south through the capital, all the way down the Naga river until you enter the Gulf of Discord. Then, you'll turn east and go all the way to the Bull's Horns!"

Leon couldn't contain his smile any more. It broke out over his face and resisted all of Leon's attempts to stifle it. But then, something occurred to him that sent a chill down his spine.

"Sir..." Leon hesitantly began.

"What is it" the Consul asked.

"I don't suppose I could request some leave time in the capital?"

"Sure, how much do you want? I can give you a couple of weeks."

"A couple of weeks would do perfectly fine," Leon said.

"Then that's what'll happen!" the Consul said. "While you're here, is there anything else you want to ask?"

It was rhetorical question, but Leon did have one more thing he was curious about, so he took the opportunity to ask, “Sir, if I may ask, how did you get here so quickly? Sir Jean thought it would take you at least a week to get here, not a couple of days...”

“Ha! If I’d stayed to wait for Count Whitefield to allow me to enter his land, it would’ve taken a week! But the Legion’s first job is to kill any assholes who invade the Bull Kingdom! I’m not going to wait for some shitstick noble who thinks himself more important than he is to fuckin’ *allow* me to do my job!”

“Well I, for one, am glad you didn’t wait,” Leon said with a genuine smile, which the Consul returned with a chuckle.

There wasn’t much left for Leon and the Consul to talk about, so Leon took his leave.

[You looking to spend some time with Elise?] Xaphan asked curiously, referring to Leon’s request for leave. [She’s probably going to be pissed at you, you know...]

[I’m very aware of that, demon,] Leon replied with some annoyance, [but it wasn’t my fault that this place didn’t have a damned

## **Chapter 162: Making Plans**

Alix looked back at Fort 127 for the last time. It looked completely different with sixty thousand Legion soldiers there than it had only a week before—like a small city. Most of those who were garrisoned there had been killed, including Sam and just about everyone she was friendly with. She couldn’t help but sigh as she turned south.

“You all right?” Leon asked her. “You don’t have to leave if you don’t want to, I can always get a different squire...”

“It’s fine,” Alix said quickly. “Nothing left for me here anyway. Let’s just go.”

Leon nodded and started walking down the dirt road that would eventually lead them back to Cyrene and the Naga River. His pack was much lighter than it was when he came north, as most of his clothes had been stolen by the Valemen and lost when the war party was obliterated; he at least still had all of his books and a fair amount of enchanting supplies, as he didn’t leave them in his tent when he and Alix moved to the tower.

“Do you want to stop anywhere? You did say you were from a village around these parts, right?” Leon inquired.

“We have our orders to get south, and we shouldn’t stop on my account. Besides, my family moved not long after I signed up. They live on the Great Plateau now, as I recall...” Alix replied with a distant look in her eyes.

Leon didn’t know what else he could say. *‘Probably best not to say anything right now,’* he thought to himself, *‘give her some time to adapt to the changing circumstances...’*

The rest of the day passed in relative silence.

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A week later, they found themselves in Cyrene, and Alix was somewhat back to her normal self. The journey had given her plenty of time to think, as well as something to focus on when not thinking. Now, the two of them were in a city that was larger than any she had ever been in before.

Her head was on a swivel, constantly looking around and taking in the sights. Cyrene was a Royal Legion fortress city to its core, but it still had more amenities and shops than someone raised in a small village would've ever dreamed of.

Remembering his own first time entering a large city not too long ago, Leon didn't say a word, he just let her take in the sights. They slowly made their way through the crowded streets to the Legion citadel, where they were plunged head-first into a sea of paperwork. Fortunately, it didn't take longer than a couple of hours, and the two were hurried onto a galley that was scheduled to leave that afternoon.

Again, Leon was given a private cabin; he was a fourth-tier knight, after all. As he had a squire, the room was a little bigger so they could share.

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"So, listen for a moment," Leon hesitantly began as he and Alix got settled in the galley after dinner. Alix looked up from the book she was reading and gave Leon her attention.

"Last time I was on a galley, I was attacked. Actually, I think I was technically attacked twice, once by a group of thugs that had been working as rowers, and the second time several minutes later by those I think hired them..."

Alix's eyes grew wider as she listened to Leon. "Why?!" she asked worriedly.

"... I'm not sure," Leon admitted. "I defeated the attackers, but they didn't have any identifying objects on their persons. I have no concrete idea of who did it, or why. That being said, just about every officer I spoke to when I was being transferred to the fort said that I must have made some enemies in the Knight Academy to get such a remote post. I find myself agreeing with them."

"No shit," Alix said.

"So, just be aware of that. I'm not sure what to expect on the way back south, so stay on your toes. Don't leave the cabin alone."

Alix nodded to acknowledge Leon's instructions.

"Moving on, we should talk about what what's going to happen when we arrive in the capital," Leon said.

"We got the authorization for leave?" Alix asked, her face lighting up in excitement.

"I did. We get two weeks, starting from the moment we check in at the Legion harbor."

Alix immediately snapped her book closed as she thought about all the things she'd heard about the capital and what she wanted to do during her off time.

Seeing her about to get lost in her own plans, Leon said, "I will want to allocate some time for training, and I'll expect you to be there."

Alix immediately refocused back on Leon with a slight frown, but she knew the importance of training even if she didn't want to lose time in the biggest city in the kingdom. "How long will this training last?" she asked.

"One to two hours of combat training, another hour of muscle training, and two to three hours of meditation, at least," Leon answered. Alix's face twisted a little at that amount of time, but Leon reassured her as he continued, "It doesn't all have to be right after each other. We can have muscle and combat training in the morning, and have you meditate in the evening. Leave the late morning and afternoon all to you."

"... Sounds good," Alix said, her face returning to her usual smile.

"In the interest of training, we'll be staying at the same place," Leon mentioned.

"I'm your squire, I didn't think we'd be separated," Alix replied.

"Well, we're not going to be staying at an inn. Or at least, I hope we don't have to..." Leon said apprehensively.

"Why not? Do you know someone in the capital? A lady, perhaps?" Alix asked. She began to inch forward with an immensely curious look on her face.

"I do, in fact, know a lady in the capital," Leon said with a subtle smile. "However, she told me to send a letter to her once I arrived at where I was going..."

"Oh," Alix said, her smile faltering a little bit. She knew that getting mail out from Fort 127 was a nightmare, and the Legion rarely bothered to try. After being at the fort for barely two weeks, there wasn't any way Leon could've sent the promised letter to his lady friend.

"So," Leon continued, "she might be a little angry. That being said, I hope we can still stay with her, as being able to come back for a couple weeks rather than having to wait at least two years will... *hopefully* blunt her anger... But, even if she is incredibly angry, I don't think she'd toss us out onto the streets..."

"What's this girl like?" Alix asked.

Leon sat back in his bed, glanced out of his tiny cabin window, and smiled. It was a gentle smile, one that Alix hadn't ever seen Leon have before.

"She's incredibly bold, confident in just about every aspect of her life, and *very* smart," Leon said with a serenity that Alix had also never seen him express.

"You *really* like her, don't you?" she asked. Leon slowly nodded to her with his smile growing wider. "I can tell," she said.

"It's only been a month since I saw her last, but I'm already greatly looking forward to seeing her again," Leon said in a warm and quiet tone that Alix found incredibly soothing.

"I'm looking forward to meeting someone who can make you act like this," she said with a mischievous smile.

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The two stayed awake chatting for another few minutes and went to bed soon after. Or at least, Alix did. Given what had happened the last time he'd taken a river galley, Leon was restless and couldn't sleep.

After more than two hours of tossing and turning, he sighed and sat up to try and read by moonlight.

As Leon reached for one of his family's books on enchantment, Xaphan said, [Leon, we should talk a bit...]

The demon's voice wavered with hesitation, making Leon pause for a moment before agreeing.

[You're a fourth-tier mage now, and you got there by your own power. I already told you about how the Thunderbird released you from your lightning cage, but we still need to talk about what comes next,] Xaphan said.

At the mention of the Thunderbird, Leon couldn't help but frown a little. Xaphan had told him about the encounter, but there hadn't been many details, so it had been a short and uninformative conversation. His ancestor's aloofness was something Leon found more than a little annoying.

[So, what comes next?] Leon asked.

[You must work toward the fifth-tier,] Xaphan answered quickly.

[Changing my mana type...] Leon muttered.

[That shouldn't take very long; it's actually something you've been working toward for a while,] Xaphan said.

[What do you mean?]

[Do you remember those exercises your family's books have detailed?]

Leon thought back for a moment and remembered his attempts to practice conjuring a lightning spear. It had gone about as well as could be expected for a third-tier mage, which is to say it didn't work at all.

[I think I understand...] Leon said thoughtfully. [So those exercises were about changing my mana type, right?]

[I believe they were,] the demon said.

Leon clenched his fist and called forth some of his magic power. He had to compress it as much as he could, then release it and let it arc throughout his body like lightning. Now that he was a fourth-tier mage, he should have the control to accomplish the task.

He gathered his power in his chest and squeezed it as much as he could. It was far easier now than when he had last tried it more than half a year before, but he still felt like he couldn't compress his power enough.

[You don't need to start practicing immediately...] Xaphan noted. [Just so long as you practice when you train. Work on getting to the fifth-tier, when you can get started on your magic body. The sooner you can enter your soul realm consciously, the better.]

[How so?]

[I think your ancestor will be a little more willing to talk, and I hope you would ask it some questions of mine...]

[I'll think about it,] Leon replied.

[Well, you still need to work on getting stronger. As you get stronger, so do I.]

[And I would very much like you to get stronger, demon, as the more power you have, the more I can draw upon,] Leon said with a smile. On the island in Leon's soul realm, Xaphan wore a matching smile, though it was completely obscured by bright orange fire. He could feel his flames burn hotter as his power gradually restored itself.

[Speaking of your power,] Leon continued, [I can control more of it, now. I got off quite a few more blasts of fire against Fire-Beard than I could've had he attacked only a day before. Your power kept us alive.]

[Of course. You are now a fourth-tier mage, so it shouldn't be surprising that you can handle stronger magics. Still didn't stop you from charring your tiny arms into uselessness, though...]

[Don't get used to things like that,] Leon declared, [I'm getting stronger all the time, and I may just pass you by...]

[Not a damned chance, young mage!]

[You're still relying on the power in my soul realm to nourish your demonic core, aren't you?]

Xaphan ground his teeth a little, but he still answered a quiet, [Yes...]

[Then your rate of recovery won't be as great as my gains. Once I make it to the fifth-tier, I'll be able to use your fifth-tier fire with impunity, as if it were my own. Don't fall too far behind, now, demon.]

[Just watch me, boy. Don't forget that I've done all of this before, and I have far more time to devote to my recovery than you have to your training. You won't catch up.]

[We'll see. We'll see.]

Xaphan was silent for a moment, then he said in a smug tone, [Well, I *was* going to teach you how to project your magic senses now that you're a fourth-tier mage, but I guess you can figure that out for yourself...]

Leon's eyes widened in surprise. [I can do that now?!] he asked excitedly, his teasing tone with his partner gone.

[You can, or at least, you can do it a little bit. We should talk more when your attitude improves.]

Leon bit back his retort, and quietly said, [I'll hold you to that, demon. Something like magic senses is a tool that I can't afford to ignore.]

[We'll see,] Xaphan replied, throwing Leon's words back in his face. [Trying to assert superiority over me won't get you a single damned thing, though...]

[Mmhhh,] Leon responded, now thoroughly annoyed. He turned over in his bed and went back to silently trying to sleep, to not fuel Xaphan's vanity or offend his pride again. Magic senses were fully worth him making a concession on this, at least.

### **Chapter 163: Two Years Early**

Three days after it left Cyrene, the river galley Leon and Alix were aboard smoothly coasted into the Legion docks of the capital city. It was a large galley, about half again as large as the boat Leon took north, so once it was safely moored the galley became a frantic hub of activity. About one hundred and fifty soldiers made their way ashore while hundreds of dock workers moved aboard to load and unload the galley's cargo.

Leon and Alix were the first passengers to disembark, as Leon was the highest ranked knight aboard who wasn't a crew member.

Much like when they were in Cyrene, Alix's eyes were darting around everywhere, taking in all the sights she possibly could. The monuments in the distance, and magic in the air, the smells from nearby bakeries, and the bright colors from the flowers and other flora that decorated much of the city, she was trying to experience all of it at once.

"Let's keep moving," Leon said quietly as Alix slowed down from the overwhelming stimulation, "there'll be time enough for sightseeing when we get our paperwork taken care of."

"Right!" Alix replied, refocusing her attention on the task at hand.

The two made their way through the harbor to the central administration area to check in. All they really had to do was wait in line for a little over an hour after Leon handed over their orders while the bureaucrats got to work. When it was over, they were instructed to return in two weeks and board a new ship that would take them south to the Gulf of Discord, then east to the Bull's Horns, and then they were dismissed.

Leon sighed as they left the administration building. He found that getting paperwork done was almost as exhausting as the battle at the fort, and he was ready to shake off the fatigue of the journey.

"So, what should we do first?" Alix asked excitedly as she stared at Leon in expectation.

*'Clearly someone's not tired in the least,'* he thought with a little bit of jealousy and bitterness.

"For now," Leon answered out loud, "we should nail down lodgings. We can also get something to eat at the same time."

"Where are we going?" Alix inquired.

"Just follow me," Leon said with a smile. He began walking west, toward the Heaven's Eye Tower.

—

When Leon left the capital, Elise had planned to focus on her work with nature magic. Unfortunately for her, her mother had insisted that she take a more active role in Heaven's Eye affairs. So, on the day Leon arrived back in the capital, Elise found herself in a meeting with three men representing the six merchant cities on the southern coast of the Bull Kingdom.

