

Storm King 211

Chapter 211: Post-Riot Recovery

Leon woke up about an hour after sparring with Alix. He was still laying down next to Anzu, and when he realized that he had fallen asleep he quickly got to his feet and shambled into the bathroom. He wanted nothing more than to collapse into bed, but he couldn't do so when he was still covered in the dust, dirt, and blood that had accumulated over the day.

He counted himself fortunate, at least, that as a fifth-tier mage, his body had much less cause to sweat, even in the conditions he'd been under earlier.

The hot shower felt incredible, but Leon didn't linger; he nearly fell asleep standing up several times. When he got out and made his way to his bedroom, he found Anzu already there, having woken up just after Leon had and meandered on in. The griffin stared at Leon as he crawled into bed without even bothering to do more than pull off his shirt and socks. Once Leon got himself situated, Anzu lay down next to him, laying his head and front paws across Leon's chest.

Leon then had to push one of Anzu's wings out of his face, but once the two were comfortable, they passed out in minutes.

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The next day was quiet. Leon and Alix had been given the day off by Trajan, so both slept in—though Leon did have to get Anzu outside for a little while in the backyard of the barracks building. He had been a little surprised that there even was a backyard when he and Alix first moved in, but Trajan explained that there were a fair number of knights with their own pets, so having such a place was necessary. The building's janitors even made sure the yard was clean every day.

Still, just because Leon didn't have any work or training to do, that didn't mean he wasn't busy. He needed at least half an hour to pull his sword back into his soul realm, and while he didn't want to waste the entire day doing the same with his armor, he at least wanted to do so with his cuirass and helmet.

So, after Leon got out of bed in earnest around noon, he took a few minutes to eat and then went back into his room to begin. The only pause he had was for a moment when he sat down in a comfortable chair and frowned at the sword in his lap. He was still used to always having it on his hip, and its absence was taking some getting used to. That being said, he wholeheartedly agreed when Trajan mentioned that he should keep the weapon in his soul realm, as the Prince had recognized him in part because of how prominently Leon had worn it.

He took a few deep breaths, then channeled his magic out through his right arm and began to coat his sword in it. It took more than ten minutes for the sword to be sufficiently coated, at which point Leon began the more difficult process of pulling his magic back in with the sword included. The sword began to twitch, and then it began to slowly sink into Leon's palm where it almost seemed to dissolve in flashes of light.

It took another fifteen minutes or so for the sword to be completely absorbed into Leon's body. Within his soul realm, if Xaphan hadn't been so focused on his healing process, he might've seen the sword appear near Leon's granite throne. Right next to the sword was a satchel that contained the documents

identifying Leon as a son of House Raime and the black Heartwood seed, a large bag containing about thirty thousand silver coins, Leon's bow which had several softly glowing runes etched upon its surface, a few hundred arrows, and a large stack of explosive spells.

When he was finished, Leon leaned back in his armchair and breathed deeply, letting his magic flow through his body and re-energize him. Storing objects in his soul realm was a draining and uncomfortable technique, but the benefits were too good to ignore until he was stronger—and by the time he reached the sixth-tier, he'd be able to do what he had just done in a fraction of the time. He took a quick glance at his armor lazily laid in a corner of his room and sighed. It was time to get started on the rest. He couldn't put it off, because if he were to be attacked for some reason in the streets, then he'd need at least some kind of protection.

He grabbed his helmet and cuirass. Both would be uncomfortable to wear without the Skyflax padding underneath—not to mention they would lack the lightning enchantments Leon had put on that part of his armor, as the Magmic Steel was only good for fire enchantments—but they were better than nothing. Besides, if he needed anything in his soul realm, it would only take a second or two to retrieve.

Leon took another deep breath and got started with his helmet.

Leon emerged from his room three hours later, completely exhausted. He found Alix in the center of the sandpit silently swinging her sword in moving meditation, while Anzu had practically draped himself over one of the couches. Alix nodded and smiled in greeting, which Leon returned, before returning to her quiet training.

Without much else to do, Leon grabbed a pen and a few sheets of paper to write a letter to Elise describing the situation in Ariminium. He briefly considered sending her the map he took from the Cradle, but as he had dozens of times before, decided against it; he didn't want the letter to be intercepted and the map stolen. He would simply wait for them to see each other again before he asked her about the ruins in the nations to the south.

The two had taken to writing to each other at least once a week, but since it took a few days for the letters to be delivered and a few more days to receive a reply, both tried to hold off on writing more often than that. This also meant that the letters they did write were often quite lengthy, not that either minded. When Leon was finished describing his recent exploits, his letter was nearly ten pages long.

As neither he nor Alix wanted to do anything strenuous after the battle, they stayed in their room for the rest of the day, only leaving to let Anzu run around a little outside.

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Leon and Alix got plenty of rest and woke up bright and early the next morning. They, along with Anzu, made their way over to Trajan's personal wing of the keep, where the Prince was waiting in his training room.

Trajan liked to spar with the knights in his retinue as well as his immediate subordinates in the Legions. This included more than two hundred people, so he obviously had to divide his time as best he could. However, he made sure to train with Leon every morning, leaving his evening training for his time with other subordinates.

However, as they entered the keep, they were stopped in the entrance hall by none other than Lapis, the stone giant sent as a kind of ambassador by Rakos.

"Greetings, Divine One," Lapis said in a low rumble.

Leon cringed a little, both at the giant's loud voice and the embarrassing title. "I've said this before, but you *really* don't have to call me that," Leon said.

'At least it's not shaking the whole keep with its voice anymore...' Leon thought, though the curious glances he was being given by some of the soldiers walking through the long entrance hall kept that thought as only a small comfort.

Lapis straightened up a little, almost brushing its head against the vaulted ceiling as it did, and said, **"Those with the Power of the Gods ought to be shown the proper respect!"**

"Are the wishes of the person in question not taken into account?" Leon countered.

This seemed to give Lapis some pause, as the giant went silent for a long moment.

Leon felt a little awkward that the giant seemed to be caught up on his words, and he hurriedly tried to move the conversation along by saying, "So what do you need?"

This jerked Lapis back from wherever its mind had gone, and it said, **"It is my understanding that there was a battle here the night before last, and that the Divine One took part in it..."**

Again, Leon felt himself cringing at the use of the title, but he did his best to smile and say, "Your understanding is correct."

"Is there some reason why I was not called to assist? I have been sent to provide what protection I can to the Divine One..."

"We... This was an internal matter, and we didn't feel it necessary to bother you with our problems," Leon quickly explained. What he certainly didn't say was that the stone giant wasn't trusted, even after a year of peace between the Bull Kingdom and the southern stone giant tribes.

"It wouldn't have been a bother," Lapis said. **"I will not press the issue, but please keep in mind my purpose, Divine One. I am here and ready to assist the Divine One in battle should the need arise..."**

With that, the giant knocked its fists together in what Leon had come to understand was a gesture of respect, and departed the hall, much to Leon's relief.

"You're looking a little pale there, Sir," Alix quietly teased. She'd settled into her role as squire fairly well over the past year, and she knew that she shouldn't openly tease her assigned knight, but in this case, she couldn't help it.

"Can you blame me?" Leon retorted as he glanced around at the dozens of other knights walking through the hall, many of whom were shooting him extremely strange looks for speaking with Lapis. "Come on, His Highness is probably waiting on us," Leon then said, hurrying them onward.

But Leon also looked over his shoulder at the departing giant and thought, *'Its offer of assistance is appreciated, but I really don't want to rely on it. If I ever find myself in a situation where I need that level of help, I'll probably already be dead...'*

About ten minutes later, Leon and Alix pushed open the door to Trajan's training room and entered. The Prince was waiting for them in the sandpit wearing training clothes and wielding a training sword.

"Good, you all are here," Trajan said.

"Your Highness," Leon and Alix said respectfully, both giving short bows.

"Please, we're not in public, that's unnecessary," Trajan responded with a smile and a dismissive wave.

"Let's just get started and ignore etiquette."

"Sure thing," Leon replied as his own normally-stoic face briefly cracked a thin smile.

Alix nodded and sat down at the edge of the sandpit; since she was technically Leon's squire, she wasn't Trajan's responsibility. As a result, Leon always trained with the Prince first, though Trajan did spend a considerable amount of time training with her as well. It seemed obvious to anyone who knew about it that the Prince was gearing Alix up to join his retinue when she ascended to the third-tier and received her knighthood.

"You two did well in the battle last night," Trajan began, "but there is always room for improvement. Leon, your magic seemed to hold out well, how did you feel afterward?"

"I was a little tired, but I think I could've continued at that pace for a while longer," Leon answered.

"Wonderful! It goes to show you just how far you've come since you first entered my service, when you could barely summon three or four lightning bolts before hitting your limit. We'll do some more endurance training, then, and after we break for the day, I want you to focus on the creation of your magic body."

"Got it," Leon said. The creation of his magic body would be the point at which he became a sixth-tier mage, and Leon was eagerly looking forward to it. Using his magic body, he'd be able to project himself outside of his body, though doing so would be dangerous; more importantly, he'd be able to consciously enter his soul realm. He greatly anticipated finally being able to look Xaphan in the eye and know that he'd passed the demon by in terms of power.

At this point, Leon had managed to use his magic power to construct about one third of his magic body. He'd need to let his magic flow into a bone or organ and trap it there until it effectively took on the structure of that body part, but this was a time-consuming process. Still, Leon was growing stronger at an exceptionally fast rate, especially since he had other things to focus on as well.

With that, he and Trajan began to spar—or rather, Leon began to call upon his magic as fast as he could, while Trajan summoned his own magic and took the younger mage's attacks. From the sidelines, Alix watched Leon hurl lightning bolts and summon fire, neither of which did the Prince much harm. Not even when Leon switched over to channeling his magic through his sword, causing it to burst into flame or arc with lightning, did his magic penetrate the Prince's iron-clad defense.

“Not bad...” Trajan said after about half an hour. His stonewall was blackened and scorched in places, but not meaningfully damaged in any way; he was still in perfect condition to fight. Leon, on the other hand, was left panting and barely able to stand after continuously using his power for so long. “... But still not great. I think you still need to work on your endurance for a while yet...”

“I understand,” Leon whispered.

“Good. With every bone of your magic body you create, you’ll expand your mana reserves just a little bit. So why don’t you get some rest and then get a head start on the rest of your training?”

Leon nodded and went to sit down next to Alix. Anzu, who had been watching from behind the columns that separated the sandpit from the rest of the room, hurried forward and snuggled up next to Leon. The little griffin didn’t really need any training as he’d grow stronger just by literally growing.

Trajan then turned his attention to the sandpit. The heat from Leon’s lightning and fire had scorched the stone columns and melted some of the sand in the pit, but with a wave of his hand and a little bit of patience, Trajan erased the scorch marks on the columns and extracted every fragment of glass from the sandpit with practiced ease. There was still plenty of sand left to train in, and servants would come in during the night to clean up what he missed and refill the pit. After a year of training with Leon—and longer with the other higher-tiered knights that Trajan sparred with—the servants had grown accustomed to this process.

With that taken care of, Trajan looked at Alix and gracefully asked, “Care to join me, my lady?”

Alix smiled and jumped to her feet. She could only train with the Prince in martial arts rather than magical arts, but he still instructed her with as much patience as he had with Leon. She didn’t know why, and she certainly wasn’t going to be so rude as to ask, but she enormously appreciated it and frequently said so.

After an hour of sparring with Alix, Trajan called the training session to an end.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Trajan said, allowing an exhausted Alix to stumble back to the edge of the sandpit. “You two should get some rest, but don’t neglect your afternoon training! I don’t have anything else for you to do, so focus on that!”

“... Are you sure there’s no work you need us to do?” Leon hesitantly asked. The half-Legion that had retaken the guild district was still cleaning the place up and assisting with repair efforts, as were most of the other knights in the Prince’s retinue.

“No, there’re enough hands out there as it is,” Trajan replied, knowing what Leon was alluding to. “With all the soldiers, guild mages, and construction workers swarming the guild district, you two would get in the way more than you’d help. Of course, the same could be said for anyone else, so don’t pay it much mind. Besides, normally you’d get a week off for taking out a vampire, so don’t worry about it!”

“Then we’ll see you tomorrow morning,” Leon gratefully said. Trajan smiled and nodded, and Leon, Alix, and Anzu rose and made for the door.

“So, what now?” Alix asked once they were back out into the hallways.

“Want to get something to eat?” Leon asked. “I must admit that I worked up a bit of an appetite, but if you just want to head back home, then we can do that instead...”

“I’m actually quite hungry, myself,” Alix replied.

The two then spent the ten minutes it took to leave the keep debating what to grab for an early lunch.

Chapter 212: Friends

Leon and Alix decided to go to a restaurant in the fortress as there weren’t many in Ariminium that would allow Anzu to enter. The specific place they settled on was a well-known place that had everything from noodles to burgers and even served as a bar after sunset.

It was relatively early when the two walked in, with Anzu sticking to Leon’s heels as much as he was able. Most of the tables were clear and the bar area only had a few patrons, but Leon barely gave the few people who were there more than a cursory glance. Leon and Alix had come to this place so often that they didn’t even need to order, they just waved at the proprietress and took a seat at a booth in the corner.

The heavy-set mortal woman who owned the place knew them by sight and immediately began working on their usual orders, which were finished in less than five minutes.

“Good to see you two here again,” she said with a bright smile as she brought the food over.

“Good to be back,” Leon responded as his steak and cheese sandwich entered his vision.

“Indeed,” Alix added when the proprietress set her plate of shrimp and salmon in front of her.

