

Storm King 321

Chapter 321: Assertion of Power

Throughout Leon and Antonius Agrippa's entire fight, Elise gripped the armrests of her seat so hard that they almost deformed. She couldn't turn away from the sight, though she wanted to. She could do nothing but watch in horror as her lover and a gladiator fought each other with the intent to kill down in the sands of the arena.

Her behavior was mirrored in quite a few of the spectators, and even in her own box. Cristina and Asiya watched in fascinated horror, and Valeria had frozen in her seat the instant Leon appeared, gripping her armrests in much the same way Elise had. Alix was the most relaxed of them all and she watched the fight with a light smile on her face as if she knew something that no one else did.

Elise had to admit, though, that Alix *did* know more about Leon's fighting abilities than anyone else present, and her seeming lack of concern helped Elise to relax more than anything else did.

"He really is fifth-tier..." Asiya muttered in a tone that wasn't quite disbelief but also wasn't too far from it either.

"That's Sir Leon?" Cristina asked quietly.

"That's him," Elise confirmed.

"He seems..." the Princess continued, but she didn't quite know how to phrase her observation. "He seems... quite the capable knight, I don't think that gladiator is going to win."

"There's no way Leon's going to lose this, not against that arrogant pretty boy," Alix confidently stated.

"Mm," Valeria murmured in agreement. After Alix, she had the most experience with Leon's fighting style, not to mention her own prodigious combat skills. Once Leon seized the initiative from Antonius Agrippa, she visibly relaxed and said, "It's over now."

Elise sighed in relief as she watched Leon put more and more pressure on Antonius Agrippa, but she didn't release her death grip on her seat's armrests until Leon had definitively defeated the gladiator.

"This is so... *exciting!*" Princess Cristina exclaimed as Leon made his way toward the exit of the arena's stage and the rest of the crowd rose from their seats and started filing out of the arena. "Are all games like this?"

"No, this was an unusual thing," Asiya said, her normal cheery demeanor buried under a much more serious attitude. "The only people who fight in the arena under normal circumstances are gladiators and other people who are specifically trained to do so. Or at least, only those who work in the industry. A knight fighting a gladiator in the arena is quite unprecedented."

"That gladiator went against the will of Prince August," Valeria said, "he shouldn't have done that."

"Yeah, only if *both* of the Regents give the order to kill should that have been legal," Asiya added. "If Leon hadn't stopped him, that gladiator could've been arrested for murder. I mean, he still could be right now for a host of charges, but at least murder won't be one of them."

"Like what?" Alix asked curiously. She wasn't a noble, and so she wasn't that well-versed in the law. Of course, none of the other ladies were lawyers, but they had a greater understanding of the legal structure of the Bull Kingdom than Alix did.

"Assaulting a knight, assaulting a Legion officer, and contempt of the Royal Family just off the top of my head," Asiya said.

"He may not have murdered that other gladiator, but there could be a few attempted murder charges," Princess Cristina added as she sent the Royal box a complicated look. She wasn't active in the politics of the Kingdom, but she still had a Royal education, and she could see where the Kingdom was going if the two Prince-Regents had made their conflicts publicly known.

Cristina and Asiya then began to further explain and discuss what the consequences could be with Alix. Valeria and Elise, however, had gotten involved in their own quiet discussion, for Elise had noticed the obvious anxiety Valeria was under when Leon appeared and fought Antonius Agrippa. As Valeria relaxed in the wake of Leon's disappearance and the others' discussion, Elise leaned over and whispered a question in her ear.

"Do you like my boyfriend, Val?" Elise whispered into her friend's ear. Her tone wasn't accusatory, and neither was it angry. In fact, it was more teasing than anything else.

Valeria froze once again, her beautiful face immediately going red from embarrassment and panic.

"W-why would you think that?" Valeria asked, deliberately not looking at Elise as she did.

Elise smiled at her younger friend and said, "Everything. Everything makes me think that."

Valeria's bright blue eyes turned toward the floor, and she explained, "He's... a friend... or, friendly... he was a good sparring partner, and I'd like to spar with him again..."

"Mmmmmmm," Elise teased with an almost predatory smile on her face.

"That's the truth!" Valeria protested, her raised voice finally drawing the attention of the other three in the box.

"What's the truth?" Asiya asked, her eyebrows raised in delighted inquisitiveness. She had been too engrossed in her conversation with Alix and Cristina to pay attention, so all she saw was Elise leaning toward Valeria and the latter looking like she was about ready to die from embarrassment.

"Nothing!" Valeria vehemently replied, knowing that if Asiya got involved then her teasing would never end.

"I think Val likes Leon," Elise explained, her narrowed eyes and wide smile encouraging Asiya to do exactly what Valeria feared she would.