“... and we can make some very generous concessions to your organization, assuming you commit to a closer relationship,” said one of the representatives. He was the junior negotiator, though he was old enough to have lost most of his hair. Still, he was dressed in fine silk clothes that did little to hide his large gut, and he wore expensive perfumes that were so pungent they almost burned Elise’s nose, and she had to concentrate on not scrunching up her face in displeasure.

“Very generous terms, such as land grants and favored status with our ships. We’ll prioritize cargo coming and going from your towers, and ensure that wherever our ships can be found, there will always be friends of your organization,” the senior negotiator added. He was quite different from his partner, in that he was slim and had a full head of black hair. However, his hair had been heavily oiled and slicked back, while his clothes were an almost fluorescent array of yellows, greens, and blues.

This pair of negotiators gave Elise the unpleasant sense of snake oil salesmen, with the perfumes and colorful clothing seemingly meant to overwhelm her senses and distract her. However, she was dressed to the nines, and her choice of attire seemed to have a greater impact upon them than theirs had upon her. Elise was clad in a tight and low-cut black silk dress that extended all the way down to her ankles and left her arms bare. Her hair had been pulled up into a stylish ponytail that highlighted her necklace, made of silver links set with an alternating pattern of red and black onyx.

Given the way their eyes roamed over her body, her wardrobe was doing much better at distraction than theirs was to her. In fact, their attire was little more than an annoyance to her.

“This will be a fantastic deal, we’re going to make each other so much money!” the junior negotiator said enthusiastically.

“Indeed, setting up a tower in the Southern Territories will bring nothing but benefits to all parties,” the senior negotiator said with what he thought was a dignified smile, but it seemed more like a dismissive leer to Elise.

She had said little during their meeting, barely sparing the two negotiators and their page more than a few cursory glances the entire time. *‘It seems my attempt to be obviously disinterested has given them the wrong impression. I guess they think me struck dumb with this idiocy...’* she thought to herself.

Elise finally broke her silence with a glare and a look of derision that immediately shut up both of the negotiators.

“Heaven’s Eye is not interested in building a new tower in any of the cities you represent,” she said bluntly. “If we were, we’d have built one by now. However, it isn’t worth building a new tower in the Southern Territories, so you’ll have to make do with the banks, smiths, and merchant hubs that Heaven’s Eye already operates in those areas.”

“But, my lady-” the senior negotiator began with a startled look on his face.

“There will be no tower built, and that’s final,” Elise said, forcefully shutting the man up. “No amount of ‘concessions’ on your part could ever make establishing such an operation down there worth the effort, even if you offered real concessions rather than the bare minimum the Bull King would give us freely if we were to indicate interest. You have entered into this negotiation and offered nothing of substance, while assuming we would simply move in and help you run your businesses. We will not do this.”

Just as the junior negotiator was going to try to argue with Elise, the door opened and a gorgeous attendant walked in. Elise glared at her for interrupting, but she gave the Tower Lord's daughter a graceful bow before approaching and whispering into her ear. Elise's annoyed expression immediately disappeared, and she looked back at the attendant with an expression of pleasant surprise, who emphatically nodded to her.

"My lady, please, if you could simply look at what we're offering again..." sputtered the senior negotiator as panic seeped into his voice.

However, Elise didn't let him finish, bluntly interrupting with, "Something important has come up. You three know the position of Heaven's Eye, so please don't continue to bother us with your frequent and irritating proposals. Good day." She then stood up and immediately made for the door, walking as fast as she could without impacting her noble demeanor.

"If I may be so bold as to ask, what has come up?" the junior negotiator asked, angrily rising to his feet.

"*Something important...*" Elise repeated as the attendant opened the door for her. Left unsaid was what she really meant: '*Something more important than you*'. The negotiators were left alone in the room, having gained nothing but anger from the meeting.

Outside, Elise turned to the attendant as they walked to the magic lift and asked, "How long ago did he arrive?"

"Young Lord Leon Ursus arrived not even five minutes ago, my lady," the attendant respectfully answered.

"Have any other attendants seen to him?" Elise inquired.

"No, my lady. The chief attendant this shift immediately sent me to inform you..."

Elise frowned. "Next time, make sure he's seen to as soon as he walks in. To not see to any guest, no matter who they are, is incredibly rude."

"Yes, my lady," the attendant replied, her pretty face growing slightly pale from Elise's subdued anger.

As the lift neared the ground floor, the attendant informed Elise of Leon's seating location, so when the doors opened, Elise could walk straight to where Leon was without any hesitation or having to search for him herself. However, what did give Elise some slight hesitation was, upon noticing Leon at his booth, seeing another young woman sitting with him.

But, that hesitation lasted less than a heartbeat, and she hurried forward...

—

When Leon led Alix into the Heaven's Eye Tower, she was as dumbstruck at the opulence and wealth on display as just about every other commoner that enters the Tower. Everywhere were splendidly dressed nobles, knights, and high officials, and the sights and smells of the extravagantly decorated lounge and its accompanying restaurant were incredible.

"We're eating *here*?" Alix asked hesitantly.

"Yes," Leon replied. He was too busy looking around to give more complex an answer, but he quickly frowned when he didn't see who he was looking for. No other attendants came up to them to help them, so Leon's frown grew slightly deeper, and he took it upon himself to lead Alix over to an empty booth.

"So..." Alix began after they had been seated for several minutes, "what do we do now? Do we just wait?"

"Normally, an attendant should've approached us, but I guess not today... Oh well, it shouldn't be too long before someone comes..."

The two sat there for a few more minutes in silence. Then, Leon noticed Alix staring at something over his shoulder, and her eyes grew wider and wider as he heard footsteps behind him coming closer.

[She's here,] Xaphan told him, confirming what he already knew. He didn't even need to turn around, and already a smile appeared on Leon's face, which only grew wider when a pair of familiar arms wrapped around his neck and shoulders from behind.

Elise pulled him into her embrace from behind, and Leon responded by leaning his head to the side and affectionately pressing his forehead against her cheek.

When the brief hug was over, Elise slid into the seat next to Leon with a happy smile and angry eyes. However, before she addressed her anger, she turned to Alix to introduce herself.

"My name is Elise, I'm the daughter of the Tower Lord in charge of this division of Heaven's Eye, and it's my pleasure to meet you."

"... A-Alix," Alix sputtered. She was so taken with Elise's aura, noble demeanor, beauty, and obviously expensive clothing that she couldn't formulate too many thoughts. Elise giggled at Alix's nervousness, bringing a tinge of red to the latter's cheeks.

"Now then," Elise said, turning her sharp green eyes to Leon, "It's been a month and a half, and I have not received a single word from you. Yet, here you are, waltzing into my Tower accompanied by a pretty girl as if nothing were wrong. I wonder how I ought to take this?"

Alix's blush grew brighter when Elise called her pretty, while Leon's face grew slightly paler.

"The place I was sent to was a backwater, to the point that there was no way to send you a letter in a timely fashion. By the time I found myself in a place where I could, I was already heading back south..." Leon explained.

"Is that so?" Elise asked, arching one of her eyebrows as she did. She remained silent and stared at Leon, while the attendant that had been almost entirely ignored anxiously came forward and took Leon and Alix's food orders.

Under her silent gaze, Leon couldn't help but wilt a little, but eventually, she leaned forward and whispered, "I know a way you can make it up to me..."

Leon turned to her, his nervous gold eyes meeting her mischievous emerald eyes. From within his soul realm, he could hear Xaphan begin to chuckle. [You're *fucked*,] the demon choked out between his laughs.

It took Leon a few seconds to work up the nerve to ask, "What is it?"

From the other side of the table, Alix watched in fascination as Elise did little more than glare at Leon to make him flustered and tense. In the entire time they had been together in the Northern Territories, she hadn't yet seen this side of Leon, and she couldn't help but unknowingly join Xaphan in chuckling at Leon's expense.

"Lift your arm," Elise commanded.

Leon didn't know what she was getting at, but he complied, slowly lifting his left arm into the air. As soon as there was enough room, Elise darted in and leaned against him, then said, "Now put your arm down!"

Understanding what she wanted, Leon smiled and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in a little closer.

Noticing his smile, Elise whispered, "Oh, don't think you're entirely off the hook. Just you wait until tonight..."

Of course, this only made Leon smile more. Xaphan, however, wasn't amused.

[IS THAT IT?! THAT'S ALL?] he cried. [Might as well not have been angry in the first place...]

"So, how did you manage to come back so early?" Elise asked. The question immediately wiped the smiles off both Leon and Alix's faces. Slowly, Leon began to explain what happened at the fort.

## **Chapter 164: Trust**

"Aaaah," Elise sighed in satisfaction as she collapsed next to Leon and buried her face into his shoulder. She lay there for several long moments, naked and breathing hard, basking in the afterglow of great sex and in the relief that Leon had survived the battle he and Alix had described to her.

The silence was only broken when Leon hesitantly asked, "... So, can I move now?"

"No!" Elise said, playfully pinching him in the ribs. "Your punishment isn't over yet!"

Leon's arm twitched as he struggled to keep from pulling Elise in closer, while her eyes sparkled in delight. They had returned to her mother's estate not long after meeting up in the Tower, and they immediately made for Elise's private wing, stopping only to help Alix get settled into a guest room. Their clothes were removed as fast as was possible once they were in Elise's bedroom, but when Leon moved in for a kiss, Elise had instead pushed him down onto the bed and enacted her punishment for not sending a letter: forcing him to lay back and not move. If his hands went anywhere near her body, she had said, she would stop immediately.

Suffice it to say, as much as he wanted to take a more active role, Leon managed to restrain himself. Elise didn't make it easy, though, as she had made use of more than a few tips from her mother to drive Leon crazy. She went slowly in the beginning, dragging out the foreplay and pushing Leon to the edge multiple times without letting him go over. Eventually, she mounted him, but continued to tease and torture him with short, slow hip movements. However, after an hour or so of fun, she decided it was time to end things, and so finally gave Leon his first climax while she drove herself into her fifth.

"Got any idea of when my punishment will be over?" Leon asked as he gave a suggestive look to his lady.

"Hmm, let me think about it," Elise teasingly answered. "In the meantime, you can tell me more about that battle at your post. I can tell you skimmed a lot of details, given that you didn't even mention your ascension to the fourth-tier..."

Leon smiled, then said, "That was a lucky accident. I barely managed to ascend just before the Valemens surrounded our tower."

"Lucky indeed," Elise responded, "but that doesn't explain the fire that your cute new squire mentioned."

Leon looked away from Elise and stared at the ceiling. He had no idea how to explain his use of demonfire, so he went silent for a few seconds while he pondered what to say. In the end, he had to ask for help.

[Any advice, demon?]

[Hmm?] Xaphan muttered in surprise; he been actively trying not to pay attention to what the two lovers were doing, so Leon had to explain the situation. [Personally, if you trust her, then I don't care what you say to her,] Xaphan answered. [The only thing that would concern me is whether or not she would take kindly to knowing a demon is living in your soul realm.]

[Yes, that's the part that's giving me pause. Demon worship is illegal in this kingdom, and though I'm not exactly worshipping you-]

[Even though you probably *should* be,] Xaphan muttered.

[- I don't think it's a distinction many would care to make,] Leon continued, ignoring Xaphan's comment. [If anyone in power here knew about you, I would be willing to bet I'd be on a one-way trip to the headsman's block in less than a day...]

[That would be mighty inconvenient,] Xaphan said. [Do you trust her?]

[I do,] Leon answered without hesitation.

[Does she trust you?]

[I believe so.]

[Then I don't think it matters whether you tell her or not. Now that I'm thinking about it more, though, I would prefer that you try to take the option that doesn't expose me.]

[I can understand that...]

Leon thought on the problem for another few moments, then turned back to Elise.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too," she answered, but her eyes quickly narrowed.

"I trust you more than anyone else," Leon continued, "but my fire is something I'd rather not speak about for now."

“That doesn’t sound like you trust me very much,” Elise said, her gaze turning hard and cold.

“I do, but this is something that affects more than me. I would put my life in your hands in a heartbeat, but I can’t make that same decision for others. So for now, I have to ask you to leave me with this one secret. Please.”

For a second, it seemed to Leon like Elise was about to explode with anger, but then her eyes softened and she turned away and said, “... I will let you have this *one* secret, then. But, I want to know everything else!”

Leon smiled and almost leaned down to kiss her, but he remembered her orders not to move just in time.

“Thank you, my love,” he said. He proceeded to tell her all the details he could about the battle, including the effect thunderstorms have on him. Elise was a little confused—that is, until she remembered that Leon’s real name wasn’t Ursus, but Raime. Things were a little easier to accept then.

But, that also reminded her that she had a little secret of her own.

“Leon,” she said, her tone turning from playful and teasing to deadly serious, “there’s something I think you should know...”

“What is it?”

“House Raime has—or I suppose, *had*—a special relationship with Heaven’s Eye, in the past.”

Leon raised his eyebrow to indicate his interest, but he remained quiet and let his lady talk.

“I don’t know the exact details, and I suspect that there are few alive that do, but House Raime was much closer to Heaven’s Eye than a noble family has any right to be. I’m pretty sure that relationship extends well before the time when they were petty kings of the Great Plateau, and long before the First Bull King united these lands.”

“What was the nature of this relationship?” Leon inquired.

“I... like I said, I don’t know the details, but Heaven’s Eye has always supported your House, and the Tower in Teira is probably older by tens of thousands of years than the one here in the capital, maybe even older than any other Tower in Aeterna...”

“So, you’re saying that Heaven’s Eye was started in Teira?” Leon asked.

“No, just that that’s where the first Tower was built,” Elise answered.

“Then... that’s not a lot to go on,” Leon said.

“I know, the evidence for it is mostly circumstantial, but it’s just a feeling I have. There’s more to what’s between Heaven’s Eye and your House than the usual business relationship we have with other noble Houses...”