“And here’s a little something for you, little one,” the woman whispered as she slipped Anzu almost an entire chicken breast, which the griffin tore into with gusto.

“You spoil him too much, Amalie,” Leon said teasingly.

“He’s a growing boy, he needs his meat!” the proprietress replied.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t need to be fattened up like a cow destined for slaughter,” Leon responded as he stroked the pristine white feathers on Anzu’s head. Alix, meanwhile, watched with no small amount of jealousy at Anzu devouring the food Amalie brought him; in fact, Amalie and her daughter were the only two people apart from Leon who Anzu would willingly take food from.

“Oh, nuts to that!” Amalie shouted with a full-bellied laugh. “It’s only a fraction of what that daughter of mine keeps giving him, and if he ain’t lookin’ pudgy from all that, then a little bit more from me ain’t gonna do a damned thing!”

Amalie’s casual attitude was something that kept many nobles away from her place, but Leon didn’t mind it in the slightest, despite being a fifth-tier knight himself. There were other noble-born knights around that enjoyed coming to her establishment, but generally speaking it was only commoners who frequented it. Nobles preferred to spend their time in a place where they would be treated with the ‘proper’ respect.

Leon, Alix, and Amalie chatted for another minute or so before the middle-aged woman left to tend to other customers, allowing Leon and Alix to dig in. However, they weren't destined for a quiet meal, as two young men entered and began scanning the room for a suitable place to sit. When their eyes landed on the two sitting in the booth, they momentarily froze.

"Leon?" one of them called out.

Hearing his name, Leon glanced over at the two newcomers and his eyes widened in surprise. Quickly swallowing his mouthful of sandwich, he responded, "Charles? Henry?!"

"Hot damn! I knew it was you!" Charles almost shouted as he and Henry rushed over from the entrance.

"Hey man, it's good to see you! How've you been?" Henry asked as he clapped Leon on the shoulder before he remembered how little Leon appreciated most physical contact.

"What are you two doing here?" Leon asked as his face broke out into a slight smile. "I thought you were sent to Fort Odo!"

Fort Odo was a large fortress built on a huge hill watching over the Gold Road between the capital and the Bull's Horns. Three of Leon's friends from the Knight Academy—Charles, Henry, and Alain—had all been sent to units based in Fort Odo after leaving the Academy.

"Our Legion was rotated here several weeks ago!" Charles cheerfully replied. "And you? I thought you went to the Northern Territories!"

"Ahh," Leon said in understanding. Prince Trajan liked to make sure that all twelve Legions in the Eastern Territories had intimate knowledge of the entire region, and so every two years he had one Legion at the Horns swap stations with another Legion that wasn't. This gave each Legion a handful of years of relative peace at the Horns and a couple decades of *peacekeeping* out in the Territories. About the only units that weren't rotated were the personal knights and men-at-arms serving himself and his subordinates like Minerva, amounting to about five thousand combat soldiers that were stationed at the Horns permanently. "I was reassigned here last year."

"And who is this?" Henry asked, shifting the conversation to Alix.

"This is Alix, my squire," Leon said with a proud smile.

"Squire?" Charles asked in confusion. "Wait a minute, you're a *knight*?!"

"He is, he was knighted by the Consul of the North," Alix explained.

"Why don't you two take a seat so we can catch up?" Leon asked.

"You're going to have to go first," Henry said.

"Right, it hasn't even been two years! How is it that you're a knight?!" Charles asked with bright expectant eyes.

Leon quickly began to fill his two friends in on what had happened over the past year and a half, though there were quite a few things that he left out. He told them about being sent to Fort 127 and the raid Hakon Fire-Beard launched, then about being reassigned to the Bull's Horns with Alix as his squire, and

then the diplomatic mission to the stone giants' crater. He was fairly light on details, but Alix was willing to fill in where needed. He also didn't say a single word about the men that Tiberias sent to kill him on the galley, or his invisibility ring. He didn't even tell them what his current magical tier was.

"... and after coming back from killing that vampire, we found the city on fire," Leon explained.

"We had to drop pretty much everything and help out," Alix said.

"As did we," Henry added. "Both of our knights were called into battle, and we, of course, had to follow."

"Really? Who are your knights again?" Leon asked.

"Oh, mine's Sir Quintus," Charles said, "and Henry's serving Dame Ateia."

Leon almost face-palmed when Charles said this, as both of those knights were from the same battalion that followed Prince Trajan in retaking the guild district.

"So you two both helped in storming the Bluefire Guild?" Alix asked, picking up on the same familiar names that Leon had.

"We did!" Henry said.

Leon almost laughed at how close they were just a couple nights ago. He hadn't been paying much attention to either of their knights, let alone their squires, but if he had been then their reunion might've happened a little earlier than this.

While they were chatting, Amalie came over to take Charles and Henry's orders, making and bringing them over in short order.

"So, what have you two been doing in this past year and a half?" Leon asked.

"Well *this* guy has been doing nothing but *paint* and Alain has been busy taking care of his kids, so all in all, we haven't done much of note," Henry said. Charles gave him a dirty look at the snide comment about his chosen form of artistic expression, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he busied himself trying to pet Anzu, but the griffin had barely taken his eyes off the two newcomers since their arrival, and he clearly wasn't going to let them touch him; he eventually decided to hide between Leon's legs and the bench Leon was sitting on, and when even that didn't stop Charles, Anzu nipped at his hand the next time it came close.

"Ouch!" Charles said, drawing his hand back with a small cut on his index finger.

"Careful, Anzu doesn't like being touched, especially by strangers," Alix said with only a slight hint of the gratification she felt that she wasn't the only one that Anzu wouldn't be touched by. She quickly pulled out a weak healing spell and gave it to Charles.

"Thank you," Charles said as graciously as he could.

"So, Miss Alix, where are you from?" Henry asked, leaning in and trying to gaze flirtatiously at Alix.

"... The Northern Territories," Alix replied with hesitation; she was getting a little creeped out from Henry's body language.

"A Northern girl, huh?" Henry said. "I'm from the Eastern Territories, myself. Say, do you want to get a drink with me? Chuckles and I don't have much else to do today--"

"I'm afraid I must decline," Alix responded, cutting Henry off. She wasn't attracted to him and didn't want his flirtation to continue.

"Shot down *again*," Charles said with a loud chuckle. "I think you need to work on your game, my friend."

Henry stared at Alix in shock and disbelief; he wasn't nearly as quick with the ladies as he pretended to be, but the speed at which Alix rejected him was certainly something to marvel at.

"Might want to close your mouth, you're starting to drool," Leon said.

Not thinking that Leon would tease him so overtly, Henry clamped his mouth shut and went to wipe his mouth, only to find nothing there.

Henry glared at Leon, but eager as he was to move on, he said, "Alain's here too. He's squiring for Dame Romania, I think."

"Then where is he now?" Leon asked.

"With his ladies," Charles said.

"Has he gotten married yet?"

"No, he still needs to be knighted first before he can legally take multiple wives."

Leon nodded, and then for the first time that day, he took a good look at Charles and Henry. They were both obviously stronger than they were back in the Knight Academy, with solid second-tier auras. Their bodies were also a little fuller with muscle, and there was a certain look to them that gave Leon the impression that the battle they had seen in the guild district wasn't their first.

"You know, I saw a griffin just like Anzu here during the battle..." Charles stated. "The knight it was following was one of the Prince's men..."

"Yeah, that was us," Leon casually said.

"What?!" Henry cried. "You're directly serving Prince Trajan?! I thought you said you were in the Diplomatic Corps?!"

"... Yes..." Leon mumbled, feeling a little embarrassed due to Henry's reaction.

"Sir Leon is a fifth-tier knight who negotiated peace with the stone giants in the southern half of the Border Mountains," Alix said. "Prince Trajan took notice and transferred him into His Highness' personal retinue."

Charles and Henry stared at Leon, completely speechless.

After several minutes, Charles muttered, "Fi-fifth-tier... *Fifth-tier*..."

After another minute of stunned silence, Alix tried to alleviate the embarrassment Leon felt by changing the subject. She asked, "So, what all did you two do at Fort Odo?"

"Ah! Well, um, it was mostly just boring training," Charles explained.

"Yeah, it was mostly just reinforcing stuff we learned at the Academy," Henry added, looking a little disappointed.

"Still, we got plenty of time to train ourselves and increase our magical power," Charles continued. "We even got taken out for a few patrols every now and then."

"We, uh, even got attacked once..." Henry said, trailing off and shifting his gaze away from Leon and Alix, but not focusing on anything in particular.

After a few moments of waiting for additional information, Leon said, "You two both had to kill while you were there, didn't you?"

"... Yes, we did," Charles admitted.

"Good!" Alix said, reaching across the table to clap Charles on the shoulder. "A true knight has to be willing to fight to uphold the laws of his land!"

Both Charles and Henry looked a little pale at the memory of their first battle, but what Alix said seemed to work a little bit. Noticing how uncomfortable they still were, though, prompted Leon to say, "She's not wrong, we have to be willing to kill if we are to do our jobs. Our willingness to kill and experience in killing gives us greater killing intent, which is always a useful weapon if properly utilized."

"I guess..." Charles whispered.

"Did you two kill when retaking the guild district?" Leon asked.

"No, we were behind our knights almost the entire time," Henry explained.

"Hmm, a shame," Leon replied. "I think it would've been a good experience for you both, in the long run."

"I'm not too upset at it, to be honest," Charles said with a slightly haunted look.

"We are mages and knights, my friend," Leon stated. "Killing the enemies of the Kingdom is our job. If you're not comfortable with it now, don't worry, I'm sure you're going to get plenty of opportunities later."

Leon's reassurance really didn't do much for Charles or Henry, who still looked more than a little nervous at the possibility of combat in the future. However, neither had any intention of shying away from it, no matter how apprehensive they were.

"Well, I'm certainly not looking forward to it, but I'm not going to run away just because I might have to spill a little blood," Charles said, trying to put on a bold and confident air, but his pale face and nervous expression ruined it a little.

"That's all that matters," Alix responded. She had learned back at Fort 127 not to think too much about taking the lives of those that endangered her and others. Her killing intent wasn't nearly as intense as Leon's was when he was a second-tier mage, but it was a far sight greater than Charles and Henry's combined.

"We don't have to let all this talk get us down, we're supposed to be eating and having a good time!" Henry suddenly said as he dug back into his food. Leon understood his intention to change the subject and started reminiscing with the two about the Knight Academy. Stories of their rivalry with the Deathbringers fascinated Alix, and the group had plenty to talk about for the rest of their meal.

When it was time to go, Leon and Alix walked with them out of the restaurant.

"Let's do this again tomorrow," Charles said happily.

"Yes, and let's get Alain in on this as well," Henry said.

"I'm looking forward to it, but where should we meet up?" Leon asked.

"How about this noodle stand I found a couple days ago?" Charles suggested, bringing a smile to Leon's face.

"Sounds good!" Alix said, sealing the deal.

And with that, Leon and Alix made their way to their room to train, while Charles and Henry went back to their own barracks to do likewise.

Chapter 213: Owain

About twenty miles east of the Bull's Horns lay Briga, the western-most fortress of the Talfar Kingdom. It wasn't nearly so large as the Horns, as in the vast plains of Talfar such fortifications were an easily bypassed waste of resources. That being said, it was still a formidable location—built on a hill, two layers of walls, six gatehouses, and numerous isolated baileys.

Due to the location, most of the fortress was made of black trap rocks taken from the Border Mountains, giving much of the architecture both in the fortress and the small city half a mile away a distinct hexagonal pattern. Just about the only building that didn't follow this design aesthetic—hexagons and black trap rocks—was the palace at the center of the city.

The palace followed more conventional Talfar architectural styles, with a circular base and a wide conical roof that shone a brilliant white in the afternoon sun. The palace had been built on a base of grey limestone, was completely encircled with marble columns, and had been heavily enchanted both for the comfort and security of its occupants.

The man who currently ruled from that palace was Prince Owain, the thirteenth son of the previous King of Talfar. Unlike most of his other siblings, Owain had an interest in politics, and so didn't renounce his claim to the throne, even after the King had declined to nominate him as successor.

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The doors to Prince Owain's office burst open and an aged sixth-tier woman wearing extremely fancy robes of green and gold walked out with a scowl on her face.

"Please wait, Elder!" Owain cried out as he followed this woman outside, his classically handsome face contorted in anger and his long perfectly styled blue hair starting to fall apart.

“We have nothing more to discuss!” the old woman responded as she descended the grand stairs leading from the palace to the rest of the city. Her horse and force of one hundred personal bodyguards were waiting for her at the bottom, decked out in the best armor that her money could buy, all shining steel trimmed with silver, adorned with sapphires and blue war paint, and with the shoulders covered in a layer of grey wolf fur.

Owain continued down the stairs after the Elder, but she didn’t listen to a word he said. She simply pulled herself up onto her horse with an almost ethereal grace that her obvious age belied and turned to begin her ride out of the city, but before she did, she glanced at Owain one last time and said, “Queen Andraste has just defeated your elder brothers, the Third and Sixth Princes, who both revolted in an attempt to press their claims. Now, she defends the Eastern Border from the Han Kingdom, who wants to take advantage of our weakness and seize control of the Disputed Lands...”

As she spoke, Owain looked like he wanted to say something, but a single angry look from her shut his mouth.

“... Let me make myself clear, Your Highness, *no one* wants another civil war. Even if we weren’t being invaded, that wouldn’t change. You’ll find no support for your claim! Andraste is our Queen, and that is *final!*”

With that said, the Elder spurred her horse on and led her guards toward the city exit, leaving a furious Owain standing alone at the bottom of the stairs.