"Oh ho ho..." Asiya said with a smile to match Elise's. "She's had her heart set on him ever since they first fought back in the Knight Academy. I almost feel sorry for Gaius Tullius, he tried to court Val for years and failed at every turn. If only he knew that the way to win her over wasn't by party invitations and gifts, but to give her an entertaining fight..."

“Shut up...” Valeria half-heartedly said as she slowly started to sink lower in her seat and hid her face behind her hands. She was stoic by nature and had been trained to fight with nearly every weapon imaginable. She could kill with ease, and her enchanting skills weren’t something to scoff at, either. However, for all that, she still didn’t quite know how to handle it when her friends pressed her buttons.

“Oooh, so it’s true then?” Cristina asked, her soft brown eyes glittering with interest. She had already been told that Valeria had a crush on someone, and now she had her confirmation.

Valeria could only sigh with the knowledge that this was going to be her life for the next few hours, and possibly, from the way Cristina and Asiya’s eyes were staring at her in almost sadistic joy, the rest of her life.

And then, Elise leaned back over and whispered something into Valeria’s ear that left her utterly stunned, something that none of the other ladies heard.

“I really don’t mind if you like him...”

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When Leon made it back to the Royal box, he found the three high officials and the four Paladins waiting outside.

“Sir Leon!” Roland exclaimed once Leon showed up. “What happened?”

Leon was about as keen to speak with Roland as he always was, but he indulged the Paladin as well as the other six curious people who were staring at him and explained everything that had happened. The Earthshaker Paladin laughed uproariously when Leon got to the part when Octavius reaffirmed the death sentence he had passed down, and the Sapphire Paladin also couldn’t keep a smile off her face. Roland and the Brimstone Paladin, however, were incensed.

“Looks like things are going to get a bit complicated around here,” the Chancellor observed. He then turned to the Chief Steward and the Spymaster and said, “Let’s head back to the Royal Palace. I think we’re going to be busy for a while...”

The other two high officials agreed, and the three swiftly took their leave.

Those who were left hardly had better opinions of their immediate future, though, as the four Paladins seemed about ready to kill each other, and Leon went quiet as three seventh-tier and a sixth-tier mage let loose with their powerful auras. He did his best to resist the pressure they put him under, but he was still only a fifth-tier mage, no matter how close to the sixth-tier he was, and he had a tough time just remaining on his feet.

‘Come on...’ Leon thought as he stared at the door of the Royal box. He guessed that the Paladins would only last another couple of minutes or so before they reached for their weapons. *‘Come on, you Royal bastards! Finish up whatever you’re doing and get your people under control!’*

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Right after the enchanted glass for the Royal box slid back into place, Trajan abandoned all decorum and quite roughly grabbed Octavius, lifting the younger Prince up by the collar of his dress jacket, and slammed him into the wall of the box.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?!” Trajan demanded, even more irate than he was the first time.

Despite the elder Prince’s wrath, and the equally angry looks August and Stefania were giving him, Octavius’ face broke out into a wide, proud smile. “Unhand me, Uncle,” Octavius whispered, his voice steady and calm. “I am a Prince-Regent, if you put me down right now, then I won’t have you arrested for assault.”

Trajan stared into Octavius’ eyes and saw how serious the younger Prince was. Trajan would never be convicted of assault, of course, but having one of the Paladins outside escorting him back to house arrest in the Royal Palace was a humiliation he could do without. Especially if that Paladin was Earthshaker.

Trajan dropped Octavius to the floor and stepped back. He glanced out of the window and saw Leon putting immense pressure upon Antonius Agrippa and smiled. Even if Octavius went against tradition and ordered the death of a gladiator, it still wouldn’t happen.

But the actual death of the black-armored gladiator wasn’t what Octavius had been trying to achieve. In fact, Octavius hadn’t really been trying to achieve anything, he simply wanted to show August how little authority the younger Prince had. He had his favorite chariot team sabotaged, he paid Agrippa not to acknowledge August, and he had August’s order essentially overturned before the whole Kingdom.

Not the best way to de-legitimize his brother, perhaps, but Octavius had to assert his authority, and symbolically showing the common people that his was the side of victory went a long way toward that goal. That Leon soon defeated Antonius Agrippa was a disappointment that angered Octavius to no end, but he didn’t regret his order at all—the day was still a success.

“Uncle, you are not the Regent of this Kingdom,” Octavius said with a smug smile. “I am. You have no authority over me, and that you consistently countermand my orders leads me to think you might be attempting to take advantage of Father’s infirmity to launch a coup.”