“How do you know all of this?” he asked, confused as to why she was suddenly telling him these things.

“My mother forced me to work in the Tower for a while, and I came across some old documents from an agreement to lease a vault between the head of House Raime and the Tower Lord in Teira. That document was more than fifteen thousand years old! It got me curious as why there was a Tower there so long ago, so I did some digging.”

Leon frowned again, hesitated for a moment, but then told Elise about his family’s archives below the palace ruins in Teira, indicating just how old House Raime was and implying that was why Heaven’s Eye set up in their city.

Elise’s eyes widened in response, and she stared at Leon in disbelief. “Really?!” she asked intensely. “That place sounds like ruins found within the Four Empires near the center of the plane!”

Leon blinked, not quite sure how proceed, but he nodded to confirm that what he said was accurate.

Elise pushed herself up off his arm so she could look into his eyes better. This put her naked body on full display, but there wasn’t the slightest hint of amorousness in her eyes; rather, they were serious mixed with some fear and panic. “Don’t tell anyone else what you just told me!” she ordered.

Leon quickly nodded and said, “I won’t!”

After a moment of staring into each other’s eyes, Elise calmed down and went back to snuggling up against Leon.

“There isn’t really anything we can do about it now, but when we get a little older and a little stronger, we should go visit those archives. I’m sure there are plenty of secrets hidden away within...”

Her statement reminded Leon of the locked door within the archives. He had almost completely forgotten about it until right that moment, but he decided not to mention it. It wasn’t a pressing issue, so he decided that he’d simply show it to her when they made their visit. Instead, he wanted to change the subject and try to alleviate some of the tense atmosphere that had been created.

“Speaking of strength,” he said, injecting some playfulness into his tone, “I noticed you ascended to the third-tier.”

Elise smiled with pride at her lover’s words. “Yes, I achieved it only a week or so after you left. I was planning on surprising you by being much stronger when you returned, but instead you came back two years early and as a fourth-tier veteran knight to boot!” She acted like she was offended, but the impish smile on her face betrayed her. Leon instinctively tried to pull her closer, but all he got was a pinch in the ribs for his trouble.

“You’re still being punished, Sir!” Elise said.

“Still?” Leon asked dejectedly. Elise had gotten herself off using his body five times, but he’d only climaxed once. This left him still quite ready to go, and it was starting to feel torturous to not move and embrace the gorgeous woman at his side.

“Until I say otherwise!” Elise said happily.

Leon sighed in frustration. Elise took a little pity on him, but that pity was still dwarfed by her mild sadism, so she still demanded he remain still.

After a few moments of silence, Leon decided to confide in her something else, and said, "I was attacked on the galley on the way to Cyrene..."

"Oh? What did you do, insult a sailor and start a brawl?" Elise asked jokingly.

"No," Leon answered seriously. "They knocked out the entire crew, then tried to infiltrate my cabin and kill me in the night."

Elise's joking demeanor vanished when she realized the gravity of what Leon had just said; an attempted assassination was just as serious as repelling a Valeman raid. "Tell me everything," she said.

Leon obliged, filling her in first on the three thugs, then on the two men who followed later.

"... and the weaker of the two wore this ring," Leon explained, showing Elise the emerald ring he still wore.

"I was wondering where you got that, and why you weren't taking it off," Elise said. "I was just in too much of a hurry to bring it up before now..."

"Well, it has an invisibility enchantment on it. I can turn invisible for a significant amount of time while wearing it, so long as I stay away from other mages or magical implements."

"Hmm..." Elise thought for a minute. "Do you have a copy of the enchantment?"

Leon nodded. He still retained the copy he made to study—it had been with all of his books, so the Valemen didn't get their hands on it.

"Where is it?" Elise asked.

"In my pack," Leon answered, nodding to where it had been unceremoniously dropped by the door. He was about to rise and get it for her, but Elise pushed him back into the bed with a look of warning and rose to get it herself. Leon didn't argue, as he was too busy watching her walk around without any clothes, something which she noticed, so she played it up a little with some exaggerated movements and struck a few highly suggestive poses when going through his things.

"You don't have a lot of clothes in here," she remarked as she returned to bed with the copy of the enchantment in hand.

"Valemen got to most of it. Went missing during the battle. I'm basically down to three outfits..."

"Well, that's something we can fix later, as you won't need clothes for the rest of the day," Elise said with a devilish smile, which Leon happily returned.

Elise sat on the edge of the bed with her back to Leon and closely examined the enchantment. It was incredibly complex, and she could tell it would take an in-depth examination to determine where it came from.

"I'll have this sent to some people in the Tower. We'll find out who made this enchantment, and who, if anyone, it was sold to," she said confidently as she rolled it up and placed it on the bedside table.

"In the meantime," Leon said, "can I move yet?"

Elise stared at him. It was obvious merely from the tent he was pitching in the bedsheets just how much he wanted to move, so she made a show of thinking about it. Just as it looked like Leon was about to lose control, she smiled at him and said, "Well I suppose you deserve a reward for surviving that Valeman attack and coming back to me... I suppose I can deign to end your punishment..."

Leon immediately sat up and snatched her up into his arms. She almost yelped in glee, but Leon sealed her mouth with his own while pressing her down into the bedsheets.

When they separated, Leon sadistically smiled at her and said, "You had your fun with me, now I feel it would only be fair if I had my fun with you..."

"Oh, you're *sooo* scary!" Elise cried in an extremely sarcastic tone. "Won't someone please come and save me from this despicable beast? I'm but an innocent maiden about to be ravaged by a monster!"

Leon gave her an evil look and an eviler chuckle, then started to kiss his way down her body. *'You don't even know...'* he thought with glee. She had made sure to agonize him with her slow and methodical actions, especially during their foreplay, so he intended to pay her back in kind; he still had plenty of tips and tricks he'd been given by Charles and Alain that he was eager to try. So he massaged, pinched, twisted, and kissed his way further and further down her body, his every move eliciting another moan of pleasure from his lover.

## **Chapter 165: Relaxing in the Capital**

While Leon moved into Elise's room, Alix was given a guest room down the hall. She was in the same private wing of Elise's estate as the other two, but she was also placed far enough away as to not be disturbed if Leon and Elise were to get too loud.

Alix's room was opulently decorated with marble tiles and statues, murals covering the walls made of colored glass tiles, and luxurious furniture, chief of which being the enormous bed. As soon as Alix walked into her room, the bed was so inviting that it almost demanded she lay down for a while, so she dropped what few things she brought to the capital and collapsed on the bed. She was so exhausted that she fell asleep in minutes.

It took a servant knocking on her door the next morning to invite her to breakfast for her to wake up, and even then, she was still sluggish and sleepy. As she gathered herself, though, she was surprised that she was able to sleep so well in this new place.

*'This is a remarkable bed, to allow me to sleep so readily...'* she thought to herself as she struggled to her feet and out of her dirty clothes. *'Then again, it makes sense that the ultra-rich would live in such comfort and luxury...'* Yet, even with that thought, she still felt at peace, as if she was welcome, which was certainly not the case at Fort 127. There, she was only able to sleep because of Sam, and later, Leon.

Alix walked into the attached bathroom and marveled at the facilities, from the magically advanced toilets and sink to the huge white marble bath. The bathroom alone was larger than the tent she and Leon shared with Sam's squad.

However, the good mood that Elise's estate put her in immediately vanished when Alix saw herself in the mirror. It wasn't her body or her looks that depressed her, though; rather, it was the streaks running down her face that drew her attention.

She groaned as she hurriedly wiped her face. *'At least Leon isn't here to see me,'* she thought to herself. Ever since the battle ended and she left the fort, she'd been occasionally crying in her sleep. Sam had been like a cool uncle to her, and her mourning was all the more intense now without mortal danger to distract from it. She hated crying, though, especially when it was in her sleep, as she couldn't do anything about it. She was certain Leon had seen her a few times with the tears still on her face when they were coming south, but he had been courteous enough not to mention it.

*'Come on, knights are stronger than this!'* she angrily thought to herself.

After wiping her face, she quickly washed her face, then started putting herself together for the upcoming day. She slapped her face a few times to fully wake herself up and to banish the last traces of sadness from her mind, then let her usual smile appear.

*'I wonder what breakfast is like here,'* she thought as she forced herself to move on.

—

Breakfast was, for the servants in the estate, a rather subdued affair. For Leon and Alix, however, it was a pampered and exciting event. They weren't eating in the main dining hall, but rather in a small room in Elise's wing that only had room for about five or six guests. Despite the lack of formality, there were still about half a dozen servants coming and going with dishes made of sparkling porcelain and silverware made of actual silver. After the table was set, the servants then brought in a veritable feast of eggs, bacon, and all sorts of other breakfast foods for Elise, Leon, and Alix to take as they pleased, pairing it all with milk, juice, and water served in crystalline glass cups.

Leon and Alix could only stare at the procession of servants that did all this, with Elise happily watching them and giggling to herself. She especially enjoyed showing off for Leon, even if this wasn't even close to what would be prepared for a formal occasion.

Elise walked over to her table and sat down, then looked over at the still-awed Leon and Alix and said, "Well, don't just stand there, come and take a seat!"

The two immediately sat down at the round table, and the servants who were waiting in the corner of the room walked forward to begin serving the food with almost exaggerated grace and politeness. The knight-and-squire pair were a little overwhelmed, but once Elise started eating, they, too, dug in. Alix tried to go slowly so she could watch Elise, while Leon struggled to not tear into his food, as he still vividly remembered Artorias' lessons on table manners.

The meal was eaten in relative silence. Alix and Leon had gotten used to eating Legion rations, and the meal they had in the Tower the day before hadn't quite washed the taste of those rations out. So, they ate as fast as they could without making a mess, and Elise watched with an odd sense of glee at their obvious joy.

As for herself, she had worked up an appetite the night before with Leon, but she was still done with her food long before the other two.

When they were finally slowing down, Elise broke the silence, asking, "So, what's on the schedule for today?"

Alix looked to Leon to answer, as he was her knight. Leon answered, "Well, there isn't much. Some training after breakfast, then some more training before bed. Nothing else, really."

"Then you have plenty of time to come into the city with me!" Elise said happily. She turned to Alix and said, "You're more than welcome to come along, too. *This* guy lost most of his clothes up at your fort, and I'm going to drag him along to get some replacements."

"Huh?" Leon asked in confusion. He and Elise hadn't agreed to that.

"You need new clothes, my love, and not the plain kind that you're wearing now!" Elise responded.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing now?!" Leon asked indignantly.

"They're too simple. If you're going to be interacting with nobles—which as a knight, you *will* be—then you need something with a little more flash," Elise said with a smile.

Leon frowned; he didn't care what the other nobles thought of him, and he cared even less about what they thought about his clothes. Besides, he greatly preferred the comfort that came from simpler clothing. He wouldn't need to spend all day dressing like he would if he wore something weighed down with gold thread.

After a moment of he and Elise staring at each other in silence, Leon said, "I suppose I can compromise for *one* fancy outfit. The rest of what I get will be some regular shit."

"I can live with that," Elise replied. "So, are you coming?" she asked of Alix.

"Yes!" Alix almost shouted. "I mean... I would love to accompany the two of you..." she said much quieter. She hadn't made that big of a deal about it, but she didn't have that many clothes, either.

Elise giggled a little at her enthusiasm, then, seeing that Leon and Alix were finished with their breakfast, made a subtle gesture to the waiting servants to collect the leftovers and the used dishes.

"Would it be a problem if I joined the two of you for your training?" she asked Leon. He, of course, nodded his assent, as did Alix when Elise turned to her. "Wonderful!" she said happily. She then dragged Leon back to her room, while telling Alix to get changed and to meet them in her training room. She also ordered a servant to act as a guide for Alix, should she need one.

Much of the rest of the morning was spent with Leon and Alix sparring, and Elise happily watching—though her eyes were mostly on Leon, imagining him in various clothes to try and see what would work with his look.

Around eleven, Leon and Alix stopped their training to wash up and ready themselves to head out into the city. They were only slightly delayed when Elise took the opportunity to have a bath with Leon, but they still got outside in due time.

—

"*This* is the place?" Leon asked, looking at the grand edifice of the tailor Elise had led him and Alix to.

"This is the place," Elise confirmed with a smile. "This is where almost all of the high nobles get their clothes made when in the capital."

"I... don't think I can afford this place..." Alix said quietly as she stared at the building. It was made of shiny polished granite and black marble, with a courtyard that had a fountain as a centerpiece. Everywhere she looked screamed at her that this place was extravagantly expensive, and she was only a first-tier squire in the Legion; she did have some money, but she guessed she'd be bankrupted before she could buy a single thread from this tailor.

But, Elise smiled at her and said, "This is my treat! We'll get you something good, don't worry about the price!"

The three walked into the building. As befitting the place of business for some of the most respected fashion designers in the Bull Kingdom, the inside was just as magnificently decorated as the outside, with murals covering the floor, walls of enchanted glass and gigantic marble columns that gave the entry hall an open feeling without letting in the heat and dust of the city, and gorgeous marble statues showing off some of the most popular clothing designs the tailors working there provided.

"Lady Elise!" came a cry from behind the front desk. The speaker was a young woman, Leon guessed in her mid-twenties, who wore a modest dress that was incredibly similar to one of the dresses on a nearby statue. Her purple-dyed hair was pulled into a loose plait and draped over one shoulder.

"How can we help you today?" asked the attendant.

"I need to get my friends some new clothes," Elise politely answered, making sure to smile at the young attendant.

"Of course, please follow me to a private room!" the attendant said. She led them into a quiet room that had been lined with dark wood and given soft lights. In the center of the room was a small platform that was half-surrounded with mirrors and could be completely surrounded with dark red velvet curtains. This platform had numerous dim magical lights, to help whoever was trying on clothes to see themselves in any kind of light.