As they rode away, the captain of the Elder’s guard sarcastically said, “So, that went well.”

The Elder, who enjoyed letting her immediate subordinates take a more relaxed tone around her, responded with a scowl and had to fight the immediate instinct to spit on the ground in disgust. “That little boy thinks that just because his father made him a governor of a province that he’s suddenly more qualified to be our ruler than any of his siblings! If he truly *were* so deserving of the post, then the Elder Council would’ve made *him* King, instead of Andraste!”

“That doesn’t really tell him anything, though, just that he’s not as popular with the Elders as his sister,” the guard captain replied. “In any event, it’s probably prudent to keep an eye on him. Since he lost any hope of support from the Elders with your denial of his claim, I wouldn’t be surprised if he takes advantage of the Queen’s absence from the capital to try and seize the throne by force.”

“If he tries that, then he’ll prove himself to be an idiot without a lick of common sense! If he tries, then Andraste will only turn her army back west and in no time, he’ll be on the same executioner’s pyre that his brothers were on only a few months ago!”

“Do you intend to tell Her Majesty about her brother’s machinations?”

“Of course! If he does try something and it comes out that I knew about it, I would be joining him on that pyre! No, Andraste will be informed, as will the rest of the Elder Council and the High Priests! I will make sure that he finds no support in Pretani!”

—

Owain stood at the bottom of the wide stairs of his palace staring at the backs of the Elder’s guard for a long time. Even when his servants caught up to him a few seconds after the Elder left, he stood there;

even when the Elder and her entourage vanished from view, he stood glaring in the direction that they had ridden off in. None of his servants dared to utter a single word, as the look on his face was dreadful, and they knew that if they interrupted his thoughts then they would be arrested and probably tortured.

Suddenly, a loud voice called out from the palace.

“Your Highness!”

Owain turned and saw standing at the top of the stairs a middle-aged man with the silver and blue armor of a Talfar Marshal. With no small amount of bitterness, Owain glanced one last time in the direction of the Elder before ascending the stairs towards the Marshal.

Marshals in the Talfar Kingdom were the rank equivalent to the Bull Kingdom’s Consul, but there were fourteen Talfar Marshals to the Bull Kingdom’s seven Consuls. However, Talfar had no equivalent to the Paladins, making the effective magical strength of both Kingdoms about equal. Consequently, in past wars between the two Kingdoms, victory or defeat had been decided by more conventional tactics and strategies.

“Marshal Arthwyn,” Owain snarled as he reached the top of the stairs, “what do you want?”

Arthwyn smiled pleasantly at the Prince in spite of the rude tone, and asked, “I simply wished to inquire as to how Your Highness’ meeting with the Elder went.”

There was barely a hint of smugness in the Marshal’s voice owing to his long years of service to the Talfar King, but Owain could hear the self-satisfaction clear as crystal. *‘You know exactly how badly that meeting went, you arrogant bastard,’* the Prince thought.

Out loud, however, Owain merely said, “Not well.”

“That’s a shame, I was truly hoping Her Honor would be able to see Your Highness’ clear and legal right to rule,” Arthwyn replied. If anyone else had heard the Marshal speak with that tone, they might have thought that he was being genuine, but Owain had known him long enough to pick up on the subtle sarcasm.

The Prince refused to lower himself and respond to the Marshal, so he walked back into the conical palace with the Marshal following closely behind. They silently made their way through the richly decorated halls and open and inviting rooms until they arrived at the Prince’s personal study. Within, the decoration became comparatively simple, with the dark redwood walls bereft of tapestries and murals and the marble floor bare. Even the furniture was rather subdued and simple, if luxuriously comfortable.

The Prince didn’t sit at his surprisingly small desk and instead chose to sit down in front of his fireplace in one of only two small couches. The Marshall sat down in a nearby armchair—drawing a dirty look from Owain due to the lack of invitation to sit—and stared at his Prince expectantly.

“Why are you staring?” Owain quietly asked.

“I’m waiting to see what you intend to do, now that you know exactly how little support you have in Pretani,” Arthwyn responded. “The Elders don’t support you, the nobility doesn’t support you, and you lack support from the common sectors as well.”

“What is your point?!” Owain demanded, his fury rising. He had to catch himself from formally reprimanding Arthwyn for insubordination; the Marshal was his only real support in the entire Kingdom, after all.

“Well, you only have two places left to look: The Primal Priests and the army...” the Marshal said with a smirk.

“Those damned priests are in my sister’s corner...” Owain bitterly grumbled.

“Well, you *could* try and get married to one of the Primal Virgins—both the Earth and Wind Temples have female Primal Virgins, as I recall.”

“Not going to happen. The Primal Priests guard their Virgins like dragons guard their hoards.”

“In that case,” Arthwyn said as his smile grew bigger, “Your Highness’ only option for support is the army.”

Owain scowled again, as he knew that Arthwyn was aware that any requests he was legally allowed to make to the army had to go through the Marshal. In other words, if Owain truly wanted to raise enough support to become King before Andraste had ruled for long enough to consolidate her power, then he was entirely dependent on Arthwyn.

“What do you want?” Owain demanded of the still-smiling Arthwyn.

“For Your Highness to listen to me. In *all* things,” Arthwyn stated.

“Be *specific*,” Owain countered.

“If I must,” Arthwyn said. “I want to be named to the Elder Council!”

Owain leaned back in his sofa and silently contemplated the matter. *‘I need his support, but he isn’t nearly old enough to be an Elder...’*

To be an Elder, a citizen of Talfar had to be at least of the sixth-tier and two hundred years old or older. Arthwyn was a powerful sixth-tier mage, but he was only in his one-hundred-forties.

‘I would look corrupt if I were to name him as an Elder upon my ascension to Kingship, especially since I would have to remove one of the Elders already on the council...’ Owain thought with some dejection. But there was another thought that crept into his head that prevented him from outright refusing Arthwyn. *‘But that is only a problem if the Marshal lives long enough to see me on the throne...’*

“Very well,” Owain said out loud, “once I am King, I promise to name you as the newest of the Elders.”

Most legislation within the Talfar Kingdom was written by the Elder Council and merely approved and enforced by the reigning monarch. The Elders even decided who among the previous monarch’s children would succeed to the throne after the monarch’s death. Owain understood Arthwyn’s desire to be on the council, as there were only twenty-one Elders at any one time. This meant that Arthwyn could wield significantly more authority over the Kingdom as an Elder than he could as a Marshal bound by the King’s regulations.

“That means a lot, Your Highness,” Arthwyn said with a sly smile.

"Now, how are we going to go about this?" Owain asked, deferring to the military specialist; his own skills lay in administration, not martial affairs.

"At this moment, I can raise one hundred thousand peasant levies from this province, in addition to the fifty-thousand professional soldiers stationed here. I can also call favors from Marshal's Bran and Gwen and add about a hundred thousand more soldiers to those numbers."

Owain shivered a little when he thought of the pale and creepy Bran, but since half of the other Marshals were with Andraste in the east fighting the Han Kingdom, Arthwyn's contacts would have to do.

"Additionally," Arthwyn continued, "we should not march on Pretani."

"I must take the capital if I wish to unseat my sister!" Owain protested.

"I understand that Your Highness, but the Han Kingdom's invasion isn't going to stop just because Your Highness wants to be King. To march on Pretani now would be to invite criticism from every corner of the Kingdom! No, it would be received much better if Your Highness were to alter the target to a foreign state..."

"I assume you have one in mind, then?" Owain asked. From their location, they could march west to the Bull Kingdom, south-west to the Samar Kingdom, or south to the Kingdom of Asturias, with each providing their own benefits if the conquest was successful.

"I do indeed..." Arthwyn replied. "The Bull Kingdom has long held the city of Ariminium, and so controls the point where the Tyrrhenian River joins the Gulf of Discord! If we were to take that city, then we would gain access to the western oceans!"

"Our two states have warred many times for that little bit of land," Owain mused. "Even when we've managed to take it, we've never been able to hold onto it. Our last invasion eighty years ago failed miserably..."

"I'm well aware of how badly we failed back then," Arthwyn coolly remarked. He absent-mindedly rubbed his left shoulder, where Owain could just barely see the edge of a scar peeking out from under his armor. But before Owain could comment on his behavior, Arthwyn continued, "Taking that city and the fortress beside it would be an enormous mark of prestige, as Your Highness would've taken the prize that has been coveted by dozens of Kings and Queens before Your Highness! And in a state of war, Your Highness proving himself by conquering new territory would be more than enough to convince most in Pretani that Your Highness would make for a far better King than Andraste, who even now struggles in the east with the armies of the Han Kingdom!"

Owain felt his heart rate accelerate as the plan took shape before him. He would conquer Ariminium and become a war hero to the Talfar Kingdom in the process. He would then use that prestige and wave of support to become King. It was a far more practical plan than any he'd had before.

After several minutes of thought, he asked, "How long will it take to assemble this army you speak of?"

"A month or two," Arthwyn immediately replied, telling Owain that he'd put quite a bit more thought into this than the Marshal had initially let on.

“Can it be done any sooner?” Owain inquired. “I don’t want to give the Bull Kingdom time to notice our gathering army and make their own preparations...”

“I can have the levies raised and supplied by the end of the month,” Arthwyn confidently stated. “My fifty thousand soldiers are always ready for battle, and Marshal Bran can be here in a matter of weeks. It’s Marshal Gwen that we’d be waiting on for most of that time.”

“Get to work, then,” Owain said. “I want your army raised as soon as possible and have the other two Marshals begin their march here. We’ll wait for Bran, but Gwen will have to serve as reinforcements after the invasion has begun.”

Arthwyn smiled and rose from his chair. With a bow, he left the Prince’s study. His smile grew wider as he walked to the communications room; the glee he felt at the invasion he’d been planning for decades couldn’t be overstated. After eighty years of living almost within spitting distance of the border, he was finally going to invade the Bull Kingdom!

The Marshal’s smile grew cold and hateful as he rubbed his shoulder again. A more level-headed commander would never have recommended invading another Kingdom while his own monarch was already fighting a war on the other side of the realm, but he had old business with the Bull Kingdom, and he was going to settle it any way he possibly could, regardless of the harm it brought to the Talfar Kingdom.

Chapter 214: Xaphan’s Request

“... and then... he just laid there! With a look... of utter confusion!” Alain recalled in between bouts of boisterous laughter.

“That horse was a *nightmare*,” Leon said defensively. “He wouldn’t do anything I told him to!”

“Yeah, buddy, it was *entirely* the horse’s fault!” Charles said with a wry smile.

It had been three weeks since the Bluefire riots, and Leon and Alix had spent most of that time training. However, when they had time, they spent much of it with Charles, Henry, and Alain, as they were now. The five had gathered in one of the small private lounge areas of the latter three’s barracks building and were busy regaling Alix with stories of when they were in the Knight Academy.

This would be something frowned upon by other knights, given that it might lead to Leon and Alix becoming too informal with each other, but Leon really didn’t care much about that. It had already been indicated to Alix that Trajan would accept her into his retinue when she reached the third-tier and Leon knighted her, so the two treated each other more like friends and comrades than leader and subordinate or teacher and student. Still, the biggest reason why they were meeting Charles, Henry, and Alain in their barracks was to get away from the disapproving looks of the knights in the barracks adjacent to the keep—not to mention the latter three flat out refusing to go anywhere near so many high-ranking knights who could make their lives difficult just for being there.

“I have to admit,” Alix said, “that it’s somewhat hard to imagine Sir Leon being that bad at anything. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you fail so completely at anything, Sir. Plus, you’ve obviously gotten better at horse riding from what I’ve seen.”

“Well I’m hardly going to advertise what I’m bad at for all the world to know,” Leon said with a wry smile. “And I think that horse was just not trained very well, those horses that we took on that vampire hunt were much... *tamer*, I guess is the word... More docile and much easier to handle.”

“You’re going to ride Anzu when he gets bigger, aren’t you?” Henry asked as if the answer weren’t obvious.

“Of course!” Leon replied, his smile growing wider from the pride he had in his little griffin.

“You’d have to be blind to not see that little thing’s going to be a real war machine when he gets older,” Charles noted.

Sensing everyone’s attention shifting to him, Anzu tried his best to melt away behind Leon’s legs. Leon reached down to try and comfort the griffin, but as he did so, he felt something that he hadn’t noticed much in the past year: Xaphan’s attention. Ever since he started training his magic sense, he started being able to perceive when Xaphan was awake or not, even when the demon wasn’t actively watching what he was doing, so he knew exactly how much Xaphan had been concentrating on his recovery in recent months; it was so much, in fact, that they’d barely had more than a single conversation with each other since coming back from the giant’s crater.

But now, Leon felt Xaphan not only wake up from his meditative trance but project his magic sense out of Leon’s soul realm to figure out what he was doing.

[Need something, demon?] Leon asked curiously.

[Felt that, did you?] Xaphan responded with both mockery and surprise as if he couldn’t decide which he wanted to convey. [I was only trying to figure out what you were doing and if this was a good time to talk.]

“Well, you’ll never catch my ass riding anything other than a horse! It’s practically asking for me to be eaten if I were to try anything more exotic!” Henry exclaimed.

[We’re clearly not talking about anything particularly important,] Leon observed. [I’m guessing that what you want to talk about is important, so why don’t you lay it on me?]

[I... I ha...] the demon began, but he cut himself off several times. It was clear to Leon that what Xaphan wanted to talk about wasn’t easy for him to say, and Leon felt certain that he knew why.

[Does this have anything to do with your not making much progress over the past year and a half?] Leon asked with a mocking tone that was much less ambiguous than Xaphan’s had been only a moment before.