After showing them into the private changing room, the attendant left to fetch one of their best tailors. She was back in a matter of minutes, with a middle-aged woman in another dress that Leon recognized from the entry hall. Her pitch-black hair had been styled much like the attendants, tied into a ponytail and pulled over a shoulder.

"Lady Elise! It's so good to see you again!" the tailor said as she and Elise hugged each other in greeting.

"Miss Gisela! I'm glad you're here today!" Elise replied.

"Whatever can we do for you today?" Gisela asked.

Elise turned to Leon and Alix and said, "My friends are looking for some formal attire, as well as something comfortable to wear every day. They're both in the Legion, so I think they might also need some training clothes, too."

"Well, let's see what we can do for them," Gisela said enthusiastically. She walked over to Alix first, to inspect Alix's looks and body, to try and figure out what might look good on her. A pair of assistants entered the room, and Gisela began ordering them around. One was sent off for fabric samples while the other began to get measurements of Alix's body, much to the young woman's embarrassment.

“Oh, don’t mind them,” Elise said, “they need to make sure your clothes are perfect fits, after all!”

Alix frowned but allowed the measuring to continue. When the assistant was done with her, she moved on to measuring Leon, who looked even less thrilled than Alix to have a stranger touching him just about everywhere. But, he retained control over himself and let the assistant finish her work without releasing killing intent or anything else of the sort.

After that, it was a flurry of changing into a wide variety of clothes behind the platform’s curtains for Leon and Alix while Elise and Gisela watched and offered suggestions. By the end, they had been there for over three hours, and Leon was left exhausted. Alix had some fun trying on the new clothes, but even she had had enough when it came time to leave.

As they were leaving the tailor, Elise leaned in to whisper to a profoundly unhappy Leon, “You looked great in that suit, you should wear it for me sometime...”

“I think it might be a *long* time before I wear that gaudy thing,” Leon answered, glaring back at the tailor. He and Alix had both bought some fancy clothes that would need attention from Gisela before they were ready, while they both walked away with bags full of more normal—and in Leon’s case, monochrome—clothing that didn’t need much work from a tailor. Their ornate clothing would be delivered to Elise’s estate before they left for the Bull’s Horns.

“Are you saying you don’t want to go to parties with me?” Elise asked teasingly.

“Going anywhere with you is a delight,” Leon answered with complete seriousness. “However, the idea of going to any kind of party is rather unappealing to me...”

“Well, I’ll figure out a way to get you to wear that outfit,” Elise replied with a sinister smile.

“I think she’s right, though, you did look pretty good in it,” Alix said.

“I... uh...” Leon sputtered, not knowing how to respond.

“See? Are you going to argue with both of us?” Elise asked.

Leon wisely shut his mouth and stared ahead of them, causing Elise to laugh and Alix to chuckle a little. If Leon weren’t her knight, her formal commander, then she would’ve probably let out quite a bit more than just a chuckle, though.

“Lady Elise,” Alix began, tactfully shifting the topic away from Leon’s wardrobe.

“Please, just call me Elise,” the other lady replied.

Alix smiled, and asked, “Elise, I’ve been noticing the same hairstyle a lot, is that just the fashion down here?”

Leon blinked in confusion, but a quick glance around at the crowds of people around them revealed that most of the women indeed had their hair styled in the same way as Gisela and the attendant. Leon hadn’t paid much attention to it, but he was sure that most of the ladies didn’t style their hair that way before he left for Fort 127.

Elise glanced around as well. Her own long shiny red hair was loose and allowed to hang over her shoulders and down her back, making her rather unique in terms of style compared to the other ladies around.

“Well,” Elise explained, “the First Princess made an appearance at court about three weeks ago. She wore her hair like that, and it seems she made quite the impression on the courtiers. Over the past few weeks, the noble ladies have started wearing their hair like that, and it’s only spread from there.”

“Ahh,” Alix whispered.

She and Elise spent the next few minutes talking about hairstyles until they returned to Elise’s estate. After that, it was time for meditation training. Alix spent several hours in Elise’s training room quietly meditating while Leon practiced trying to change his mana into lightning magic. Elise passed those hours in her garden, staring at nature enchantments and trying to make them more efficient.

In the neighboring wing of the estate, her mother watched with an enormous smile on her face. Even after they’d left after morning training, she’d kept an eye on them. After a while, she called a servant over to her and instructed her to relay an invitation to Elise to invite her and her guests to share dinner, so she could get to know them better.

#### **Chapter 166: Roland’s Investigation**

“She turned down the invitation?” Emilie asked, seeking confirmation from the servant she sent to her daughter extending an invitation for her, Leon, and Alix to join her for dinner.

“Yes, my lady. Young Lady Elise was quite emphatic, in fact,” the servant answered. He was standing at the door, where a light enchantment had created a black curtain-like wall that blocked all light from passing. Just beyond it, Emilie was lounging on a sofa, completely naked. She was leaning back against one of her concubines, an exceptionally muscular dark-skinned man from the Samar Kingdom, while another concubine, an almost effeminately thin man, rubbed her feet. Both men were also naked.

The servant, of course, knew what was going on behind the light curtain, so he didn’t pry. He respectfully remained behind the curtain, though Emilie wasn’t nearly so shy as to care if he saw her body or not.

“Well, that’s disappointing,” Emilie whispered. “I was hoping to meet that boy that has so captured my daughter’s attention...”

Ajax had written to her almost immediately after Leon had left Teira, and had included just enough details in his letter for Emilie to correctly guess Leon’s identity. And, though she didn’t say it out loud, as she didn’t want to say it in front of her concubines, Leon’s identity as the last survivor of House Raime piqued her interest in far more ways than him simply being Elise’s lover.

“Very well, I won’t insist that she join me,” Emilie said after a few moments of thought. “However, please relay to her my disappointment, and my expectation that she finds the time sometime soon to make a formal introduction between myself and her boyfriend.”

“Yes, my Lady,” the servant replied, and he left to relay the message.

For a moment, it seemed like the man rubbing Emilie's feet was about to say something, but a quick glare from her shut him up. She wasn't about to let her daughter's obstinance ruin her relaxation time.

—

Roland leaned back into his favorite chair, stretched out, and cracked open a book. He had just returned from a meeting with Prince August and had almost collapsed from exhaustion when he returned home. It was only the smile of his wife, Melissa, and the sight of his son walking over to him that kept him going long enough to get out of his uniform and persevere until he made it to the family room in his villa.

This place was his sanctuary, with no one but himself, his wife, his son, and his most trusted servants allowed within; and even the latter had to have a serious reason to enter, as Roland made it clear that when he was in this sanctuary, work was set aside.

"It's so rare we get moments like this, anymore," Melissa said with a contented smile on her face. She was sitting across the table from him, in another armchair with their son sitting in her lap dozing off.

"It's a shame, but as a Paladin, I have work that has to get done," Roland replied.

"I understand," Melissa stated. "My own work keeps me more than busy, but we should really allocate more time to just relax as a family like this."

"I certainly wouldn't say no to that," Roland said. "However, this is a critical time for Prince August. Octavius has continued to tour the Western Territories and has even made a few appearances in the South over the past year. Prince August has made several repeated attempts to get him to return to the capital and assist with the administration of the government, but Octavius has refused every time."

"Why would he do that? I would think being in the capital would give him more power than constantly being on the move," Melissa wondered aloud.

"... We think he's been gathering support from the nobility in order to shore up his claim to the throne. He's already visited every Duke in the West, and most of the Dukes in the South. We also know that almost every high noble in those Territories has visited him at some point, which is troubling, to say the least, as Prince August certainly isn't going to be giving up his own claim any time soon," Roland said, his face contorting with worry.

"Prince August is a smart man," Melissa said, reassuring her husband. "He'll get on top of this, and you'll be right there at his side as he does so. But, for now, you're supposed to be relaxing, so let the work talk drop!"

"Yes, dear," Roland said with a chuckle.

The two took a few more minutes to rest in silence before they rose and moved to a nearby couch, where they could both play with their son. It was a fine time, and for a brief moment, Roland forgot all about being a Paladin. That is, until a servant timidly opened the door of the family room and stuck her head in.

"What is it?" Melissa asked in a voice that was, perhaps, a little too sharp.

She immediately regretted snapping at the servant, who ducked back behind the door and quietly said, "An urgent letter came for the Good Sir, my Lady!"

Roland sighed, then walked over to the door, where he apologized to the servant and received the letter.

"Who's it from?" Melissa asked.

"The Office of the Consul of the North," Roland answered, his eyes narrowing. He immediately sat down and stared at the letter in his hand, remembering the lengths he'd gone to in order to look into the Academy trainee-turned-squire Luke had seen on the street about a month previously.

—

It had started the day after the commencement and knighting ceremony, when Leon and the rest of his circle of friends had already gone out to celebrate completing their training in the Academy. Prince August had no need for him, so Roland made his way down to the Knight Academy around one or two in the afternoon, accompanied only by Luke.

"Sir Roland!" exclaimed the secretary in the entry hall of the Academy's Administration building.

"Good day," Roland said in greeting.

"W-what can I help you with?" the young secretary behind the desk asked.

"I'd like to speak with the Legate as soon as possible," Roland answered. The secretary nodded furiously, then waved at a nearby first-tier mage to leave, who Roland assumed was there to act as a runner.

The runner came back almost immediately, and Roland was led to the Legate's office.

"Sir Roland, welcome!" the Legate said as he stood and walked over to shake Roland's hand, and gestured to the chairs and couch in his office.

Roland graciously took a seat, and asked, "I've come here to inquire about a trainee that was recently sent off for his squireship."

"Getting right to the point, eh?" the Legate said with an appreciative nod. "What's this trainee's name? I might have heard of him."

"Leon Ursus," Roland answered.

The Legate knew exactly who Roland was asking about. He remembered Leon from the duel he had with Gaius during the Combat Test. More importantly, he was one of the few people in the Bull Kingdom who had correctly guessed Leon's identity. The Legate's heart rate skyrocketed, but his face remained jovial, showing no sign that he was affected by Roland's purpose.

"That name does sound familiar," the Legate had to admit, "I believe he was one of the third-tier trainees who led the Snow Lions to victory this past cycle..."

"Can you tell me anything else about him? Physical description, perhaps?" Roland asked, betraying his own burning curiosity by leaning in and narrowing his eyes.

"Can't say that I can, I don't actually interact with the trainees very much in my position," the Legate answered. After he'd guessed who Leon really was, he'd made the decision to avoid involving himself in the younger mage's affairs, to minimize the risk of drawing the attention of those who had destroyed House Raime as much as possible. He'd even made excuses to involve himself as little as possible in the training of Leon's cycle, and to not check the squireships Nicomedes gave the third-tier trainees in Leon's year.

"Well, then, how about where and who he went to squire for? He was in the winning unit, so he had to have been sent somewhere within or close to the capital..."

There was a short silence following Roland's follow-up question, while the Legate smiled at the Paladin. He deliberately dragged out his response, making Roland impatient.

"Why are you so interested in this young boy?" the Legate asked, slowly enunciating each word.

"I believe that he's a boy I encountered recently in the Northern Vales. If I'm right, then I'd like to take him as a squire, if possible," Roland answered.

"We've already issued orders for this boy, and he's likely on his way to his assigned post as we speak," the Legate said. "Did you file a formal request for this boy to be your squire?"

"I didn't," Roland admitted. Most sixth-tier knights would have a high enough rank that they would have someone one of their subordinates send for a squire, and actually knew little about the trainees in any given year. Roland, however, liked to be a little more discerning, and to do his research on every trainee in the Academy. Consequently, Luke had only been his second squire.

"So, then, you want to deprive another deserving knight of an Academy trained squire, so you can take him on yourself?" the Legate pressed, hoping, but not believing, that Roland would let the matter drop.

"I'm not trying to inconvenience anyone, but as I said, if it's *possible*, I'd like to look out for this boy. I saw him fight in the Northern Vales, and I'd very much like to take him under my wing," Roland explained.

"Assuming this is the same person," the Legate added.

"Assuming this is the same person," Roland repeated.

After another moment's pause, the Legate stood up. Roland made to do the same, but the Legate waved him back into his seat. The Legate stuck his head out of his office door, spoke a few words to one of his assistants, then returned to his seat. *'I can't get too close to this, and if I stand in the Paladin's way too vehemently, then he'll likely guess that I also know who Leon Ursus is...'* the Legate had thought.

"I'm not going to get in your way, Sir Roland," the Legate said out loud. "However, I don't know where this Leon Ursus is being sent. So, I've asked my logistics officer, Sir Nicomedes Tullius, to join us. You may direct all your questions regarding the specifics of where the young Ursus is being sent to him."

"Thank you, Sir Aeneas," Roland said gratefully.

"Don't thank me just yet, Paladin," the Legate said. "I will not rescind Ursus' orders. He's going where Sir Tullius has sent him. If you want to take him as your own squire, you'll have to take that up with the unit he's been assigned to."

"I understand," Roland responded.

They waited in the Legate's office for a few minutes, until Nicomedes arrived.

"Nico!" the Legate said in greeting. "Please, take a seat, Sir Roland has a few questions regarding a specific trainee we've just sent out for his squireship."

"Well, I hope I can answer Sir Roland's questions," Nicomedes said.

Roland and the Legate quickly brought Nicomedes up to speed on who Roland was looking for.

"His name *does* sound familiar," Nicomedes said. He was a little startled that Roland was looking for Leon, but he didn't let it show on his face.

"Do you remember where he's being sent to?" Roland asked.

"Unfortunately, I do not," Nicomedes answered, lying through his teeth. "I have almost one thousand trainees to see to every year, and I can hardly be expected to remember where I send each and every one, wouldn't you agree?"

Roland frowned, as he figured the Tribune would remember the third-tier trainees, at least, but he didn't question Nicomedes. "Can you check your records then?" he asked the Nico as politely as he could.

"Is this an official request, or just something you'd like to know?" Nicomedes asked.

"This is a personal request," said Roland.

The Legate almost winced as soon as the Paladin said this, and he felt the powerful urge to glare at Nicomedes. *'I was hoping to ignore official documents, but now that that ass has brought it up, that's impossible now...'*

Nicomedes glanced over at the Legate, who frowned, sighed, and said, "There *are* a few forms that you are going to have to take care of, if this isn't official business, Paladin."

Roland grit his teeth in frustration, but he nodded his head and tried to not let it show. "If you could help me, that would be great..." he said.

"Then I will have the proper forms sent over to your home as soon as I can," Nicomedes said.

"Thank you," Roland said as politely as he could. With his business done, he rose, said his goodbyes, and left.

He met Luke back in the entry hall, who came over and asked, "So, what's the news?"

"I get the feeling that the Tribune in charge of logistics here is *slightly* corrupt, and that the Legate isn't so squeaky clean either," Roland said quietly.

"If they're noble, then I'm sure they're both a little more than *slightly* corrupt," Luke said with a smile.

"Indeed, nepotism and corruption are fairly strong ingredients in blue blood... Still, they avoided my questions by throwing bureaucracy in my face. Neither are wrong, they're just a obstructionist asses..."

“What do we do now?” Luke asked.

“We wait for the forms to come to my house, then we wait for the answer to my inquiries. Not much else we can do right now.”

Luke frowned, mirroring Roland’s own expression.

—

After the Paladin left, the Legate turned to Nicomedes.

“Have you ever forgotten where you’ve sent a trainee, before?” he asked, his eyes narrowing in obvious suspicion of his Tribune.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Nicomedes said flippantly.

“You were deliberately avoiding his questions,” the Legate said.

“There are rules and regulations that everyone must follow,” Nicomedes countered. “Whether they are nobles or up-jumped commoners, they must follow the procedures.”

“I don’t like yelling at my subordinates in front of others—I find it humiliating for everyone—so you will *not* do something like this again or I will do just that. It costs the Academy nothing to tell a Paladin—or a Consul, for that matter—where a trainee has been sent if they ask, and it puts that Paladin or Consul in our debt,” the Legate said, his anger mounting.

“I would be happy to cooperate with a *Paladin*,” Nicomedes passionately said, “however, that man is no Paladin. He was appointed by the Fourth Prince, but when the King returns, I’m sure he’ll be kicked out in a heartbeat! Paladins should be seventh-tier mages, and of proper lineage!”

“Enough!” shouted the Legate. “Roland will fill out the paperwork, and you will tell him what he wants to know without delay! Maybe then I won’t have you replaced!”

The Legate began to emit his prodigious killing intent, and Nicomedes, despite having been fired up just a few seconds before, sank down into his chair like a withered stalk of grass.

“Now, tell me, where did you send Ursus?” the Legate growled. He could tell that part of the reason Nicomedes was denying Roland was that he didn’t want anyone looking into where he sent Leon, which he found obviously suspicious.

Nicomedes lost what little color remained in his face, and hesitantly said, “... A fort on the northern border, watching over the Frozen Mountains for Valeman activity...”

The Legate scowled and stared coolly at his Tribune. *‘That’s actually a good place for that boy,’* he thought to himself, but he was careful not to let his approval show on his face. *‘The enemies of his family would hardly look into such a backwater, I’d wager...’*

However, his approval of where Nicomedes sent Leon was based purely on knowledge of Leon’s identity; as the Legate of the Knight Academy, he couldn’t openly support the decision. Sending a trainee to a nowhere fort wasn’t strictly against the rules, but it simply wasn’t done.

“Do you remember what it was like when you first arrived here?” the Legate suddenly asked.

“... Sir?” Nicomedes said in confusion.

“I mean how I would scrutinize your every action, and constantly hover over your shoulder making sure you didn’t succumb to the same corruption that caused me to dismiss your predecessor, and *his* predecessor.”

Nicomedes clenched his teeth in frustration. He absolutely remembered that time, he couldn’t do a single thing without the Legate closely scrutinizing it. After years in the position, though, the Legate had backed off and given him quite a bit of autonomy, so long as he kept his nose clean and wasn’t more corrupt than any other high-ranking knight in the Royal Legions.

“Do you want to go back to that time?” the Legate asked.

“No, Sir,” Nicomedes immediately replied.

*‘I feel that, perhaps, I have been too generous in my granting of autonomy. That will have to change...’* the Legate thought to himself.

“The dignity of the Knight Academy demands more than a tiny border fort. I will be taking a more active role in squire assignments from now on,” the Legate said, causing Nicomedes to frown in dejection.

“And you had best cooperate fully with the Paladin, or else I will be taking a much closer and more *official* look into this matter. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir!”

He couldn’t actually punish his Tribune, as Nicomedes hadn’t technically broken any rules, despite the obvious disregard for ethics. Still, the Legate certainly intended to make Nico’s life much harder for the next year or two, to make sure the Tribune wouldn’t do anything so blatantly corrupt again—and so that he wouldn’t have to open any official investigations into the matter that would leave paper trails.

Suffice it to say, Roland learned that Leon had been sent to Fort 127 a week later. It had taken that long for the paperwork to be processed, but once it was, Nicomedes made sure that the Paladin was informed right away. If he didn’t, then the Legate would have real cause to remove him from his office, as he’d specifically ordered Nico to inform Roland as soon as the paperwork allowed.

It then took Roland another few days to find out exactly where the fort in question was, and when he did, he almost screamed in anger and frustration. He couldn’t leave the capital on a whim, and so was forced to send a letter inquiring after Leon to the Consul of the North, who could then pass it on to his subordinates, who would then pass it on the commander of the fort.

Now, a little more than a month later, Roland received an unexpected reply from the Consul of the North himself, rather than the expected fort commander.

—

“What does it say?” Melissa asked.

Roland had opened the letter and slowly read it through twice. It was short and to the point, and Roland’s face grew red from anger as he read through it. He sighed and took a few moments to choose his words carefully, so as to not break out into undignified swearing and cursing in front of his son.

"The Consul says that I don't have a right to know about the squire in question. He says that only Paladins, Princes, or the Bull King himself can make such inquiries of him."

"But you *are* a Paladin," Melissa said, her head tilting in confusion.

"The Consul would disagree, I think. He's implying that since the King didn't appoint me personally, that I'm not a real Paladin."

Roland's face was bitter and angry, but he held it in as best as he could.

"I'm going to see Prince August tomorrow," he said.

"You're going north?" Melissa asked. She wrapped her arms around their son and held him close. He was playing with a toy soldier and making war sounds and wasn't paying any attention to what his parents were saying.

"I am. They will find it harder to deny me what I want to know if I'm there in person."

Melissa frowned for a moment, then asked, "How long will you be gone?"

"No more than a month," Roland answered with a confident smile. "I want to be gone from your arms for as little time as possible, so be assured that I'll make this little trip quick."

"I'll be holding you to that," Melissa replied.

## **Chapter 167: Investigations and Enchantments**

"Roland! Please, come on in," Prince August said with a good-natured smile when his friend arrived.

"Your Highness," Roland said as he walked into the Prince's office. The Prince looked even more tired than usual, with his face more pale and the bags under his eyes more pronounced, but he still moved with the same energy as he had three years ago, when he had first started more of an active role in political affairs. Despite this, it was obvious to Roland that serving as regent was getting to August; the Prince needed, but couldn't afford, a break.

"What brings you here today?" August asked.

"I've been looking into something for a little while, and I've been getting delayed or stonewalled in my attempts," Roland explained.

"Maybe I can help," August generously offered. "What have you been looking into, and what can I help with?"

Roland had been thinking about how much he should say to August ever since he'd read the Consul of the North's letter the night before, but he still needed a moment of silence to work up the courage. He was betraying his word, after all, and that wasn't something that he found natural to do.

"When I was in the Northern Vales last year," the Paladin hesitantly began, "I met a man. This man was exceptionally powerful, and he guided us to the grove of Heartwood Trees where we found that chunk of Heartwood Amber."

"Yes, I remember you telling me about him. A Valeman of that level of power is certainly something to take note of, isn't it?" August said with a tired smile.

"I... didn't tell you everything, Your Highness," Roland admitted. August's smile faltered a little, but he remained silent, letting Roland explain himself. "This man swore me to secrecy, but I believe that it's something you need to be aware of before I explain my purpose in coming here."

Roland paused until August nodded to him to continue.

"Your Highness, that man was Artorias Raime."

August's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when Roland said that, so surprised was he. "A scion of House Raime is still alive?" he wondered out loud. Out of curiosity, when he assumed the position of regent, he'd read the reports of what had happened when the local Legion arrived at Artorias' villa after it had been attacked. No bodies had been found, but the villa had been nearly burned to the ground. After they'd been missing for a year, it had just been assumed that Artorias and his family had been killed in the battle that had obviously taken place.

"Artorias fled to the Northern Vales, Your Highness. From what I gathered, his wife was missing, but his son was present. He accompanied us through the Vales and to the Heartwood Grove," Roland said.

"Why are you telling me all of this now?" August asked with a tightly controlled tone. "I assume Sir Artorias was the one to swear you to secrecy once he was identified..."

"That was indeed the case, Your Highness. He didn't want me to inform anyone about his location and status."

"Yet here you are, breaking that oath."

"I believe it's necessary, Your Highness."

"Why?"

"Because I think that Artorias' son, Leon, has come south and joined the Royal Legions!" Roland quickly walked Prince August through the, admittedly light and circumstantial, evidence he'd collected that supported his belief, how Luke thought he'd seen Leon, Roland's discovery of a Valeman on the list of trainees with Leon's name, and then about how he'd been jerked around by Nicomedes and the Consul of the North.

"So, you want to go to the Northern Territories and look into this 'Leon Ursus', to see if he's actually Leon Raime?" August asked, to which Roland nodded in confirmation. "Well, my friend, this is a lot you've thrown at me. There was a Valeman incursion into Count Whitefield's lands only a few weeks ago. It was relatively small and easily dealt with, but it has ignited a feud between Count Whitefield and his vassals and allies, and the Royal Legions. I've been in constant communication with both Sir Clovis and Count Whitefield, and I can tell you that things up there are complicated right now—it's all I can do to prevent another battle from taking place."

"I understand, Your Highness, and I wouldn't ask to continue this investigation in the Northern Territories unless I thought it was required."

August sighed, then said, “I will send you to Sir Clovis, in an official capacity. I will give you a missive that makes it clear that his rank as a Consul is lower to mine as both Prince and Regent. He will assist your investigation, or his rank will be forfeit.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“And if you can, try to cool things between him and Count Whitefield. I don’t need a small civil war in the North right now.”

“I’ll do what I can, Your Highness.”

“If this boy really is who you say he is, then make sure to bring him back here. I’m sure those that destroyed his family are still out there, so we must protect him. Plus, when he grows older, we can return the Great Plateau to him, and cement the Northern Territories as loyal to the crown, as they were when Archduke Kyros was still around.”

*‘... and make the Northern Territories loyal to me, or at least, keep them away from Octavius...’* August thought to himself.

Roland frowned a little, and asked, “Your Highness, that sounds a bit like you want to use him as a political pawn...”

August glanced at Roland and sighed. “Octavius has been spending the last few years drumming up support from the West and the South, while I’ve been stuck in the capital trying to keep the peace. I’ve made some progress with the nobles in the Eastern Territories, but I *need* the support of the North. If Father dies before I’m able to collect all the ingredients for the potion that will wake him up, then I’m afraid Octavius will run right over us. I’ll find myself upon the headsman’s block, my mother will be exiled, and my sister will likely be married off to one of Octavius’ supporters—assuming both of them don’t join me in death, that is.

“I can’t afford to lose to Octavius, my friend. If this boy you’re seeking can help me win, then I won’t hesitate to use him. But, I’m not Octavius; I won’t force him to do anything he doesn’t want to do. But, can you think of any greater reward for assisting a Prince than being granted the only Archduchy in the entire Kingdom?”

“That would mean going public with his identity,” Roland said quietly.

“And we’ll protect him. He’ll have my full support.”

Roland sat there in awkward silence for a little longer. After a minute or so, Prince August wrote up his missive granting Roland all the authority he needed to investigate Leon’s whereabouts, and then Roland was dismissed to organize his journey to the Northern Territories.

—

Aside from the time he spent training with Alix and the time he was with Elise, Leon focused on his enchantment work. Specifically, he and Xaphan were working on crafting the fire enchantments Leon wanted to carve into his armor.

[... and three more focusing runes near the edges, and that should do it,] Xaphan said.

Leon carefully wrote the last three runes onto the large sheet of paper in front of him and sat back to examine his work. It was a sprawling mess of runes emanating from the central glyph, five interconnected runic circles formed by more than fifty fire runes, fourteen light runes, and eight air runes. Around this central glyph, Leon added a large runic circle with fifty lightning runes. Spiraling out from there was a web of additional runes that controlled, amplified, focused, and otherwise altered the magic power that flowed through the enchantment.

Xaphan gave a deep sigh from within Leon's soul realm. The fire enchantments were perfectly functional, he was certain, but the lightning additions that Leon had made were outside of his wheelhouse, and he had no idea if the overall enchantment was going to work.

[It's fine,] Leon said confidently.

[And if it isn't?] Xaphan asked.

[Then we'll keep working on it until it's fine,] Leon answered.

Xaphan took a deep breath, then said, [Then let's hope it's fine. Why don't you activate it and see what you can see?]