As if through gritted teeth, Xaphan responded with a terse, [Yes...]

[And you need something from me in order to give you a kick in the pants, so to speak?]

[That’s a rather crude way of putting it.]

[Is it inaccurate?]

[I... suppose not...]

As Leon spoke with the demon, the conversation around him continued. Charles, Alain, and Henry seemed to be paying far more attention to Alix than they were to Leon, which he understood given Alix's looks. Compounded with Leon's usual taciturn nature, which the former three understood well enough from the Knight Academy, Leon felt comfortable completely tuning out of their conversation for a while.

[All right, demon, before we get started talking about what you need, I've a condition,] Leon said with a serious tone.

[And what might that be?] Xaphan asked with some apprehension.

[Back when we were in the cave hunting that vampire, you recognized the demon that appeared in the bonfire. I haven't pressed you for much information in that regard, but I think it's time that you told me a little something about this 'Amon' guy.]

Almost an entire minute followed without either Leon or Xaphan speaking. Leon was dead set on getting some answers out of Xaphan about his history with that other demon, and Xaphan could tell through their link that he wasn't going to just let this go, even if Xaphan refused to speak.

Finally, Leon heard a long sigh and a sense of resignation coming from his soul realm.

[Very well, but I would prefer if we were to discuss what I need first,] Xaphan said.

[That's fine,] Leon replied, [but don't think that I'm going to let you off the hook.]

[Perish the thought,] the demon responded with sarcasm.

[So, what do you need? Another potion?]

[Not this time,] Xaphan said. [Since you're now a fifth-tier mage, we don't need to resort to such crude methods as you drinking a potion and forcing the magic down into your soul realm. No, now we can simply get materials and you can essentially deliver them to me directly by absorbing them into yourself.]

[Let's get to specifics,] Leon suggested, wanting to hurry this along so he could get the answers to the questions that had been burning in his mind for weeks.

[You're going to need a diamond about the size of your thumb and four sapphires each about half that size,] Xaphan informed.

After waiting a brief moment, Leon asked, [Is that it? Because I actually already have all of that in my vault back in Teira...]

[That's right, you do,] Xaphan said as it dawned on him just how many gems Leon had that he'd completely forgotten about. [But, they're way back in Teira, how are you going to get them here?]

[I'll write to Elise and ask about policies in that regard,] Leon said. [Even if they're not able to open the vault without my presence, I'm sure that Heaven's Eye can loan me some sapphires and a diamond until I can get back up to Teira.]

[I don't doubt that, sleeping with the daughter of the woman who's in charge of their entire operation in this Kingdom probably helps,] Xaphan said with the smile on his face evident from his voice alone.

[So, is that it? Just the sapphires and the diamond?] Leon asked.

[You already have everything else that's needed, which is to say spell paper and ink,] Xaphan said.

[Wonderful!] Leon exclaimed. [So now that that's taken care of, let's have a little chat...]

[You don't want to know what the materials are used for?] Xaphan asked in what, to Leon at least, was an obvious attempt to delay talking about Amon.

[Nope,] Leon instantly replied. [You'll tell me what to do when the time comes, so why waste time now?]

The demon sighed again. [Very well, might as well just jump right into it,] he said. [There isn't that much to say, really; Amon and I were rivals that competed for the Lordship that I eventually won.]

[Right, I remember you saying something about there only being seven Lords for each magical element, and a single Prince for each element as well in demon society...] Leon said.

[Correct. The last Lord had been missing for one hundred and fifty thousand years, and so was pronounced dead by the Prince of Flame. This opened that Lord's seat for any ambitious demon to take. Amon and I were the two who lasted the longest in the Prince's challenges.]

[But I *felt* your anger and fury and hatred when you saw Amon in the bonfire, he couldn't have just been some random demon you competed against one time,] Leon mentioned.

[... The tasks assigned by a Prince to determine a Lord aren't quick and simple, especially if the Prince isn't raising someone up to fill the seat. I don't want to get too deep into the nitty gritty details, but suffice it to say that after five hundred years of fighting against each other in just about every manner conceivable, things between myself and Amon got bitter and *personal*.

[At first, things remained fairly cordial, and we even got somewhat friendly for a time after we began to respect each other's power. However, as time went on, and it became increasingly clear that the battle for Lordship would come down to myself and him, we started attacking each other's power bases. Our followers and our families died in droves. By the time I was declared Lord of Flame, Amon's family had been devastated, and mine wasn't much better.]

[You have a family?!] Leon asked incredulously.

[I *did*,] Xaphan corrected with the hate in his voice almost tangible. Leon wisely shut up to allow his partner to continue.

[When the competition was over, my power base had been ravaged. Still, in the end, I had won, I was the Lord and he was a corpse. I enjoyed my time as Lord, but that came to a swift end when the Storm King's little bootlickers summoned me here.]

When Xaphan mentioned his summoning, Leon's eyes perked up. He was a little confused as to how a Lord of Flame, one of the highest beings in demon society, could be summoned so easily. But, rather than interrupt, he filed that question away for later.

[You know that I've spoken to the Thunderbird before, don't you, young mage?] Xaphan suddenly asked.

[You've told me that before, yes,] Leon answered.

[It told me that, despite only being gone for eighty thousand years—not even the traditional hundred thousand—Amon has usurped my title as Lord! Somehow, he survived even though I *saw* him dead at my feet! I ripped his core from his chest and threw his body into a star!]

Leon couldn't help but be more than a little irked that the Thunderbird seemed so much more willing to speak with Xaphan than to him, but he held his tongue on that subject. He doubted that this was the time to bring it up.

[I see,] Leon said. [Well, that does make a lot of sense, then, that's not the kind of overkill that I would expect anyone to return from...]

Xaphan furiously grumbled a little, but Leon couldn't make out anything the demon said.

[Anyway, thanks for telling me *something* of your past,] Leon continued, [I'll get right on those enchantment materials you want.]

[And who said they were for an enchantment?] Xaphan asked with forced mischievousness.

[What else could they be used for, especially at the power level we're at?] Leon countered.

[A great many things, you're just far too weak and limited in your knowledge to know about them!] Xaphan arrogantly retorted.

[Oh, but the great and mighty demon Lord Xaphan is enlightened in this subject?] Leon asked, playfully jabbing at his partner's pride. [You sure have never indicated as such before and have even admitted that you know just about nothing if it doesn't include fire.]

Xaphan understood that Leon was trying to get his mind off Amon, and he eagerly seized the chance. The two partners bickered back and forth like that for a while until it became inconvenient that Leon wasn't participating in the conversation between his friends around him. However, Leon did have a few last words to share with Xaphan before he let the matter drop completely.

[One of these days, and that day may be *far* off, I'm going to want some specifics as to what exactly you and Amon did to each other,] Leon said. [We can drop it now, but know that I am expecting a story...]

Xaphan didn't reply, and after several minutes, Leon felt the demon's attention drift away until Xaphan fell back into his healing meditation.

Chapter 215: Bluefire's Box

"... and this is the only object seized from the Bluefire Guild that matched the description you gave us, Your Highness," the young fourth-tier knight said to Prince Trajan.

"This is it, I'm sure of it," the Prince replied, looking down at the simple black box in front of him. The box wasn't that large, only as big as a decent-sized book, but Trajan knew that it contained the single most valuable item that the Bluefire Guild possessed. "Thank you, you're dismissed," Trajan said to the knight.

"Yes, Your Highness," the knight replied, and he left the Prince's office without another word.

The Prince waited for the knight to leave before he turned back to the box. He picked it up and walked over to a nearby couch by a fireplace. He could feel a staggering amount of magic contained within the box, and it was clear to him that he would need some time to get the thing open, so he wanted to get comfortable first.

He laid the box upon the table in front of him and, by brushing his fingers over a few small runic circles at the edge of the table, activated several magic lanterns in the ceiling above the table, illuminating every side of the box. *'Now tell me, little box, how do I open you?'* Trajan thought as he covered the box in his magic sense, scanning every square inch of the thing and examining the runes carved upon it.

The runes flared in response, glowing in every color and scattering Trajan's projected magic.

'This thing certainly is locked tight...' Trajan thought with a hint of frustration. He glanced out of the window of his office at the setting sun, deciding at that moment that he wasn't going to bed until he opened the box and acquired what was inside.

—

Leon, Anzu, and Alix walked into the keep exactly on time the next morning. As usual, they made their way to Trajan's training room, but when they entered, they found it completely empty.

"Huh..." Alix muttered. "I wonder where His Highness is? He's never missed a training session before..."

"No idea," Leon responded. He considered letting loose with his magic sense to try and find the Prince, but he knew that not only were there plenty of people around who would sense his projected magic and might be bothered by it, but also the enchantments in the keep likely wouldn't allow for that, to begin with. "Let's wait for a little while and see if Trajan shows up. We can spar in the meantime," Leon said.

"Sounds good," Alix replied as she hopped on over to the sandpit and took up a strong stance.

Leon quickly followed her and got himself ready by taking an aggressive stance while Anzu laid down at the edge of the sandpit for a quick nap. Alix paled a little, as she had been sparring with Leon for long enough to recognize the stance he took; he was going to rush and stun her as fast as he could in the first few seconds. Knowing that there was no way she was going to be able to dodge or start her own attack in time, she clenched her teeth and shifted to a more defensive stance. Her only hope to stand against even a regular fifth-tier lightning mage—let alone someone as skilled as Leon—was to tank the first hit and try to counter-attack.

Alix raised her training blade just in time, meeting Leon's swift attack head-on. Her blade shook in her hand enough to leave it feeling slightly numb, but she ignored that as she tried to step to the side and deflect Leon's blade away. Unfortunately for her, Leon stepped in the same direction, keeping the pressure on her blade and forcing her back across the sand.

After several long moments with their blades locked together, Leon flicked his wrist and tore Alix's sword from her hand. He then brought his blade down on her head, stopping just short of actually touching and stunning her.

Alix stared at the blade less than an inch in front of her face and asked, "Is it really necessary for you to go so hard right from the beginning?"

"Of course," Leon immediately answered. "I would never hold back in an actual fight, so why should I when training? Besides, my father always trained me like this, though he was typically a little more showy and arrogant about it. The point of it is to ensure that the weaker person never loses perspective. It wouldn't do for you to grow arrogant, plus having experience fighting someone stronger is never a bad thing."

"You make some good points, I guess," Alix said with a cheeky smile.

As she walked over to pick up her weapon, the door of the training room opened, and both young mages turned toward it expecting to see Prince Trajan. Instead, they saw a fourth-tier knight that both recognized as one of the Prince's assistants.

"His Highness has ordered me to escort the both of you to his office," the assistant respectfully informed.

"I see, then please lead on," Leon said, restraining himself from indulging his curiosity at what was keeping the Prince by asking the assistant.

The assistant did just as requested, leading Leon and Alix down one floor to the Prince's office in the back of the meeting room that they first met him in. Upon arrival, the assistant led them past the meeting room's raised dais, directly opened the door almost hidden away in a dark corner, and held it for Leon and Alix.

The Prince's office was as spacious and splendidly decorated as would be expected—though dimly lit—but the only thing the two saw upon their entrance was a somewhat haggard Trajan hunched over the illuminated table in front of his couch. After glancing up at the sound of the opening door, Trajan said, "Ah, come on in, have a seat."

Leon and Alix complied, sitting in a pair of nearby armchairs. Leon curiously looked at the box that still sat unopened in front of the Prince.

"I apologize for not making it to today's morning training," Trajan said, "but I was busy with this damned box. I've been working on it since last night."

"What's in it that would take up so much of your time?" Alix asked, her own curiosity overriding her usual reticence to speak in front of someone so much higher in rank than her.

Trajan didn't mind—though it might be a little different if they weren't in private—and explained, "That little box contains the greatest treasure the Bluefire Guild possessed: their own founder!"

"This box contains a corpse?" Leon asked with a look of confusion. "Was the founder cremated and the box contains their ashes?"

"No, that's not what I mean," Trajan said with a chuckle. "The founder of the Bluefire Guild reached the seventh-tier before he died—he was strong enough to have been named a Paladin if my Royal Grandfather wanted to press the issue, but he was also very old when he managed to ascend and so was left alone until he died of old age. However, just before he died, he projected his magic body outside of his physical body and attached it to an enchanted gem, and that is what is within this box."

“Why would he do that?!” Leon passionately asked. “I would rather embrace death completely than be so trapped!”

“I don’t disagree, but I also don’t know his reasons,” Trajan said. “I’d have to ask him to find out why he did what he did, and that’s part of the reason why I want to open this damned box!”

Leon shivered as Trajan turned his attention back to the box. He knew that a mage got his magic power from two places: absorbing it from the environment or producing it in bone marrow after ascending to the third-tier. Most of that mage’s magic power is then stored in their soul realm, while the magic they can use at a moment’s notice is kept as mana, fused with their blood. Since the soul realm exists within the physical body, and a magic body doesn’t have blood, then it’s nearly impossible for a mage to utilize magic with nothing more than a magic body; if Trajan was right about the founder of the Bluefire Guild continuing to live as a magic body attached to an enchanted gem, then the founder would be little more than an impotent ghost, able to use no more magic than was in their environment.

But, of course, that wasn’t the end of it. Without a physical body to attach to, a magic body is incredibly fragile and weak. Its intangible nature makes a magic body completely untouchable for a mage beneath the fifth-tier without enchanted weapons, but any mage capable of using elemental magic would be able to destroy it with an almost comical lack of effort.

‘Why would anyone choose such a weak and defenseless existence?’ Leon thought to himself. ‘It must be a deeply profound reason for a powerful mage to stick around in such a diminished state... It couldn’t be because he simply didn’t want to die, could it?’

“How long has the Bluefire founder been trapped in that box?” Alix asked as her face contorted in horror at the prospect of such imprisonment.

“Decades, at least,” Trajan said with a look of complete seriousness. “He supposedly died about a century and a half ago. I suspect that he wanted to stick around in this manner to continue to advise his successors, but if they were actually consulting him, I doubt that the higher-ups in the Bluefire Guild would’ve attempted to steal payments from their mages.”

Leon leaned forward to examine the box closer. His curiosity was now piqued and he wanted to hear why the Bluefire Guild’s founder attached himself to a gem.

“This enchantment...” he muttered almost without realizing it.

“Hmm? Do you see something, Leon?” Trajan asked.

“I’ve read about enchantments like these in one of the books I have,” Leon said, keeping his knowledge relatively vague. One of the books he’d brought out of the archives beneath Teira actually described in great detail locking enchantments exactly like what he now saw on the box.

“Can you open it?” Alix inquired, her eyes almost glittering at the prospect.

“Maybe...” Leon said noncommittally. “Is there any paper around?”

“Over there,” Trajan said, pointing to a small desk in the corner of the room. Alix immediately sprang up and walked over, pulling out several sheets of paper, a quill, and a small pot of ink from the drawers.

"Thank you," Leon said as Alix handed him what he'd asked for. He then turned his eyes back to the box and began to scribble on the first sheet of paper.

Trajan watched Leon work like a hawk watching a mouse. He was never that great at enchanting and the box had completely stumped him. He had been almost at the point of summoning an enchanter who worked for the Legion and putting them to the task of opening the box.

After about five minutes of watching Leon work, though, Trajan was just as confused. "Are you just copying the enchantment?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. Indeed, what Leon had drawn on the paper was what appeared to be the beginning of a copy of the glyphs on the box. However, if Trajan was more familiar with enchanting, he'd notice that Leon's copy was more of a sketch; Leon hadn't focused on accuracy, and so was just scrawling some of the runes onto the paper.

"Kind of," Leon answered. "To the best of my ability to see, this particular enchantment has several layers of fake glyphs stacked on top of one another, which are slightly defective runes. These fake layers still have magic coursing through them, so they're hard to distinguish, but once an enchanter sees past them and discerns the real enchantment, then it shouldn't be that difficult to unlock the box..."

"That... *what?!*" Alix asked, her face scrunched up in confusion.

"Think of it like this," Leon explained, "If a rune is a letter, then an enchantment is like a paragraph. This technique disguises the real 'words' of the enchantment behind several layers of other 'words', like disguising the contents of a letter by drawing or writing over what you've already written... Well, I make it sound easier than it is, but that's the general idea, anyway..."

"And you can see beneath these fake layers?" Trajan asked, his face breaking out into an expectant smile.

"I *think* so, I just have to identify the runes that have been written incorrectly, which isn't the easiest thing to do. Some of them are only defective in extremely minor ways." Leon replied as he turned his attention back to the box. Neither Alix nor Trajan disturbed him again, and about ten minutes later, Leon sat back with his sketch completed. He carefully scrutinized every rune he'd copied down, and after glancing back at the box several times for reference, Leon said, "*This* should do it..."

He leaned forward and began to tap the box in several places, channeling his magic into the enchantment and destroying a few key runes. A couple of seconds later, all three of them heard a soft click come from the box, indicating that it had been unlocked.

"Huh," Leon said. "I wasn't actually expecting that to work..."

Trajan, with a huge smile on his face, quickly opened the box, revealing the enchanted gem the Bluefire Guild's founder had sealed himself within.

Chapter 216: Bluefire Guild Founder

Trajan's office was suddenly filled with a bright red light as the Prince opened the box. Within, Leon could see a thin plate of polished black onyx about six inches square, and set in the center of the plate was a brilliant red ruby about the size of his eye. The ruby glittered with magic power, and beneath the surface seemed to flow a red liquid that Leon was almost certain was only a trick of the light. Still, it was

impossible to deny how magical the ruby was, especially as the room was inundated with a tremendous aura as well as red light as the lid of the box was opened.

"Look at *that*," Trajan whispered. "Even in the capital where nobles wear more gold and silver than they keep in their vaults, this ruby would be a thing to marvel at..."

"It's so *pretty*," Alix whispered as she unconsciously reached out to touch the ruby.

As her finger got closer, suddenly a loud and extremely irate voice thundered from the gem, saying, "Keep your peasant fingers to yourself, girl!"

Alix froze in shock, but after taking a second for the words to sink in, her face twisted in anger. However, before she could retort, Trajan said, "Is that any way to thank the people who opened your box?"

"You could be the Sacred Bull himself and I still wouldn't allow you to touch me so casually!" the voice shot back.

"Well it's a good thing you brought that up," Trajan said as his aura began to spike, "because I happen to be a Prince of this Kingdom, and if you don't tone yourself down a peg or twelve, then I'll rip that stone out of its plate and hurl it into the Gulf!"

His words carried a forcefulness that shut the voice from the gem up instantly, despite the aura coming from it being stronger than even Trajan's. However, the gem's aura didn't carry even a hint of killing intent, whereas Trajan's killing intent was so strong that Alix froze and found it hard to breathe, and even Leon couldn't help but grow pale and stop all unnecessary movements.

A long silence followed, which only ended when Trajan leaned forward and grabbed the onyx plate out of the box, to which the voice sighed and said, "I suppose the luxury of choosing not to be touched is something I no longer possess..."

"No, it's something you can certainly decide for yourself, but right now you need to consider your current situation," Trajan said quietly. "Besides, making demands of Princes and insulting said Prince's ancestor isn't something that most people would recommend..."

"I... must concede to you on that point," the voice admitted as Trajan closely examined the plate and ruby.

"If you cooperate with me, then you'll be afforded every courtesy and respect due to someone of your station," Trajan said. "But, if you let your arrogance run unchecked, then we're going to have some serious problems going forward."

"What sort of 'cooperation' are you suggesting?" the voice asked.

"You're a venerable man with a wealth of experience in matters both magical and mundane," Trajan said. "I want you for an advisor."

"An advisor to a Prince, hm? I suppose I can lower... I mean, I'll admit that it isn't a bad job..."

"Certainly better than being locked in a box with nothing to do and no one to talk to for years on end," Leon muttered.

"That boy makes a point that's hard to argue with," the voice admitted. "Very well, for the time being at least, Your Highness, I suppose I can lend you my advice, as recompense for opening my box."

"Wonderful!" Trajan exclaimed. "Now that all that's over with, why don't we have us some introductions?"

"I am Caecilius Symmachus Aemilianus! Founder and first Master of the esteemed Bluefire Guild!" the voice declared.

"I am Trajan Anastasius Taurus, Firstborn son of Julius Sextus Taurus, Consul of the East, and Exarch of Ariminium!" Trajan thundered.

"Leon," Leon said, identifying himself in the simplest manner he could.

"Alix," Alix said, taking a cue from her knight.

Trajan rolled his eyes, then stated, "Sir Leon Ursus is one of the most promising young knights in this Kingdom. I have personally taken him under my wing. Miss Alix is his squire, also a promising young knight in training."

Caecilius made a tongue-clicking sound, then scornfully said, "A barbarian and a common wench. If you want my advice, you ought to ditch this inferior stock and choose your knights with a more *discerning* eye."

Both Leon and Alix immediately scowled and glared at the ruby, while Trajan squeezed the onyx plate so hard it almost cracked.

"I ought to warn you, Caecilius," Trajan said through teeth clenched in fury, "that when it comes to those I choose for my retinue, I have a *very* discerning eye. From now on, you will keep such insulting comments to yourself!"

Trajan's killing intent spiked, causing the temperature in the room to plummet. So strong was Trajan's wrath, in fact, that the ruby itself seemed to lose some of its luster.

"I-I understand!" Caecilius sputtered. Even though he had no physical body left to make the words, it still took him a titanic amount of effort to speak them. Even when he was alive and at the height of his power, his own killing intent would've been dwarfed by Trajan's. He simply hadn't lived a life that revolved around death and killing, as Trajan had as a soldier.

Still, he had been a seventh-tier mage in life, so Leon felt more than a modicum of surprise that Caecilius submitted to Trajan so quickly.

A short moment of awkward silence followed Caecilius' submission, which came to a sudden end when someone knocked on the office door.

"Enter!" Trajan called out. His assistants knew that he considered the matter with Caecilius to be of paramount importance and that they wouldn't let anyone disturb him unless it was a matter of comparable substance.

A young knight with long auburn hair and clear blue eyes that sparkled with intelligence stepped into the office and bowed. Even in the dim light that the Prince favored, Leon recognized her as Dame Furia, one of the Tribunes serving under Minerva.

“Your Highness, I have an urgent report from Dame Minerva regarding the clearing of the guild district!” Furia said in a soft voice and almost lyrical cadence. Leon could tell from the way she spoke that she was nobility.

“What is it?” Trajan asked a little more curtly than he intended.

“While clearing the villa of a fifth-tier mage in the Iron Dove guild,” Furia explained, “we uncovered a small hidden warehouse filled with what we estimate to be an actual ton of Silverleaf!”

“*What?!?*” Trajan exclaimed as he rose from his seat. “*That much?!?*”

“Yes, Your Highness, and Dame Minerva believes from the charred remnants in the warehouse that there was quite a bit more in there that was destroyed in the fire,” Furia said.

Trajan slipped Caecilius’ onyx plate into the chest pocket of his dark green Legion uniform and started walking toward Furia. “I want to see this warehouse. Is Minerva there right now?” he asked.

“She is,” Furia answered.

“Good. Oh, and Ursus,” Trajan said, turning back to Leon and Alix, “I want you to come with me as well.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Leon instantly replied as he almost sprang to his feet and made to follow Trajan, with Anzu and Alix hot on his heels.

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The villa Furia took the group to was relatively small compared to some of the others in the district, especially considering its owner was a high-ranking mage in the Iron Dove guild who Leon guessed would’ve been fairly well-off compared to most of the other mages in the guild. It might have been a cozy and far more impressive place if half the rooms hadn’t been blocked by rubble and the white granite walls and red roof tiles hadn’t been scorched black by the fire.

“The Silverleaf is in the back,” Furia said upon their arrival.

She directed the group past a handful of laborers working to clear the rubble and temporarily reinforce the villa with magic so it wouldn’t crumble when the rubble holding up what was left of the ceiling was gone. The group had passed by hundreds of other villas in the district that had similar work going on within; the hours-long riot had done a significant amount of damage to the district, and it would likely take months to completely rebuild.

The room farthest in the back was their destination, and upon arrival, Leon immediately understood how the hidden warehouse had been discovered: the ceiling had collapsed, and a support beam had fallen on a hidden hatch in the floor, causing it to also collapse. The beam had been moved to make room for people to get past, but not far enough to disguise what had happened.

Furia led them through the crushed hatch, down a short flight of stairs, and into a basement made entirely of concrete with a vaulted ceiling to support the villa above. The room was as large as the villa’s

entire footprint and packed almost floor-to-ceiling with huge boxes. The area nearest the door had been scorched from the fire, and a handful of workers were busy cleaning up the remains of dozens of boxes that had been destroyed in the blaze. Several other boxes had been damaged, allowing Leon to see bales of shiny grey leaves within.

"That is a *lot* of contraband," Trajan muttered in shock as his eyes scanned the hundreds of boxes around the room. "How did all this get into the city without anyone noticing?!"

"That's what we intend to find out, Your Highness," came a voice from behind the newcomers. Leon turned to see who it was and saw Minerva striding into the warehouse. "We're already looking for the owner of this villa, but with everything that's happened over the past month, we're not confident that they're still alive."

"Why not?" Trajan asked.

"The Silverleaf is still here," Leon offered.

"Just so," Minerva replied. "Had the smuggler been alive, then I don't think we ever would've found this warehouse; they would've had this place cleaned up without us."

"Then check with our records. And get Iron Dove on it!" Trajan said angrily.

"What if they don't cooperate?" Minerva asked.

"They *will* if they don't want to end up like Bluefire!" Trajan replied.

As soon as the Prince said this, Caecilius spoke up from within Trajan's pocket, worriedly asking, "Wait, what was that about my guild? What's happened to it?!"

Minerva stared at Trajan with a rare look of bewilderment as the Prince pulled the onyx plate out of his pocket and said, "We can talk about that later, but for now we have a smuggler to find."

"No, what in the hell has happened to my damned guild?!" Caecilius demanded.

"The master fucked up, tried to take everyone's money, started a riot that turned into a rebellion, and the guild was disbanded," Leon succinctly explained.

"What?! I... Why... *How* did this happen?!" Caecilius shouted.

"Your Highness...?" Minerva asked in confusion.

"This is the founder of the Bluefire Guild," Trajan explained with a sigh. "He attached his magic body to this ruby so he could live on after his physical body died."

"Why would you *do* that?" Minerva couldn't help but ask, shivering as she did at the prospect of facing an eternity trapped in a tiny gem.

"To advise my successors and help to guide my guild!" Caecilius howled in anger and despair. "If I had *been* there, if they had *listened* instead of sealing me away, this wouldn't have ever happened!"

A short awkward silence followed with no one knowing what to say. Eventually, Trajan simply slipped the onyx plate back into his pocket and said, “Perhaps we should return to the pressing issue, that being this smuggler...”

“Right...” Minerva responded. Caecilius didn’t say anything more, falling into a depressed silence.