Leon complied, pressing his palm into the central glyph and channeling some of his magic power into the enchantment. For a moment, nothing happened.

[... It's not working,] Xaphan observed.

[I can see that,] Leon said. [I'm just not channeling enough power...]

Leon concentrated more; he wanted to see if the enchantment worked, but if he used too much power, he could destroy the spell paper it was written on. Fortunately, he had written down extensive notes as he crafted this enchantment, so he could recreate it if something went wrong, though it would be a time-consuming process.

But, Leon didn't destroy the spell paper. The enhanced control over mana and magic power he acquired from ascending to the fourth-tier made it almost easy for him to adjust his magical output, so he slowly increased the amount of magic flowing into the enchantment. The central glyph began to glow, followed by the circle of lightning runes, and then the rest of the enchantment.

[It's working,] Leon said.

[It's *glowing*,] Xaphan corrected.

[That means the enchantment is working,] Leon countered.

[That means that the magic power is flowing to every rune,] Xaphan responded. [We won't know if the enchantment works until we enchant something with it.]

Just at that moment, Leon heard a voice from behind say, "What have you been working on while I've been gone?"

Leon couldn't help but smile, as he recognized the voice as coming from Elise. He turned and saw his lover standing in the doorway of the small enchantment workshop adjacent to her garden that he was working in.

"I've been writing down the first of the enchantments I've been planning on inscribing onto my armor," he answered.

"Oooh, can I see?" Elise asked with an expectant smile.

"Of course," Leon answered, and Elise almost bounced forward to examine the paper in front of him. She had just returned from a meeting with some of the merchants in the Heaven's Eye Tower. They had wanted to arrange for some new supply lines to be established from the coastal cities along the western coast of Aeterna, and Emilie had thrust the responsibility for dealing with it onto Elise.

Elise suspected this was payback for turning down her mother's invitation for dinner, but she considered it a small price to pay to avoid the awkwardness of introducing Leon to Emilie. Still, she hurriedly dealt with the merchants and came back as quickly as her formal business dress would allow. In fact, so eager was she, that she didn't even change when she came back home, going instead straight to where Leon was working.

After a few moments, Elise looked over to Leon with a quizzical look. "Where did you learn these kinds of enchantments?" she asked. "I can barely tell what it's supposed to do..."

"It's designed to amplify and strengthen the fire and lightning magic that passes through it, as well as granting much finer control over it," Leon answered. "I just don't know how well it works. Having two separate enchantments for both elements would've been a simpler solution, but there's limited space on my gauntlets, and I wanted to be as efficient as possible."

"Want to test it?" Elise asked, giving Leon a proud smile.

"I assume you're asking because you have a way?" Leon inquired. Elise nodded, so he said, "Of course!"

"Wonderful!" Elise said, almost jumping for joy at being able to show off. She hurried over to a cabinet and pulled out a sheet of ash-grey paper. "Copy your enchantment onto this, I'll be right back!"

Leon nodded and got to work. The paper wasn't that big, so he had to be incredibly careful; however, he'd practiced his enchanting skills enough that he had finished the core glyph by the time Elise returned. She'd swapped her tight black dress for loose-fitting white training clothes and had pulled her hair back into a loose ponytail.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Give me another ten or fifteen minutes," Leon answered.

When he was done, Elise held out a cheap leather bracer. It was obviously old leather and wasn't made from any magical creature, so the only use it could have would be for testing enchantments.

"Wrap this in that paper," Elise instructed. "That paper will then burn the enchantment into the bracer, so you won't have to carve or inscribe it yourself!"

Leon raised his eyebrows in surprise. He'd been assuming he'd have to use a small hammer and chisel to get his enchantments onto his armor and had been dreading it. But, if this paper could be used on the Magmic Steel his armor was made of, then he wouldn't have to stress about making a mistake.

He hurriedly did as instructed and wrapped the bracer in the paper. The runes on the paper briefly glowed red-hot, and when he unwrapped the bracer, the runes had been burned into it. Running his fingers along the bracer revealed to Leon that the runes were slightly indented, meaning that they were far more than just burns that could be polished off.

Smiling, Leon put on the bracer, and he called forth a tiny fraction of Xaphan's power. Elise already knew that he had some command of fire despite only being a fourth-tier mage, so she wasn't surprised when a tiny flame no larger than a candle appeared in Leon's palm.

[It seems to be working fine on my end, how's it going with you?] Xaphan asked.

Leon's smile almost split his face in half. [It seems to be working perfectly, though we'll still need some testing to be sure.]

He quickly explained as much to Elise, but just as she was about to offer to escort him to her training room, a servant appeared in the garden just outside the workshop.

Alix had left after morning training to spend the day in the capital, so Elise had thought she and Leon would be able to be alone for a long while; she wasn't thrilled to be interrupted. However, when she went to speak with the servant, Leon noticed a look of excitement on her face as the servant handed her a message before leaving to wait outside the garden.

Elise hurriedly read the message. It was only a single short paragraph, but Elise went from happy and excited to confused, and then to furious. As she scanned the message again, her fury only grew, and she began to emit killing intent, something which Leon didn't think he'd seen her do before.

"That *bastard!*" she screamed.

"What is it?" he asked as he pulled her into a hug from behind.

"That *animal!*" she roared.

"What is it?" Leon asked again, with much more insistence.

"*This,*" Elise said, brandishing the message as if it were a thing profane, "is the conclusion reached from analyzing the invisibility enchantment you gave to us!"

## **Chapter 168: Sanctions**

"What did you find?" Leon asked, looking at the message in Elise's hand. She had just received a message with Heaven's Eye's analysis of the invisibility enchantment on the ring he took from the assassins who came for him on the galley a month ago.

'*This must be something quite serious, to get her so worked up,*' Leon thought, as he observed Elise's towering killing intent.

"That ring," she said, waving at the emerald ring on Leon's hand, "was crafted and enchanted by a Heaven's Eye enchanter for the Duke of Aurelianorum! That asshole Tiberias' father!"

Leon's eyes narrowed in anger, and he immediately understood Elise's own rage. Tiberias had been trying to court Elise by sending her gifts and invitations to parties, despite Elise making it exceedingly clear that she wasn't interested. She had even gotten a package from him in the few days since Leon returned, containing a heavy golden necklace with five huge glittering rubies, which didn't move her heart at all; she gave the necklace back to the courier who delivered it and had it returned immediately.

"Wait a moment," Leon said, "if this ring was for Tiberias' father, then why would he give it to a third-tier assassin? Why wouldn't he keep it for himself?"

"It was part of a bulk order. The Duke paid more than forty million silvers for twenty rings," Elise answered, brandishing the message again. "He has plenty of rings to spare for assassins..."

Leon sighed and took a seat at the table he had been working at. He had a strange smile on his face, but Elise couldn't sense a single trace of killing intent emanating from him, in stark contrast to herself.

"Do you plan to do anything about this?" Elise asked angrily. She was a little frustrated at Leon's subdued response, as she expected the same explosive anger that she was feeling.

"Oh, I'm planning plenty," Leon said with a vicious smile. "But, for now, I will focus on ascending to the fifth-tier. It won't take nearly as long as the fourth-tier did, I can tell. Not a hell of a lot a single fourth-tier mage can do, is there?"

"You're not just a single fourth-tier mage, though," Elise said, glaring first at him, then at the paper in her hand, "you're affiliated with Heaven's Eye. We can do plenty to the Duke."

"Can you destroy them outright?" Leon asked.

"No..." Elise replied. "Or at least, not without some serious repercussions..."

Leon looked at her, and for the first time, she realized just how wrathful he was; when their eyes met, she felt a tiny sliver of his killing intent, and it was like catching a glimpse of the Endless Ocean through a distant window. So great was the killing intent that she saw that for a split second, she lost herself in it and froze up completely. She regained control of herself a moment later when Leon looked away, and she immediately collected herself and restrained her own aura.

"They still attacked you, my love," she said quietly. "They can't just be let go... I can't just let them go..."

Leon's smile softened, and he rose from his seat and pulled Elise into his arms. "I understand. I'm not forgiving them, not by a long shot. There will come a day when I visit Tiberias, and he and I are going to... *have some words*..."

The pair stood there embracing for several silent minutes. They stewed in their anger and fury, though anyone who saw them would've only seen two blissful lovers enjoying each other's presence.

Elise was the first to break that silence, saying, "There *is* actually a way we can act against them right now, and not have to wait around for years until we can personally strike back against them."

Leon noted her use of the word 'we' when talking about personal retaliation, and he smiled wider. He asked, "What do you have in mind?"

"We don't have to do anything overt, but there are a few things I can do as my mother's daughter that can make their lives a living hell." As she thought more and more about what she could do apart from simply sending Heaven's Eye guards after Duke Decimius and Tiberias, Elise started to smile in a manner that reflected Leon's before he stood up.

"Going after their money?" Leon asked.

"More than that, we can go after *all* of their assets," Elise stated. "We can sink their vaults into a quagmire of paperwork so they can't be accessed without significant effort, and we can remove them from our list of trusted partners—they'll be the only high nobles in this kingdom that aren't on it. This will probably cut profits on their products by at least a third due to lost business with our other business partners, probably more... Also, a few words whispered into the ear of the right official in the Royal Palace will see an army of accountants and lawyers invading their lands. That family will see their taxes rise sharply, and I'm sure they've done some shady things to build their wealth, as all noble families have done, which would be uncovered during the audit."

"They are a powerful noble family, though, wouldn't they be able to fight back against the audit?" Leon asked. He knew that the first two actions Elise suggested would badly mangle Tiberias' family's finances, but it was the audit by the Royal Family that could truly ruin them. The audit was also the only thing that House Decimius could resist with any kind of effectiveness.

"They can, and they most certainly will," Elise said, "but it will drive a wedge between them and the Royal Family. A good relationship with the Bull King is worth more in this kingdom than just about any trade agreement with Heaven's Eye."

It wasn't as viscerally satisfying as Leon thought driving his sword into Tiberias' chest would be—and he was certainly thinking about it—but he still looked at Elise and said, "I actually like this idea."

"Really?" she asked, arching an eyebrow. "I thought I would've needed a little more time to convince you before you said that."

"There will be time enough for vengeance with a more personal touch later, when I'm a little stronger," Leon replied.

"Don't you mean when *we're* a little stronger?" Elise asked, with a hint of steel in her voice.

Leon was silent for a moment, but then he said, "Of course I do, it's just hard to change my mannerisms, even though I'm no longer alone in this..."

The two of them leaned forward and softly kissed, with their anger and killing intent quickly fading away in each other's embrace.

"Speaking of hard things..." Elise whispered into Leon's ear. Neither of them needed to say anything more, and Leon pulled off the test bracer, tossed it onto the table, and followed Elise back to her bedroom.

—

Emilie stared at the documents in her hand. She was in her office at the top floor of the Heaven's Eye Tower, with Jordan, her first husband and commander of all Heaven's Eye guards in the city, who had just brought the documents to her.

"So, what are you going to do about that?" Jordan asked her.

"Did these really come from our daughter?" Emilie asked, sounding almost impressed.

"They did," Jordan confirmed.

"Why is she doing this? What has House Decimus done to warrant such an extreme reaction?" Emilie wondered out loud.

Jordan had an idea, as Elise's request for more information on the invisibility enchantment had gone through his department and been brought to his attention, but he didn't know all the details. "I guess we're just going to have to ask her," he said.

"We're?" Emilie asked.

"Yes, it's been too long since I last saw our daughter, I'd like to catch up for a while," Jordan said with the smile of a doting father about to see his only child again.

Emilie was silent for a few moments, but before Jordan could leave, she said, "I'm not going to allow these sanctions—or at least, not yet. I want her to come to me and explain why she's doing this. I hope this isn't just because that young boy Tiberias is continuing to try and court her..."

"How about this," Jordan suggested, "in exchange for these sanctions to go into effect, let's have her introduce her boyfriend to us."

With his suggestion, Emilie's eyes grew wide and she almost jumped out of her chair as she enthusiastically said, "Yes! Let's do that! I'll have the dining hall prepared for a family dinner! The cooks will go all out!"

"Let's slow down there, my dear," Jordan said with a soothing tone. "I think part of the reason why she turned down your last invitation was because of the formality of it. How about instead of a feast in the dining hall, we have a small, *informal*, and intimate meal with our daughter, her boyfriend, and her new friend. No servants, no noble trappings. Sound good?"

A frown appeared on Emilie's face, but she gave it serious consideration. *'Elise has always been more open with him than with me, so he's probably right about this. Still, I wanted to make an impression on that young man!'* she thought, her expression turning a little bitter.

"Very well," she said out loud through clenched teeth.

"Wonderful!" Jordan exclaimed. He immediately left to make the arrangements.

—

After making love, Leon had to finish his enchanting work while Elise dispatched a servant to relay her orders to sanction House Decimus. Then, she went to her library to read. To her surprise, when Elise pushed open the door to her library, she found Alix already there, having come back from her afternoon

in the city some time before. The two ladies smiled and nodded at each other in greeting, but as the point of going there was to quietly read, they didn't say much.

However, Elise had barely been reading her selected book for an hour before someone else entered the room. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the newcomer, but instead of a frown of displeasure at the intrusion, she let out a cry of delight and ran straight into the arms of the man who had just walked in.

Alix was startled at Elise's behavior, but she understood when the latter said, "It's so good to see you again, Daddy!"

"Ahhh, it's been far too long, Butterfly," the man responded.

"What are you doing here?" Elise asked happily when the two separated.

"I've come to drag you to dinner!" her father replied with a wide smile on his face. He then turned to Alix and said, "And your two guests are invited as well!"

The smile on Elise's face faltered a little as she asked, "Will Mother be there?"

"Of course she will," her father answered, "but don't you worry about anything! I've already spoken to her and she'll keep things casual."