“What’s the deal with this Silverleaf? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it before,” Leon asked.

“It’s a powerful drug that can enhance wind magic,” Trajan answered.

“It’s also horrifically addictive and extremely damaging to the user’s body,” Minerva added. “Apparently, it gives one hell of a high to go with the boosted power, but it comes with a low to match the high and severe damage to the internal organs. Some addicts have been found with their organs liquified after indulging too much.”

“I see...” Leon said. His own experience with ingesting materials strong in wind magic—the feather he needed for Xaphan’s potion back in the Knight Academy—had been painful and quite damaging to his body. He didn’t question it when Minerva mentioned the damage the Silverleaf could do to a person’s body.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Trajan said, turning every head in the warehouse in his direction.

“We’re going to burn all of this Silverleaf. Minerva, I’m going to have you get on finding out whatever you can from Iron Dove about the owner of this villa. Leon, I want you to search this place for anything that might have survived the fire that could be useful in this investigation.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Leon and Minerva replied in unison.

“Good. Now get on it.”

Chapter 217: Silverleaf

As Leon walked up the stairs from the Silverleaf warehouse, it occurred to him that the villa had probably already been searched by those who had found the warehouse to begin with. He, of course, had to search it again to fulfill Trajan’s orders, but the first thing he did was to find the knight in charge of the clean-up in the area. It was easy to find the man, as he was the only fourth-tier mage out of the dozen or so workers and soldiers who were cleaning the place.

“Ah, Sir Leon!” the young Centurion exclaimed as Leon, Alix, and Anzu approached.

“You know who I am?” Leon asked in surprise and confusion.

“Yes, Sir, I don’t think there’s a single knight assigned to the Bull’s Horns that doesn’t know the knights in His Highness’ retinue!” the knight answered.

Leon had approached the knight with purpose, but this surprise brought some color to his face and rendered him momentarily speechless in embarrassment. After a few mostly-silent chuckles, Alix came to his rescue, saying, “I believe you have Sir Leon at a disadvantage...?”

“Right!” the knight exclaimed as he hurried to identify himself. Unfortunately, Leon was embarrassed enough that the man’s name didn’t even register with him.

“Right... um... so, has this entire place been searched?” Leon quietly asked once the introductions were over.

“There are a few rooms that are still blocked, but those that are open have been searched,” the Centurion responded. “Everything of note that we found has been taken to the atrium.”

“Thank you,” Leon responded as he started to make his way over to the atrium.

“Yes, Sir! We’ll be here should you need anything else!” the Centurion said as Leon, Alix, and Anzu walked away.

After they left, the Centurion’s third-tier Prefect came over and asked, “You all right, Sir?” The Centurion’s face was a little pale and he was obviously a tad jittery, but he quickly nodded to his subordinate.

“I wasn’t expecting one of the Prince’s own men to ask me anything, especially not *him*!”

“Right...” the Prefect said in understanding. In the year that Leon had been serving under Trajan, just about all the soldiers in the Bull’s Horns had heard about the quiet, stoic, and intense young Tribune that had been recruited into the Prince’s retinue. Leon wasn’t all that aware of it, but there were all kinds of rumors flying around the Legions in Ariminium about who he was and where he came from.

“He was *nothing* like what I’ve heard about him, though,” the Centurion continued.

“Indeed, I was under the impression that he was far more severe and arrogant,” the Prefect added.

“Really? I’d heard that he was a bloodthirsty brute, more prone to killing any soldiers who looked at him funny than he was to talk to any of them...” the Centurion replied as he forced his heart rate to slow.

Both men shivered a little at the relief of seeing Leon walk away, but that disconnect between what they had heard about him and how he’d acted twisted their minds in confusion. It took them nearly an hour to get their minds back on clearing and patching up the villa.

Unfortunately for the two of them, both Leon and Alix had heard the entire exchange, as the atrium wasn’t far enough away for their voices to be lost. Leon’s face was as expressionless as ever, but his cheeks were still slightly flushed, and Alix was staring at him and desperately trying to contain her mirthful chuckles. Ignoring her, Leon turned his attention to the pile of papers, personal items, and anything else that the workers had deemed noteworthy in the small atrium.

“You start over there,” Leon said, indicating one end of the pile while he walked over to the other end and grabbed the nearest stack of papers. A quick scan revealed nothing more than what was already known: the owner of the villa was a fifth-tier mage in the Iron Dove guild. Leon set the unhelpful papers aside and reached for another stack. He could already tell that this was going to take a long while.

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Two hours later, Leon and Alix met in the middle of the pile. There had been a few things learned, such as the names of several of the villa owner’s friends and family, but otherwise, nothing that might have shed light on the smuggling operation that they could tell. Leon noted everything down that seemed relevant, but even then, he barely needed more than a couple sheets of paper for all of it.

"I can't help but feel like that was all a giant waste of time," Alix pessimistically muttered.

"You're not alone," Leon said. "The other rooms should be cleared by now, let's check the place out."

"Mm!" Alix responded.

The villa had been built in three narrow rows, with a row of rooms going from the front door all the way to the farthest room in the back. All the other rooms branched off this central row, with a second floor that had a similar design layout, though much smaller; neither the atrium nor the room that led to the underground warehouse possessed a second floor above them. Most of the rooms were barely big enough to comfortably hold a couple pieces of furniture, so searching the place was hardly a challenging affair.

Leon and Alix moved from room to room, with Anzu trailing behind looking both bored at what they were doing and tense at all the other people around. Their search didn't go far, especially at first, as most of the rooms closer to the front door had already been ransacked. As they continued, they found a few rooms that had been cleared of rubble in the past two hours, but even then, the fire had destroyed anything that they might have been interested in.

Storage rooms, guest bedrooms, bathrooms, a dining room, and a living room, Leon and Alix went through them all, and they found little more than ash and charred furniture.

"The owner of this place *really* should've invested in some fire suppression enchantments," Alix complained as she and Leon ascended the stairs to the second floor. Despite the stone exterior of the villa, much of the building's frame had been made of wood, not to mention the highly flammable tapestries and wooden furniture. After the frame burned, much of the villa had started to collapse, which only spread the fire further.

"If they had, then we likely wouldn't have found out about their little smuggling operation," Leon said. "But, yeah, if I were in the business of smuggling a plant, then I would've put some time into designing—or getting someone to design—and install some kind of anti-fire enchantments, regardless of the price."

"Are they expensive?" Alix asked curiously.

"From what I understand, all enchantments are prohibitively expensive when applied to something as large as a house, even if that house is small," Leon explained. "Even the enchantments that power household appliances aren't cheap, which is why most rural households have little more than a single freezer, toilet, and maybe a shower per home."

"I suppose that does make some sense, given how little we had at Fort 127..." Alix whispered. "Though, that might not be the best comparison—even my childhood home in a country town had more amenities than Fort 127..."

When they reached the top of the stairs, they found that the workers had largely finished their work and were busy trying to stay out of Leon and Alix's way. Leon actually had to fight back an amused chuckle when he saw several first-tier and mortal workers scramble out of the room when he appeared at the top of the stairs.

"There's probably an office and a bedroom up here, let's start there," Leon said.

"Got it," Alix responded.

The two immediately split to continue their search. Alix found the bedroom, while Leon found the office. The office wasn't that large, with only a desk and several cabinets to search. The desk was bereft of anything useful, but within one of the cabinets, he found both a small stack of letters and a stack of papers that were very interesting indeed. The papers seemed to be accounting information that indicated how much Silverleaf had passed through the villa over the past year or so, while several of the letters had times and dates written on them that Leon assumed were from the villa owners' smuggling contacts.

'This guy was just asking to get caught smuggling!' Leon thought as he rifled through the incriminating documents. If he were the smuggler, he would've burned the letters and receipts, but to be fair, he'd never had to keep track of multiple tons of contraband.

Leon left the office with his evidence in hand, but the search wasn't over; he still had another large room to check out on the second floor. However, once he poked his head into it, he instantly knew that he wouldn't find much within—the room was what Leon guessed to be an enchantment lab, though the roof had collapsed and burned almost everything of note.

"There's nothing in the bedroom," Alix stated as she joined Leon in the lab.

"Then I'd say we're done here," Leon said. "Let's head back and report to the Prince."

Leon and Alix found the Prince out in front of the villa, watching the workers like a hawk as they piled the boxes of Silverleaf in the street to burn. It was fortunate that just about everything they had seized was the raw plant. If it had been refined into the wind-magic-boosting drug, then they would've had to had to find another way to dispose of it.

"Your Highness," Leon said in greeting.

"Sir Leon! Find anything?" Trajan replied.

"Some accounting details and a couple of possible accomplices," Leon answered as he waved what he'd brought from the office.

"Good," Trajan said. "Dame Minerva has some people speaking with the neighbors; once they get back, you can hand all of that off to them."

"Yes, Your Highness," Leon responded.

As they spoke, the last of the Silverleaf was carried out of the basement and taken to the pile. The Centurion that Leon had spoken to earlier then tossed a roll of paper onto the pile, causing a huge portion of the Silverleaf to immediately burst into flame. The heat roiled off the pile and the fire spread rapidly, but there were more than enough people around to keep it in check. It only took about ten minutes, but more than a ton of Silverleaf was rendered into ash.

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Merovech's clothes were soaked with sweat, and he had to fight with every fiber of his being not to shake or show other outward signs of his anxiety. Ever since the riots in the guild district, he'd been locked up in the prisons of Ariminium, and he was sure he'd missed at least three drops by his contacts.

If he didn't get out soon and see to his Silverleaf supply, then the smugglers he'd been working with for the past few years would be in a decidedly violent mood when they met with him next.

He desperately hoped that with the riots, his contacts might be a little more understanding than he feared, but he also knew that three weeks without access to his warehouse would cut into their profits by a huge margin. Every day he spent languishing in prison, both he and his smuggling friends were losing out on enormous piles of silver. But there wasn't anything the man could do about that while he was in the dark, dank, dirty cell that he'd been in for almost a month.

Suddenly, just as Merovech had managed to temporarily drive the fears from his mind of what would happen when—or *if*—he was released, he heard the sounds of approaching footsteps. This in itself didn't raise any alarms with him, as guards frequently patrolled through the prison, but as the footsteps grew closer, Merovech started paying more attention. As a fifth-tier mage, he wasn't imprisoned with the rest of the hundreds of rioters and was instead held in the basement of Ariminium's principal prison in a specially constructed cell to prevent him from using his elemental magic to escape. He quickly realized that these footsteps were descending the long flight of stairs into his cell block, where only himself and a small handful of other high-tiered mages were being held.

Merovech pressed his face against the bars to try and get a good look at whoever was coming—he and the rest of the prisoners in his neighboring cells hadn't received any visitors in the weeks since they'd been arrested, only a few officials to process them and inform them of the date they'd go before an Arbiter and be tried for their crimes. However, with the sheer number of guild mages that had rioted, the courts had to scramble to find the time for everyone. Consequently, Merovech and about a third of the mages arrested for their part in the riots were still waiting on their trial dates.

Finally, after an agonizingly long wait, the door to Merovech's cell block opened, allowing light to spill out into the dark dungeon that nearly blinded him. As the guild mage-cum-smuggler averted his eyes for a moment, he heard the footsteps of about half a dozen people move past his neighboring cells and stop right in front of his.

After a brief moment, Merovech's eyes adapted to the sudden light and he turned back toward the bars of his cell. There, he saw a beautiful but terrifying woman staring back at him. She had glossy black hair, sharp facial features, and brown eyes so dark they appeared almost black.

Merovech had, for a moment, been hopeful that these people were finally bringing him word about his trial, but as he stared back at the cold and merciless eyes of this woman, he knew in his heart that that wasn't the case.

With almost theatrical slowness, as if she were reveling in Merovech's growing horror, the woman reached into a small satchel at her hip and pulled out a single Silverleaf, then dropped it through the bars of Merovech's cell.

Chapter 218: The Smuggler

Merovech felt his heart sink into his feet as he stared at the single gray leaf that the woman had tossed into his cell.

'She knows who I am,' Merovech thought, instantly grasping the obvious.

The guards accompanying the woman swiftly opened the doors of his cell and rushed in. Merovech, in a futile attempt to protect himself, launched himself back while calling upon his magic. He was already imprisoned for rioting and rebellion, so he didn't think twice about fighting against the guards.

However, as his magic power burst out of his soul realm and into his blood, a deep and terrifying aura erupted from the woman, stopping him in his tracks. The killing aura from her alone was enough for Merovech—who honestly didn't have that much experience with combat—to freeze up and feel like a rabbit caught in the jaws of a wolf.

A pair of guards grabbed his arms and dragged him out of his cell, to which he offered no more resistance. The woman was a sixth-tier mage, and going by her green and gold uniform, she was a Legate in the Royal Legions, so she was far more used to fighting and killing than he was—though he didn't need to assume, her killing intent alone was enough for him to understand that.

Merovech was dragged out of the dungeon and through the halls of the prison, rising from the cold and dark granite of the prison's lower reaches into the bright white marble of the administration sectors. He didn't get much time to savor the heat and the comfort of these parts of the prison, though, as he was immediately dragged into a stark and featureless interrogation room. Following close behind were the rest of the guards and the woman whose killing intent continued to strike fear deep into his heart every time they made eye contact.

The interrogation room was just barely big enough for all eight people within to stand comfortably and was so immaculately clean that Merovech was extremely conscious of the fact that he hadn't been allowed a shower or bath in over a week. But all concerns of his appearance or smell vanished the instant the woman sat down across a table from the chair in which he'd been unceremoniously dropped by the guards.