Elise crossed her arms and cutely pouted, saying, "I don't want to eat with her..."

"Butterfly," her father said, "will you please come and eat with us? It's been so long since we last sat down and spent some time as a family. So long, in fact, that you've gone and made our family a little bit bigger!"

Elise continued to pout, but a hint of red started to creep into her cheeks. Slowly, she lowered her arms and averted her gaze from Jordan.

Seeing her do this, Jordan put his hands on her shoulders, making her look back him. "I would love it if you were to come. We have some things we need to talk about..." His tone was gentle, and his gaze was soft, like he was looking at the person he loved most in the world—or at least, that was how it seemed to Alix, who was watching in fascination.

Of course, she wasn't wrong, but Jordan also knew that Elise probably wasn't going to say no. And indeed, she slowly nodded her head and said, "I'll be there..."

"And your boyfriend?" Jordan asked.

"... I'll invite him too," Elise responded without the slightest hint of enthusiasm.

"I love you, Butterfly," Jordan said, pulling his daughter into another hug. When they separated again, he turned and walked over to Alix and said, "My lady, may I request the honor of your presence at dinner tonight?"

Alix's eyes went wide and her cheeks turned bright red at how polite and formal Jordan asked, and she was so caught off-guard at being directly asked that she could only respond with a slight head nod.

“Splendid! I’m looking forward to it!” Jordan said as he politely bowed to Alix. He then walked back to the door and opened it, saying to Elise, “I’ll see you in a few hours, Butterfly.” And then he was gone, leaving Elise to sigh in dejection and put her book back on its shelf.

“Best prepare yourself for a formal introduction and an awkward family dinner,” she said to Alix. “My mother has always been stubborn and has a tendency to ask personal questions.”

“I’ll do my best,” Alix responded with a less-than-confident smile. “What should I wear?”

“Go with something informal. In fact, what you’ve got on now is probably perfect,” Elise said, looking at Alix’s tight white blouse and frilly blue skirt. “I’m almost tempted to say you should change into training clothes, but that might be going a little overboard. Anyway, I’ll go get Leon ready, and we’ll come and find you around dinnertime. Sound like a plan?”

“See you then,” Alix said, smiling back at Elise.

### **Chapter 169: Family Dinner**

Dinner that evening was a tremendously tense affair, but not for the reasons Elise envisioned. Things started off well when she, Leon, and Alix met up in her small dining room. It was a small and intimate room, one that Leon hadn’t really seen before as he and Elise would typically eat in her room or in the living room.

But, small as it was, it was still as lavishly decorated as the rest of the estate. It was a circular room, with the walls made up entirely of enchanted glass that gave a pleasant view of the gardens between the estate and the Heaven’s Eye Tower. It was lit with magic lanterns that gave off soft indirect light, and the domed ceiling had a colorful mural depicting an underwater reef. Along the bottom corner of the ceiling was a long frieze that extended all the way around, with images of dozens of different water beasts carved into it.

“So, are you ready for this?” Leon asked Elise.

Elise didn’t respond verbally, but she reassuringly entangled her fingers with Leon’s.

“Is it really all right for me to be here?” Alix asked nervously.

Before anyone could respond, they heard footsteps approaching the dining room from the hall outside.

“Too late to leave now,” Leon whispered.

Several seconds later, the door opened, and two people walked in. The first was a stunningly beautiful woman who looked like a slightly older version of Elise: red hair so bright it was almost luminescent, shining green eyes, and a body that would cause every lady-lover to stare. Even Leon was captivated for a moment before he was able to turn his eyes back to Elise.

Despite the dinner being informal, this woman was dressed to the nines, with a long black dress that had a plunging neckline and left her shoulders bare. It was a dress that seemed to Leon like it was made for the sole purpose of seduction.

[That woman is dangerous,] Xaphan warned.

[What can you tell about her?] Leon asked.

[It's hard for me to be certain, but I can say for sure that she's strong. Easily the strongest mage we've met in this kingdom...] the demon answered apprehensively.

[... I'll keep that in mind,] Leon said, vowing to himself to never underestimate this woman, especially if what Xaphan said wasn't exaggerated and she was stronger than men like the Legate of the Knight Academy, the Consul of the North, and Ajax, the Tower Lord of Teira.

Walking into the dining room behind her was a tall and handsome man, with short brown hair, blue eyes, and an angular face covered in stylish stubble. The last detail was especially notable to Leon, as it was the fashion of the Bull Kingdom for men to be clean shaven.

This man was at least dressed for the event, with plain grey pants and a white shirt. His outfit almost matched Leon's, with the only difference being in the materials their clothes were made of, creating slight variance in their appearance.

[How about this guy?] Leon asked Xaphan. [What can you tell me about him?]

[Sixth-tier would be my guess. No stronger than that Consul you met not too long ago. Although, he's probably far more skilled and possessed of better gear than that knight, and thus far more dangerous. Still far outside your capabilities...]

[Well that's encouraging,] Leon replied sarcastically.

"Dad. Mom," Elise said, purposefully greeting Jordan first. She rose from her seat, prompting Leon and Alix to do likewise, and walked over to the two newcomers and giving them each a hug.

"Hey there, Butterfly," Jordan said, giving Elise a warm smile.

"It's good to see you, Elise," Emilie said. Her smile was a little colder than Jordan's was, but by no means was it fake; she was genuinely happy to see her daughter and to have the opportunity to meet Leon and Alix.

The latter two hovered off to the side until Elise made the introductions, "Leon, Alix, this is my father, Jordan, and my mother, Emilie. Mother, Father, this is Leon, my boyfriend, and Alix, his squire."

"It's wonderful to meet you, at last!" Emilie said as she rushed forward to pull Leon into a hug, causing the latter to freeze up from the sudden human contact.

"Indeed, it's great to have a formal introduction," Jordan said, extending his hand out to Alix, who nervously shook it. After a moment, they swapped, with Emilie wrapping her arms around Alix, and Jordan and Leon shaking hands. Leon was a little surprised to see that there wasn't any hostility in Jordan's eyes, or in his handshake. In fact, both he and Emilie seemed genuinely warm and welcoming, though he resolved to keep his defenses up for the time being, as Elise still hadn't relaxed yet.

Everyone took their seats at the circular table, with Leon and Alix flanking Elise, while Jordan and Emilie sat roughly opposite to them. There was a short awkward silence as a few servants filed in with food and drinks, then left once the table had been set. For five long minutes, there was no sound except for the clinking of silverware.

It was Jordan who spoke up first, to try and alleviate the tense atmosphere. He said to Elise, “I noticed you’ve been getting more involved with Heaven’s Eye of late. How has that been going?”

“Fine,” Elise answered. “It would be going better if I didn’t have to deal with greedy merchants or arrogant nobles every single time it comes time to negotiate something.”

“Yes, that is always tiring,” Jordan said with a grimace. “I’ve never had much patience for that kind of deal-making, to be honest. I remember Emilie tried to have me sit in on a few of her meetings, and by the end of the last one I was in, I almost beat a man to death for his overly aggressive demeanor.”

“Really?” Elise asked, looking at her father in amazement. “I suppose that makes some sense, I never really pictured you as the negotiating type.”

“I think it was that particular experience that destroyed any career I may have had in negotiating contracts,” Jordan said with a laugh.

“That merchant he nearly killed was the Lord Mayor of one of the Six Great Cities on the southern coast. It caused no shortage of problems for us,” Emilie said, though she almost laughed as she did.

“Why did you do that? It can’t have been for just some combative language...” Elise asked.

“He assumed that he had enough power in his city to kick Heaven’s Eye out, and he made no secret of that belief by repeatedly insulting both your mother and Heaven’s Eye—though it was the former that truly set me off. In the end, he found that he did not, in fact, have the power to kick out Heaven’s Eye,” Jordan said with a vicious smile.

“Speaking of business,” Emilie began, “can you tell me why you’re suddenly issuing sanctions against House Decimus? I hope it isn’t because that Tiberias is continuing to try and court you, because what you ordered is incredibly excessive for sending a few gifts and not being able to take a hint...”

Elise didn’t hesitate with her response, stating matter-of-factly, “They tried to murder Leon.”

“They what?” Jordan asked, his gaze turning sharp. In less than a second, a slight undercurrent of killing intent started to permeate the room.

“They tried to kill me while I was taking a galley north,” Leon explained. He then told Jordan and Emilie everything he knew about the incident on the galley, finishing with the invisibility enchantment that led back to House Decimus.

“Hmm, I’ve heard rumors about Duke Euphemius’ Shadow Guards, but I didn’t put much stock in them. It’s hard to imagine someone who invests so heavily in public welfare programs and infrastructure having much need for assassins,” Jordan admitted.

“And yet, assassins who tried to kill Leon had a ring that was made specifically for his House!” Elise said angrily.

“Why would they do something like that? I mean no offense, but Leon is hardly a threat to one of the eminent Houses in the Kingdom,” Emilie wondered. “Unless they learned your true identity...”

Leon’s eyes narrowed and he and stared at Emilie, barely containing his killing intent.

“Oh, I suppose we should say that we know you’re the last surviving member of House Raime,” Emilie stated with a nonchalant smile.

Leon’s instinct to reach for and draw his sword was so strong that fighting it caused him to twitch. The fork in his hand was bent completely out of shape, he was so taken aback.

Of course, Emilie wasn’t nervous at all, as she didn’t believe that Leon had the capacity to harm her. Still, she felt the need to reassure both him and Elise, who was staring daggers at her.

“Oh, you needn’t worry about that. We know about you, but we won’t be telling anyone. Your identity is your own business, and we’re not going to interfere in that.”

Leon was hardly reassured, but he relaxed slightly, setting the deformed fork down on his plate—he’d quite lost his appetite.

On the other side of Elise, Alix was staring at him with wide eyes. She was a girl from the Northern Territories, and even though Archduke Kyros had been dead for most of her life, she knew all about how powerful and influential House Raime was.

“So your sanctions were for their attempted assassination and not for Tiberias’ inability to take ‘no’ for an answer?” Jordan asked, continuing as if what Emilie had just said hadn’t happened.

“... Yes,” Elise said, still not averting her glaring eyes from her mother.

“Well then I don’t see why we shouldn’t enact them,” Jordan said.

“I agree, those who attack my future son-in-law ought to be punished!” Emilie said with a wicked smile that was remarkably similar to Elise’s when she had come up with the sanctions only a few hours before.

With Emilie’s mention of ‘son-in-law’, both Leon and Elise turned bright red, their anger evaporating like a puddle in the way of a lava flow.

[Aww, you’re not embarrassed, are you?] Xaphan asked, not missing this opportunity to jab at Leon.

[Look at you, blushing so hard you’ve turned almost as red as me!]

[Quiet, demon,] Leon growled.

“How do you know who I am?” Leon asked Emilie.

“Ajax sent us a letter describing you, and while he didn’t say who you were outright, he did give enough information that we were able to guess,” Emilie responded.

“... Right,” Leon said quietly.

“Leon and Alix,” Emilie said, calling out both of their guests, “I want the both of you to consider this place a home. You’re welcome here any time!”

“... Thank you...” Alix muttered. She was still too overwhelmed with being in the same room with such powerful people to say much.

Leon thanked Emilie as well, but he was even quieter than Alix.

"I think our guests are a little on edge," Jordan observed. "How about we change topics to something that's a little more relaxing?"

"Of course!" Emilie said as she turned her attention back to Elise and Leon's relationship. "So, how often do you two sleep together? Are you remembering to use your contraception spells? Do you two need any advice?"

Elise turned bright red again and shrunk back into her chair. "I don't forget to use the spells, Mother," she mumbled.

"Good! Not, that I'm not interested in seeing my grandchildren, but you two clearly aren't ready for that kind of responsibility!" Emilie stated.

Leon was mortified by the conversation and only grew more so as Emilie launched into a long explanation of her favorite sex positions.

[You know, I think I like this woman,] Xaphan said with admiration in his voice. [she's completely comfortable talking about anything, isn't she?]

[Yes, she's certainly something,] Leon responded. It was only once the conversation shifted to sex that he truly began to understand Elise's actions when they first met—if this was the woman who raised her, then it made a great deal of sense to him why she was so excessively physical.

[Anyway, next time you train, there's something I want you to try,] Xaphan continued.

[What is it?]

[I want you to train in fire magic as well as lightning. I've already told you about your affinity for fire, and I absolutely refuse to have you ignore it!]

[Got it, just tell me what to do,] Leon agreed. He and his demon partner began talking about the specifics, and Leon threw himself completely into the discussion. It was an easy way to forget about the significantly more embarrassing conversation happening between Emilie and Elise.

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"So, Sir *Raime*," Alix said pointedly during their evening training.

Leon sighed, knowing that this was coming as soon as Emilie revealed who he was.

"It is *Ursus*, Alix, not Raime. Getting the two confused will lead to death and violence, and since you're affiliated with me, much of that will be directed towards you as well."

Alix frowned, but she pressed on, choosing not to interpret Leon's statement as a threat. "Very well, Sir Ursus, but if it's all the same to you, I'd wouldn't mind hearing a story..."

For a long moment, Leon contemplated the wisdom of invoking his rank and ordering her to shut up, but he knew that wouldn't be the best idea. Alix already knew, and if he were to order her to not ask for further information, then it would only breed resentment and mistrust between them. Besides, if he were to be straight up with her, Leon figured that Alix would be more likely to keep the secret from any other friends she might make in the Eastern Territories.

Reluctantly, Leon decided to give her some more information.

"I was raised in the Northern Vales by my father, Artorias Raime, second son of Archduke Kyros Raime," he said.

Alix's eyes immediately went wide, and she gleefully asked, "So you're a noble?! You really don't seem like it, but I guess if you were raised that far north than it makes sense... Is that why you've come south? To claim your birthright? Do you want to be the Archduke of the Great Plateau?"