The woman fixed her steely gaze onto Merovech until he began to noticeably sweat, then stated, "I am Dame Minerva."

Merovech felt his stomach sink, which mildly surprised him as he didn't think it could sink any further. Regardless, he knew exactly who Dame Minerva was: the second-in-command of the Legions at the Bull's Horns. Not only did she know that he was smuggling the primary ingredient in a highly illegal drug, but she had personally come down to the prison to question him.

"We found your little warehouse beneath your villa during the clean-up of the guild district," Minerva said, confirming Merovech's suspicions that she knew how big of an operation he was involved in.

Merovech couldn't say anything in his defense. Perhaps if he hadn't spent the past three weeks worrying about his safety when—if—he ever managed to get out of prison then he might've tried denying it. But now, he could only sigh and hold his tongue.

Minerva glared at the smuggler. She'd learned from his arrest record that he'd been captured only a street or two over from his villa fighting some of the other rioters. *'Probably trying to defend his home and the fight got out of hand,'* Minerva had thought when she read the record. Regardless of how the fight between Merovech and the looters had begun, the smuggler had resisted when the soldiers attempted to take him into custody and so been labeled a rioter.

Of course, Minerva could understand why the smuggler hadn't wanted to even claim that he was defending his own property, as any association with the soldiers could be dangerous given his profession. There would be more than a few awkward questions asked of him when he next met with his contacts.

Then again, Minerva didn't know that for certain. If Merovech's smuggling contacts weren't the inquisitive or cautious sort, then maybe they wouldn't have asked. Either way, Merovech decided not to cooperate with the soldiers and had spent the past three weeks locked in a cell as a consequence.

"The amount of Silverleaf we confiscated from that warehouse was *substantial*," Minerva continued. "If your contacts find out what happened, surely they won't be pleased..."

Minerva hoped that Merovech would be smart enough to pick up on her insinuation. Given that he hadn't said more than a few coherent sentences to the soldiers guarding the prison, though, she was fully prepared to explain what she meant in excruciating detail.

Fortunately, however, Merovech understood perfectly well that if he were to leave now, with the millions of silvers worth of Silverleaf in his possession lost, then he was already a dead man walking.

"How will my cooperation affect my current standing?" Merovech asked, his voice raspy and hoarse from lack of use over the past few weeks.

"We can come to an arrangement," Minerva said. "If your information leads to the capture of more smugglers, then the Arbiters will certainly take that into consideration. If you give us *enough*, we might even let you go..."

Left unsaid was just how much was 'enough'. Merovech knew that the damage the riots had done was enough to get him locked up for a *long* time, let alone the rebellion charges added once Trajan was forced to get personally involved, and so if he were to have his crimes forgiven, his information would have to be significant indeed.

Slowly, with the full understanding of what he was doing and the hesitation that such a betrayal brought, Merovech said, "I think I can give you what you want..."

—

"How is it that we had to nearly have the *entire city* burn down around us to find any of this out?!" Trajan thunderously demanded of his Legates and Tribunes. The Prince and his highest ranked subordinates had gathered in the meeting room where Leon had first met Trajan, and everyone had a copy of Minerva's initial report in their hands. Trajan glared at each one of them in turn, only skipping over Leon and a small handful of other Tribunes who were standing off to the side as their duties were so restrictive as to make it laughable if anyone held them at fault.

"This is a very complex smuggling network, Your Highness," Minerva offered in everyone's defense. "Additionally, it seems that the smugglers are receiving some substantial help from someone important within the Kingdom."

"How so?" Trajan brusquely asked.

“Simply by the fact that we haven’t heard of this before indicates that the smugglers have the kind of resources that would be almost impossible to possess without some inside help from the more corrupt sectors of the Kingdom’s government,” Minerva said. “Not to mention some of the names Merovech gave us implicate a few bureaucrats within Ariminium itself, as well as a handful in the six merchant cities of the Southern Territories. This is an *extensive* network of smugglers.”

“And what’s more,” offered another Legate sitting close to the Prince, “this Merovech has indicated that the Silverleaf he stores is destined to move *up* the Tyrrhenian River, meaning that it originates within the Kingdom.”

Trajan scowled. He wanted to believe that the King’s surveyors wouldn’t miss the kind of large-scale farms that would be needed to produce the amount of Silverleaf they had found in Merovech’s villa, but the fact that they had only just accidentally stumbled upon the smuggling ring prevented the Prince from indulging in that want. These smugglers had powerful help, that much he couldn’t deny.

“How many of the people Merovech identified have been arrested?” the Prince asked.

“About half,” Minerva instantly responded. “A few others were reported dead in the aftermath of the riots, and others still aren’t permanent residents of the city. If they show up, though, we’ll get them.”

“*Right*,” Trajan almost spat. He almost added a few scathing remarks, but he knew that it wouldn’t help, so he refrained. “Ursus,” the Prince growled.

Leon immediately stepped forward, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. He felt the pressure that brought quite intensely, but after a year in Trajan’s service, he’d become at least somewhat acquainted with just about everyone in the room. As a result, he wasn’t nearly so anxious as he might have otherwise been with so many powerful mages staring at him.

“Your Highness,” Leon whispered as he gave the Prince a slight bow.

“When we get actionable intel on any locations where more Silverleaf can be found, I’ll be sending you to deal with it. I’m going to assign you three knights from each of the local Legions and fifteen men-at-arms as well.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Leon said as he fought back the smile of being given his first command, even if it was temporary and he was accompanied by far more experienced knights. “I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t,” Trajan responded with an almost fatherly look.

Leon returned to where he had been standing feeling like he had been suddenly energized. He was as excited as anyone would be after being entrusted with new, if temporary, responsibilities, but on the other hand, he was almost paralyzed with anxiety at the prospect of having to deal with so many new people and the pressure placed upon him by Trajan’s expectations.

As Leon was lost in contemplation, Trajan handed out other assignments to several other Tribunes and younger Legates. For the most part, these orders were to follow up on the people Merovech had named that hadn’t been caught yet or to interrogate those who had been arrested.

“I want as much information on these smugglers as all of you can bring me,” Trajan stated with killing intent pouring out of his body. “We will find those who believe the King’s laws are beneath them, we

will find those who exploit the King's own people to peddle their poison, and we will break them in every way possible! Now, you all have your orders, so get moving!"

"Yes, Your Highness!" everyone responded in unison. Immediately, most of the Legates and Tribunes began to file out, but Minerva, Leon, and the three Legates that commanded the three combat Legions stayed behind.

"What is it?" Trajan asked. He knew why Leon was staying: unless otherwise dismissed, it was the young man's job to stick with Trajan in these situations to learn from his elder's example. Minerva and the three most senior Legates stationed at the Horns, however, weren't given to flights of whimsy—if they had stuck around, then Trajan knew there was a damned good reason for it.

"Our spies to the east have been sending back some concerning reports," one of the Legates said—he was Amatus, the son of Count Occius in the Eastern Territories, and was the first of the Legates that Leon had met. "They tell of the mustering of troops by Prince Owain of the Talfar Kingdom."

"Hmm, Talfar is currently at war with the Han Kingdom, no?" Trajan inquired.

"Indeed, Your Highness, and from our accounts, it seems to be a bitter stalemate," another Legate by the name of Saufeia answered.

"Chances are that this gathering army is meant to reinforce their eastern front, but they're worryingly close if they're being gathered at Briga... Keep an eye on them. If they move west instead, I want to know."

"Yes, Your Highness," the Legates responded, and all three finally left, leaving only Trajan, Leon, and Minerva in the meeting room. Trajan had nothing more to say, though, so Leon followed the Legates out only a couple minutes later.

Anzu, who had been anxiously waiting in the meeting room's antechamber, stared at the doors every time they opened, and when Leon appeared, the young griffin bolted over and almost knocked Leon to the ground.

"Hey there, little buddy," Leon said quietly as Alix, too, rose to her feet from where she'd been sitting and approached with an inquisitive look. "Expect to be heading out soon," Leon said with a smile of anticipation.

Alix responded with a smile of her own, and she said, "We're going to be destroying the smugglers, right?"

"More than that," Leon continued. "I've been placed in charge of a team to do just that."

Chapter 219: Actionable Intel

The Legion captured more than a dozen smugglers in Ariminum alone due to Merovech's information. It took all of about three days for Minerva to get enough intelligence from them in turn for the ball to enter Leon's court.

"... said about a mile or so down the coast from this fishing village," Minerva explained to Leon, Trajan, several Legates, and the knights that were assigned to Leon's team.

“The coast to our west is hilly and extremely rocky, any docks that have been built in that area will be small,” one of the Legates added.

“We only need to put some pressure on the local villagers,” another Legate said. “If the information Dame Minerva extracted is correct, then this little storage point for smuggled goods is *way* too close for the fishermen not to know it exists. They’re probably being paid a few silvers to look the other way when a strange boat comes in.”

“What do you want us to do, take the entire village into custody?” Leon asked sarcastically. If it were any Tribune in any other unit, then the Legate he was speaking to would be incensed. However, Leon was one of Trajan’s knights, and it was obvious that the Prince thought highly of him. Consequently, most knights treated him with great respect, despite his barbarous last name or their own higher ranks.

“No, that would be too... *authoritarian*,” the Legate said, not insulted at all by Leon’s comment.

“Have a few thousand silvers requisitioned, and pay the village elder or mayor to give you the information you need,” Minerva said as she rolled her eyes. “If they won’t help you, *someone* will, for the right price.”

“Hmm, we may not need that in the first place...” Leon mused. “I can’t imagine that the smugglers would take their things too far inland, only to have to haul it all back to their dock to transport here or anywhere else. And if that’s the case, then we only need to stick to the coast, and we’ll find what we seek.”

“Don’t count on that too much,” one of the Legates said. “As I said before, the coastal region is *very* hilly, so hiding places close to the water are abundant. The coast itself is also extremely rocky, so you won’t be able to ride on the along the beach.”

Leon nodded with a thoughtful expression. *‘That’s a good point. If these smugglers weren’t so cautious and well-hidden, then we would’ve had some information on them before the riots...’*

Throughout this planning process, Trajan sat back and didn’t say a word. He put Leon in charge of this mission so he could see how well the young man was progressing, so the Prince wasn’t going to offer any advice. This was Leon’s job, not Trajan’s.

After a twenty minute meeting, Leon and the other three knights in his team settled on a plan of action and a back-up plan. There was no more time to waste, as the smugglers had a three-week head-start on them from Merovech’s capture, so Leon and his team made to depart immediately.

—

An hour later, Trajan stood in front of a window on the highest floor of his personal tower. From there, he could see all of Ariminum and the Bull’s Horns; with his sixth-tier eyesight, few details escaped his notice, though in his current mood he wasn’t paying attention to a single thing. The Prince had been staring out of that window since the meeting with Leon’s team ended completely alone, unmoving, and silent.

It wasn’t until he heard a respectful few knocks at the door that he returned from where his mind had wandered off to.

"Come in!" he called out.

At the sound of his voice, Minerva entered the room. It was a small and cozy sitting room, with a few couches and chairs in the center and bookshelves lining the walls. The lights were dim just as the Prince liked, but Minerva could see the worry lines in Trajan's face.

"Count Severus is expected to arrive in the next few hours," she said as she took a few steps further into the room.

"I'm aware," Trajan said quietly.

"He's going to demand an audience with you as soon as he does," Minerva continued.

"He can wait," the Prince responded.

Minerva sighed, then threw herself into one of the couches, burying her face in one of the pillows. "Sit down," she said to her Prince.

Trajan, understanding that she was now speaking as a friend rather than a subordinate, complied, taking a seat in another couch across from her.

Still laying down on her stomach, Minerva quickly kicked off her decidedly unglamorous and unflattering shoes, then turned her head so she could see Trajan. "You need to relax," she said.

"So you've told me, time and time again," Trajan said with a faint smile.

"And I *mean* it," Minerva countered with a stern tone. "That boy's going to be fine. You'll see, he's going to come back tomorrow bringing word of victory, and that's assuming the smugglers have even stuck around this long after Merovech was arrested."

"I'm sure he will," Trajan replied. "Doesn't stop me from worrying about the kid, especially after the recklessness he showed with the giants..."

"He has *three* experienced knights keeping an eye on him," Minerva reminded.

Trajan sighed and cast his gaze back out of the window. He could see over the wall of the Southern Horn and down onto the plain between the Horns. The road in the center of the plain was well traveled, and given that it was still around noon, there were hundreds of people and wagons moving along it. Some turned south toward Ariminium, while others were going west and further into the Kingdom, while still others were going east, through the gates in the wall.

Even among these crowds, Trajan could pick out a group of twenty soldiers and one white griffin departing from the posthouses near the foot of the Northern Horn and riding west along the road.

'I imagine that this is kind of what having a son is like,' Trajan brooded. Minerva, for her part, just shifted around until she got comfortable so she could listen to her commander. "I have no doubts that Leon will return alive and well, but that doesn't stop me from being afraid that he won't."

The two sat there in silence for a few more minutes while Trajan watched Leon's group fade into the distance.

"They'll be fine," he told himself. "They'll be fine..."

—

Leon's group rode hard west from the Bull's Horns, quickly leaving the coast behind. They stuck with the Gold Road as far as they could, soon passing the village that had several weeks prior been terrorized by the vampire. The road eventually turned slightly northward, following the curve of the southern tip of the Border Mountains, and continued until it reached the Naga River. From there, it would follow the river all the way to the capital.

But Leon and his team weren't going nearly so far. They turned off the paved road to follow another that was barely more than a dirt path into the wilderness. After passing a couple of mining villages, the group finally caught sight of the coast again in the distance. About five miles from the fishing village, Leon called the group to a halt.