"*Fuck* no!" Leon cried out. "There are many things that I want to do—and given my relative lack of strength, I can't quite deal with them and they seem to just keep piling up—but to be tied down to that land in the Northern Territories is definitely not something I want!"

"Then why come here at all? I mean, I get not wanting to stay around Valemén..." Alix trailed off a little, suddenly remembering that Leon had told her that his father was dead.

"My father was killed by assassins, most likely sent by the same people who attacked my grandfather's palace in Teira and killed him and my uncle," Leon said with a carefully measured tone. "They're still at large in this Kingdom, which is why I gave you that warning about keeping this a secret."

Alix furiously nodded; she didn't want to be targeted by anyone strong enough to wipe out the second most powerful noble family in the Bull Kingdom.

"That is the main reason why I'm focusing on gaining strength, not because I want to be worthy of inheriting my family's Archduchy, but because I want to kill those who killed my father, who separated me from my mother, who destroyed my family." Leon began to emit a considerable amount of killing intent, and the first-tier Alix felt her knees start to shake. What Leon had said about his mother raised more questions for her, but Leon seemed angry and worked up enough that she decided to bite her tongue for the time being.

"I... understand..." she said. "I won't speak a word of this to anyone!"

"Good," Leon replied, clamping down on his killing intent at the same time, "now let's get back to training."

## **Chapter 170: Inner Fire**

After the short family dinner, Jordan and Emilie left to enact Elise's sanctions against House Decimius, while Leon, Alix, and Elise spent the rest of the day in evening training.

Alix spent her time after the short conversation with Leon meditating, flooding her body with magic power in order to ascend to the second-tier. Judging by her aura, Leon guessed she was only two or three months away from doing so. After saying goodbye to her parents and coming to join them, Elise began similar training, but she was targeting her brain and organs, just as Leon had been doing until recently.

Leon, however, was working on ascending to the fifth-tier, which involved changing his mana type. Since he made it to the fourth-tier, he'd been focusing on lightning, using the techniques described in his family's instruction books. This training session was a little different, though; at Xaphan's urging, he temporarily switched to fire magic. In fact, he was so excited from his talk with the demon that he

wasn't even sitting down to meditate, instead choosing to mindlessly work through a few basic sword exercises Artorias had taught him years ago.

[Now, summon your magic and gather it into your chest,] Xaphan instructed. [This shouldn't be too difficult—even for you—as it starts off almost identical to the basics for lightning magic.]

[I won't be compressing it, though, will I?] Leon asked.

[You will, but only a little,] Xaphan said. [Think about it like this: let your magic power gather into your chest, and have it act as if it were a fire that had enveloped your heart.]

Leon frowned, but he did as he was instructed, gathering his mana while he slowly swung his sword. [What now?] he asked once he had done so.

[Hold it there as best you can for a moment, but then let it slowly leak out into the rest of your body. Imagine the mass of power you start with to be like a bonfire, and the magic power you release to be heat, slowly spreading throughout your body,] Xaphan explained. [You may need to compress it a little, but don't go too far. You're striving for the glorious majesty of flame, not the empty and fleeting flash of lightning!]

With the power in his chest gathered, Leon concentrated on trying to keep it under control. This was much harder than Xaphan had made it sound, as even though he was only a fourth-tier mage, the amount of magic power in his blood wasn't so easily reined in. He barely kept it contained for ten seconds before losing control.

[Damnit!] Leon shouted, feeling the magic power spread throughout his body in less than a second, far too fast for his purpose.

[Did you fail?] Xaphan asked.

[What do you think?] Leon responded as he prepared himself for another attempt.

[I think you failed, and quite spectacularly, too,] Xaphan said without bothering to hide the mockery in his voice.

Leon almost growled out loud before going back to concentrating on the task at hand. He summoned up the magic power within his blood and gathered it in his chest. If he were to try his family's techniques and alter his mana for use with lightning magic, then he'd immediately start compressing the power as much as he could. Now, however, he had to hold it there without any meaningful compression, which he was struggling to do.

Again, Leon lost control, but he lasted for twelve seconds rather than only ten. He didn't say anything, as he didn't want to give Xaphan any ammunition to hurl at him, and he simply got to work silently gathering his power again.

Over the course of an hour, Leon failed more than one hundred times to use his magic power in the way Xaphan had described, but he had managed to increase the time he was able to hold his power in his chest up to thirty seconds. When that hour was over, Leon paused his training. He was still on his feet swinging his sword, but he wasn't nearly so excited as he was when he began, so he sheathed his sword and sat down close to Alix and Elise.

[Meditation is all well and good, but I think it would be better to practice these techniques as you move,] Xaphan suggested. [You will hardly find time to meditate on the battlefield, after all.]

[I have to figure out how to do this to begin with before I worry about that,] Leon responded. [When I've got the techniques down, then I can start focusing on using them in more strenuous conditions.]

[... Fair enough,] the demon said.

Now that he was sitting down and not going through sword exercises, Leon was able to devote all of his attention to the task at hand. He called up his magic power one more time and sucked all of it into his chest. He was able to hold it for forty seconds before it all slipped from his grasp.

[There,] Leon said with pride, [I held it for a third again as long as I did when I was on my feet!]

[Congratulations,] Xaphan said with sarcasm dripping from every syllable, [do you want a medal? How about a nice big juicy steak to celebrate?]

Leon scowled, then responded, [I'll take the steak, but you can fuck off with your medal!]

[A failure is still a failure, young mage. You failed to conjure your own fire, so the length of time you held the power in your chest doesn't matter. A proper fire mage can summon their fire in an instant, so holding your power there for forty seconds is no accomplishment.]

Reflecting back on all the times he'd seen his father using lightning, as well as the times he'd seen other mages use their power, Leon had to admit that Xaphan had a point. That being said, he didn't have any other metric for how well he was doing, so as he continued to train, he found himself continuing to latch onto how long he was able to keep his power contained in his chest. When he, Elise, and Alix stopped training for the day, he was able to hold his magic power for fifty seconds before losing control, but his power still wasn't behaving like the 'inner fire' that Xaphan had described.

Over the course of the next week, he alternated between training with his family's lightning techniques, and with Xaphan's fire technique. He certainly made progress, as it was getting easier to manipulate his power the way he wanted to, but without knowing where the finish line was, he wasn't able to determine how much progress he'd made at the end of that week. This put something of a damper on his mood, but he was cheered up immensely when Elise returned from spending some time in the Heaven's Eye Tower and told him some good news.

"The sanctions against House Decimius went into effect last week, and word has arrived in Aurelianorum. They've lost easy access to a majority of their vaults, and their businesses will be seeing some steep rises in expenses and some steep drops in revenue. Additionally, I think they'll be receiving a letter from one of the Prince-Regents angrily demanding answers to a number of damning questions."

It wasn't as viscerally satisfying as taking his revenge personally, but Leon figured could wait on that front. This economic attack would hopefully keep Tiberias' family from taking any further actions against him until he was strong enough to deal with them without relying on Elise.

A smile broke out on Leon's face, and he and Elise stared at each other for a moment in her training room. Alix had gone out into the city again, so they had her entire wing of the estate to themselves. Leon scrambled to his feet from where he'd been meditating and he and Elise all but ran back to her bedroom and began pulling at each other's clothes.

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Leon and Elise's excitement and elation spiked at the same time that Duke Euphemius Decimius' was plummeting. Far to the west, in the palace of Aurelianorum, the Duke had just returned from the primary Heaven's Eye bank in the city. He'd been told that his people weren't able to access their accounts, and when he'd gone down to the bank to try and sort things out, he'd been given more than two thousand forms to fill out in order to access his vaults.

He was exhausted, frustrated, and furious. There were dozens of scribes handling most of the paperwork, but he was still required to go through more than three hundred of the forms personally. Making matter worse, the bank manager had told him that the same procedure would have to be followed every time he wanted access to his vaults.

*'Why would Heaven's Eye do this?! What could their motive possibly be?! Is this because of Tiberias? Is this the whore's daughter's way of rejecting my son?!'* The more Euphemius thought about it, the more he thought it made sense that this petty move was Elise trying to forcefully dissuade Tiberias from continuing to send her gifts and letters.

It never crossed his mind that this was related to Leon, as he was under the impression that Leon was dead—the head of his Shadow Guards had told him so, and he had seen no reason to doubt the man. After all, he wasn't personally acquainted with all of his pet killers, so two going missing wasn't something he'd notice unless someone informed him.

Ultimately, the inability for Euphemius to access his vaults wasn't something that greatly concerned him. It was a serious inconvenience, but it was hardly ruinous. Still, it was frustrating and aggravating for the Duke, and he spent the next few hours pondering how to deal with the situation, so he could regain access to his assets in the Heaven's Eye banks as soon as possible.

While he was lost in thought, one of his servants timidly knocked on the door to his study.

"What is it?" Euphemius growled.

The servant, with as much dignity and politeness as he could, entered the room and said, "Your Grace, we have a very grave problem."

"... And that problem would be...?" Euphemius asked, making it apparent with his tone that he didn't appreciate the servant's needless pause.

"Your Grace, the caravan dispatched to sell your wine and glassware has returned. The merchants they spoke to in the forum have lowered their buying price by a significant degree—so significant that the caravan has returned to the warehouses and are waiting for word on what they ought to do..."

The servant respectfully held out a piece of paper for the Duke to examine, upon which was written the new terms the merchants had given him for his goods.

"What... is *this*?" Euphemius asked rhetorically. He struggled mightily to keep his tone even and free of profanity so as to not mar his image in the eyes of the servant, but the terms offered made that a titanic task. "They've cut the price almost in half! What are they playing at?!"

Euphemius was livid, and the hand that held the piece of paper was shaking in anger. Glass and wine were the two most expensive commodities produced in the Western Territories, and he'd gone to a great deal of trouble to get as many wineries and glassworks in his pocket as he could for that reason.

Forty years ago, he'd invested almost every silver coin his duchy brought in through taxes and tariffs in buying up huge swathes of private property in the hinterlands around the city of Aurelianorum. He then rented that land at generous rates to businesses in his lands. However, since the products of these businesses were all taxed on their sale, Euphemius was essentially double-dipping, charging his tenants rent and taxing what they produced.

The only two exceptions to this were glass and wine. Instead of directly charging rent to the wineries and glassworks in his land, he instead took a portion of whatever they produced. He just had to sit back and watch as glass and wine flowed into his warehouses at a staggering rate. He could then stamp his House's sigil upon the boxes of glass and barrels of wine, and their price would increase by anywhere from fifty to two hundred percent.

This policy had made him one of the richest nobles in the Bull Kingdom—though that wealth didn't mean much if it was locked away in a Heaven's Eye vault. He still had a great many other assets, but if the vaults—and thus, his liquid assets—were inaccessible to him, then he might have to sell off some property to keep paying for his duchy's expenses.

The sale of his glass and wine could prevent that, as it was a ludicrously lucrative deal for him, but the merchants had drastically lowered their offer!

Euphemius shot straight to his feet and made for the door, growling at his servant, "Come with me! We're going to have a chat with these merchants!" He bit his tongue so he didn't call them 'common filth'. He certainly believed that was what they were, but that also wasn't the image he wanted to present.

Unfortunately for him, none of the merchants budged on the price. He met with more than a dozen of the biggest merchants in the city, and every one of them barely offered Euphemius half of what his wine and glass were worth. When he returned several hours later, he was almost sputtering with rage, and he had to retreat to his private study as fast as he could so the rest of his servants didn't see him in that state.

Euphemius almost shouted for his secretary outside to summon the head of his Shadow Guards, to teach the merchants a lesson in defying him, but again, he had to hold his tongue. The need to maintain a pleasant and trustworthy reputation was the only reason he wasn't calling for the merchants to be beheaded.

He could almost see his wealth disappearing before his eyes. After half an hour of pacing in his study to clear his head, Euphemius called in his team of accountants.

"How badly is this going to hit us?" he asked.

"Your Grace, this could very well be catastrophic," his lead accountant replied. "Without being able to withdraw funds from the vaults and without the income from your luxury goods, it's going to be extremely difficult to pay for your army. It's also going to lead to an increase in corruption among the lower ranks of the bureaucrats who work for you if we can't pay them."

Euphemius was silent for a long moment. There was only one solution he could think of that could keep him from resorting to selling off his properties.

*'I need to expand my Silverleaf farms,'* he thought.

"That's enough, you all may go," he said to his accountants. Once they had all dutifully left his study, he summoned another accountant, the head of his Shadow Guards, and a liaison with a confederacy of pirates and smugglers that stayed in his palace under the guise of an ambassador from a kingdom far to the south.

Upon their arrival, Euphemius ordered them to increase Silverleaf production.

"Your Grace, that may not be so easy," his Shadow Guard said. "Silverleaf is *highly* illegal, and the more we expand, the greater the chance that the Bull King will take notice..."

"Just do it," Euphemius spat.

"Well, I'm certainly not going to complain," the smuggler said with a smile. "The more you grow, the more money we can all make. Just give me a few days and I'll have new buds brought in, so you don't have to harvest prematurely."

"That's appreciated," Euphemius said.

"We're going to have to expand by at least thirty percent if we want to make up for this shortfall," the accountant said. "There aren't many places left in the duchy where we can grow Silverleaf without detection..."

"That decision has been made!" Euphemius said intensely. He was desperately trying to keep himself from screaming at the accountant, but he still got in the man's face while glaring and emitting staggering killing intent—he didn't care about these men seeing his rage, for they were people he had to intimidate rather than persuade and cajole.

Under the weight of his aura, his three guests excused themselves to see to the Silverleaf expansion, leaving Duke Euphemius alone to ponder how this had happened, how in the course of a single day he had been nearly ruined.