"We'll stop and rest here for a little while. Get some food," Leon ordered. The knights and their men-at-arms complied, dismounting and getting as much rest as they could. No one wasted any time, as they tied their horses to nearby trees and started shoveling food into their mouths.

As the lower ranked men-at-arms were doing this, one of the knights approached Leon and asked, "Have you decided against seeking information from the villagers?"

"No," Leon answered. "I would just prefer to give the smugglers as little time to react as possible. We're going to move again once the sun sets and the villagers get off the streets."

"I understand," the knight answered, returning to his men.

For Leon, the hour and a half it took for the sun to creep down below the horizon were agonizing. He felt jittery as if there were countless things that he should've been doing, and that he'd forgotten countless more. He stared at the brilliant disc in the sky almost every second from when they stopped to when it finally disappeared.

The other members of his team seemed to pick up on his anxiety, and there wasn't much conversation between them while they waited. This silence only served to make Leon more anxious than he already was, and once it was time to go, it was almost with relief that he turned to face his team and said, "Let's go."

Everyone sprang to their feet and jumped back on their horses. They were in the village in less than fifteen minutes.

The village was large enough to warrant a mayor, so his house was Leon's first stop. The streets weren't as devoid of life as Leon had hoped for, but at this point there wasn't any point in stopping and turning back, so his team rode right past about a dozen villagers on their way to the village center where, as was legally required, the mayor's house could be found.

Fortunately, they didn't have to be any more specific than that, as the mayor was still awake and came outside when he heard the commotion of the arriving soldiers.

"What's goin' on out there?!" he demanded, before immediately striking a far more submissive appearance once Leon dismounted his horse and stepped into the light coming from the mayor's home.

"There are smugglers in the area," Leon bluntly stated. He didn't even bother to remove his helmet, his anxiety about his mission driving away the memory of Grim chastising him for being unsociable on his previous mission. "We want you to help us locate them."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything 'bout smugglers, Sir...?" the mayor understandably said.

"My name is Leon. We know there are smugglers along the coast near this village. We've been authorized by Prince Trajan himself to find them and destroy their operation. Anyone who hinders us in the performance of our duties will be arrested for treason."

The mayor paled a little as Leon let his aura start to pulse out from his body. Even some of the weaker soldiers on their horses not too far away could feel their hair start to stand on end from the hint of killing intent Leon layered into his aura.

But then, Leon suddenly cut off his aura and said, "On the other hand, those who aid us will be rewarded..." He then pulled out a small box from a satchel at his hip and gently shook it. The mayor could hear the muted clinking of silver coins from within, and his face momentarily twisted in a greedy smile.

'Well, those bastards are probably gone by now, and I certainly can't just pick up and leave like that... Why shouldn't I take some money from this man?' the mayor thought to himself.

"Please, come inside and let's talk a little," the mayor said out loud. "I'm not sure 'bout any smugglin' in these parts, but I think there's plenty I can discuss with a knight such as yerself..."

For a quick moment, Leon almost demanded that the mayor just spit it out, but Trajan's training started to kick in and he looked around. There were dozens of other homes in the area that could see what was going on, and with his fifth-tier senses, Leon could perceive a *lot* of people watching and waiting to see what would happen.

'Better to not be rude,' Leon thought as he silently followed the mayor inside, with Alix and Anzu right behind him.

For his part, the mayor welcomed them quite warmly in his home, though he did send more than a few apprehensive looks Anzu's way. In the end, though, Leon, Alix, and Anzu walked out of his house with the location of a nearby cave the smugglers were using, while Leon's satchel was remarkably lighter than it had been only ten minutes earlier.

Chapter 220: Smuggler's Cave I

Staring out at the dark coast, Leon immediately understood why it had been strongly recommended that he seek the assistance of the locals: the entire coastline was taken up by rocky hills and black cliffs with a familiar hexagonal pattern that blocked passage from the coast further inland. More than that, the cave that the fishing village's mayor had directed him to was secreted away in a small cove that pushed into the cliffs. So well hidden was it that Leon doubted he would've been able to find it without the mayor's help, and even if he did, there was still a seventy to eighty-foot cliff blocking his team from the coastline.

"We should've gotten the navy to help with this," one of the knights behind him said, striking a bitter tone.

"Given how uncooperative they've been lately, I doubt they would've spared even a single transport," said another.

"I think someone's coming out of the cave," the third knight stated, changing the subject.

Below them, they could see a faint light coming from within the cave, and that light was growing brighter by the second. What emerged was a group of young men that had a range of ethnicities rarely seen in the isolated Bull Kingdom. Perhaps half of them appeared fair-skinned enough to be natives, though they still sported healthy tans, while the rest had skin tones dark enough to be obviously foreign. A few appeared to be from the deserts of the Samar Kingdom to the south, while others seemed to be from even sunnier regions.

One thing they all had in common, however, was that they were all mages; none were mortals, which was fairly unusual for unskilled labor work like transferring cargo on and off a ship. The man in charge was obviously one of the Samar men, who was a fourth-tier mage that had a wicked-looking halberd strapped to his back. Leon took special note of that weapon, as it seemed as if the smith that had forged it stuck every spike and unused bits of metal that they could get a hold of onto it until it appeared almost demonic.

"That's a *lot* of foreigners," the first knight stated.

"Well, it's good to see that at least our criminals are open-minded," the third knight said while glancing at the first.

"I'm *plenty* open-minded!" the first knight angrily retorted.

"Sure didn't seem like it when we-" the third knight began.

"Enough!" the second knight interrupted. He was the oldest, with a robust fifth-tier aura but hair that had turned almost entirely silver. The second knight turned to Leon and asked, "What's the plan, Sir?"

"We follow the path that the mayor told us about, and assault that cave," Leon swiftly answered, but his eyes never left the smugglers getting to work down below. "But, before that, how many archers do we have?"

"Five of the men-at-arms are good enough to trust with a bow and arrow," the first knight informed.

"The others, I'm afraid, would be more likely to shoot themselves than our opponents if their blades were replaced with bows," the second knight added with a wry smile.

"Then we have *seven* archers," Leon said with a smile as he summoned his magic and called forth his bow and a handful of arrows from his soul realm, while Alix not too far behind him pulled a bow off her shoulder. "Get those archers over here, we're going to wait and see what they're doing down there, and then rain some fire down upon them. If they panic and run into their cave, then that's fine, we'll deal with them during our assault. If, however, they're waiting on a galley, then they may try and get away. If that happens, I want you three and your fourth-tier subordinates to jump down there and delay. Everyone else can circle around on that path and get to that cave as fast as they can. Just make sure they know not to attack before we do. In fact, I want you to go with them, to keep them in check. If the fighting hasn't started once you get into position, then wait for us to make the first move, and then you can flank them when these guys jump down there."

The second knight nodded, acknowledging Leon's order without any complaint. In fact, Leon was a little surprised that these knights were so willing to follow him, especially after his experience at Fort 127.

'Not that I'm complaining,' he thought to no one in particular. 'I guess that's just a perk of being a direct follower of royalty...'

"Let's get to it," Leon said, and the knights immediately jumped into action. Most of the men-at-arms behind them didn't hear their whispered planning, so the knights had to repeat the plan for their benefit. Once that was knocked out, the first and third knights organized three lower-ranked fourth-tier knights to stick with them and the five archers to stand with Leon and Alix. Meanwhile, the second knight took the remaining men-at-arms and ventured off into the wilds; the path down to the coast involved trekking past a pair of hills up on the cliff, then walking down some stone stairs cut into the opposite side of the cove, so Leon and the rest didn't expect to see them for a little while.

Fortunately, they had some time to wait, and they spent that time silently observing the smugglers down below. For a few minutes, Leon was slightly confused as to the lack of a suitable dock, especially since the beach was entirely made up of ugly jagged rocks that made landing directly on it nearly impossible.

However, as they waited, they saw more smugglers emerge from the cave carrying what Leon could only assume were pieces of a disassembled pier. The smugglers began sliding wooden support pillars down concrete cylinders that had been hidden so well in the beach's rocks that Leon hadn't noticed them until then, and once the pillars were in, the wooden platforms quickly slid into place over them. Once it was all said and done, the smugglers assembled a sturdy and permanent-looking pier in less than ten minutes.

"Damn, that's clever," the third knight whispered.

"It's not surprising that they've got something like that," the first knight responded. "I mean, if their network is big enough that they can hire what I'm assuming are foreign mercenaries, then they certainly have the resources for something like this."

The group didn't have to wait long for whoever the smugglers were setting up for, as only about five minutes later a small single-sail galley appeared on the horizon. The galley wasn't that big, perhaps small enough for a person to operate alone if they had to, but it was certainly big enough to carry a significant amount of cargo. What's more, from what Leon could tell as the galley came closer, it hadn't any more enchantments than what might be considered crucial—one to prevent the wood it was made of from rotting, another to prevent fires, and another to harden the hull in case of unseen rocks in their way.

The galley clearly wasn't that expensive, and whoever owned it only put enough money into it for it to do the job.

Another couple of minutes passed as Leon's group and the smugglers waited for the galley to slide into the dock, at which point the man in charge of the smugglers and the captain of the galley's small crew met on the pier to exchange a few words. As they spoke, a few more smugglers filed out of the cave carrying a number of crates, bringing the total number of smugglers in the small cove to thirty.

Across the cove, Leon noticed the second knight's team arrive at the top of the stairs.

“No point in waiting any longer,” Leon said as he readied an arrow and took aim at the Samari in charge. “Aim carefully, we’re not going to get another opportunity like this where they’re all relaxed and vulnerable...”

The other archers around Leon prepared their own arrows. Leon glanced over at Alix, who nodded confidently. She’d been practicing her archery quite a bit over the last year, though she still wasn’t anywhere near Leon’s skill level.

Leon immediately fired his arrow, followed by the other six doing likewise. Leon’s aim was true, and the Samari was struck in the throat and killed instantly. Alix’s arrow also killed her target, a first-tier smuggler, as did the arrow of another archer, while the other four only inflicted light wounds upon the smugglers.

Without missing a beat, Leon fired, again and again, killing two more third-tier smugglers—including the captain of the galley—before anyone could react. But, once they did react, the smugglers began to shout and scatter across the beach to avoid the arrows falling upon them from on high.

“Go!” Leon shouted at the knights at his side, and they leaped down from the cliff. For fourth and fifth-tier mages, a fall of seventy-ish feet wasn’t anything to write home about, and they landed with cat-like grace. Across the cove, the second knight burst out from the narrow stairway, and the two groups caught the smugglers between them. With the arrows from Leon and the others on the cliff, the smugglers were falling left and right.

The battle lasted for all of thirty seconds. These weren’t soldiers or hardened raiders, they were smugglers, and most didn’t even reach the third-tier. As soon as they realized they were being attacked by strong and experienced Legion soldiers, any weapons that had been drawn were instantly dropped, and the rest of the smugglers surrendered.

Leon was slightly taken aback when he saw the smugglers throwing down their weapons and tossing their hands in the air. “Huh...” he muttered. “I wasn’t expecting that...”

“Neither was I,” Alix said quietly. Neither of them had ever fought anyone that had been so willing to surrender so quickly before.

“Hold fire!” Leon ordered, and the archers complied. The knights on the ground were easily taking charge and arresting the smugglers, tying their hands behind their backs and sitting them down with their backs against the cliff. “Let’s get down there,” Leon said, leading Alix, Anzu, and the five archers toward the path. He could’ve jumped down without any difficulty, but that would be leaving the archers without any officers, and since they were all third-tier or weaker, they couldn’t jump down with him; his hands were tied.

The three knights in charge on the ground, fortunately, glanced up at Leon, and he used hand gestures to order them to stay put. They probably would’ve been able to hear him if he spoke loud enough, but there was no guarantee that any smugglers still in the caves wouldn’t be able to do the same. So, the knights busied themselves securing the captured smugglers and the galley.

When Leon arrived down in the cove several minutes later, the situation was in hand.

"Anything on the ship?" Leon asked the second knight, who had been acting as the de facto second in command.

"Nothing, Sir. Looks like it was only here to take cargo away," the knight replied.

Leon nodded, then walked over to one of the crates that had been brought out of the cave. With almost comical ease, he ripped the top off of the nearest one, revealing several bales of Silverleaf thicker than his waist.

Many of the smugglers at the cliff paled or averted their eyes as Leon turned his helmeted head in their direction.

"Have they said anything?" Leon asked the second knight.

"Nothing useful," the knight responded.

"Hmm. No matter," Leon said. "Get ready to storm the cave."

"Yes, Sir. Should we leave anyone behind to keep an eye on these guys?"

"Grab four, including one of the fourth-tier knights," Leon answered.

Once that was arranged, the team formed up to assault the cave. It was wide enough for them to advance in a group three wide, so Leon and the remaining two fourth-tier knights formed up to lead the way. Out of curiosity, Leon attempted to project his magic sense into the mouth of the cave, but his magic was immediately scattered at the entrance.

'They had the wherewithal to set up defensive enchantments...' he thought, his wariness increasing dramatically after it had been lowered by the smugglers' quick surrender.

Leon glanced back to make sure the rest of the knights and men-at-arms were ready, and his eyes scanned the captured smugglers again. He almost shouted the order to advance, but he quickly said as a forethought, "If we can capture any more smugglers, then do so. But, if you judge that it's impossible, then don't bother."

The others nodded to him, and Leon trusted in the experience of the older members of the team to keep the younger men-at-arms in line.

"Then let's do this," Leon said, relishing every word as he advanced into the darkness of the cave.