“I have no need for a coup, if I wanted the throne, I would be King,” Trajan growled. It was true, to an extent, as Trajan had been the heir apparent as the eldest son of the previous King. However, he didn’t want the throne and relinquished his claim to it in favor of Julius.

“Wants and desires can change with time,” Octavius observed. “Regardless of your motivation, you will stop, or I will have you arrested.”

“You can’t do that, I too, am Regent,” August stated.

“On paper, perhaps,” Octavius sneered. “You are not Father’s heir. Only I am, as only my blood is awakened! Your blood is too common to carry the Sacred Bull’s power!”

“All of you need to shut up!” Stefania shouted. “We are family! This is not how family is supposed to act towards one another!”

Octavius smiled contemptuously at his elder sister and said, “You are no family of mine, and that bastard over there is even less my brother than you are my sister.”

This statement shocked the other three to the point of speechlessness. People could reject political titles, but it was unheard of for a noble of any rank to repudiate their own family—noble legitimacy was

given through kinship, and Octavius' claim that the other three legitimate children of King Julius weren't his family was to implicitly say the same about the King. It was tantamount to giving up his title as Prince, but none of the other three had any illusions about whose side the nobility would take if this were to become an actual legal issue given how many of them followed Octavius.

Satisfied with the result of his denouncement, Octavius swiftly left the Royal box, his face almost split in half with a shit-eating grin.

Trajan, Stefania, and August were so silent that even a mortal could've heard a pin drop in the Royal box. All three of them, even Stefania who normally isolated herself completely from politics, could feel that something was coming, that even if this didn't go as well as he had hoped for, Octavius was now done sharing power. Up to this point, Octavius hadn't been exerting his influence too openly in the capital with both Trajan and August there as well, but now he was asserting himself. He would no longer listen to anyone else.

Once he was gone, August collapsed into his seat, mentally exhausted from the day. Of course, just an exhausting day wasn't enough to leave him feeling so defeated, but Octavius had struck a nerve when he reminded August that his blood hadn't been awakened.

Over the Bull Kingdom's five thousand years of history, there hadn't been a single Monarch whose blood hadn't been awakened; the title of Bull King wasn't just for show. When push came to shove, the fact that Octavius had awakened the blood of the Sacred Bull and August hadn't was a huge mark in the Second Prince's favor.

But then, as August was trying to process everything that had just happened, Trajan said something that stunned him more than anything else that day.

"August, I think it's time we awoke your blood."

Chapter 322: A New Lead

Justin sat in his box staring down into the sands of the arena long after just about everyone else in the arena had left. He could think about nothing but Leon's lightning, and how similar it had felt to him, how startlingly powerful it had seemed compared to other fifth-tier lightning mages that Justin had encountered. On the surface, it had appeared barely different compared to the power of any other lightning mage, but Justin had felt something sacred about that Leon's lightning, something that could banish the dark. It was a trait of magic that he was intimately familiar with.

'That boy must be of House Raime...' Justin thought to himself, but a sense of déjà vu was hardly concrete proof of that. However, as he sat there thinking it over in his head, it suddenly struck him just how much Leon resembled Kyros Raime, from his black hair to his long, straight nose and chiseled features. Leon even seemed to be about the same height as Kyros.

Of course, his appearance was little more than circumstantial evidence, as Justin had met countless people who resembled Kyros Raime in some form or fashion, but when added to the lightning magic that Leon displayed, Justin couldn't help but start to be convinced of his suspicion.

Justin sat in his box for a long time mulling these things over, and it wasn't until the arena had been otherwise cleared of spectators that he realized the games were over and he departed for his villa.

When he arrived, two hours or so after Leon first leaped into the arena, the stout man was already waiting for him with a preliminary report. Without a word, both men went straight to Justin's office, which Justin had heavily warded to keep whatever was discussed within private.

"Talk to me," Justin said as soon as the door was closed and they were sealed off from the rest of the world.

"That knight's name is Leon Ursus, he's from the Northern Vales..." the stout man reported. He quickly went into what information his contact in the Royal palace had at hand, including Leon's record at the Knight Academy, the brief couple of weeks he spent at Fort 127, his subsequent reassignment to the Diplomatic Corps, and ending with his transfer to Prince Trajan's retinue and his actions thereafter.

"So," Justin said once the stout man was finished, "this boy came south from the Northern Vales right after Timotheos' team vanished up there?"

"Yes," the stout man confirmed, his face momentarily twisting in a deep frown. Timotheos' disappearance left a significant hole in the Isynian forces, and it hadn't yet been filled. The rest of the mages that had gone with him were replaced easily enough, but seventh-tier mages didn't just grow on trees. What was more, Timotheos was a friend to most of Justin's immediate subordinates, making him that much harder to replace.

"Then... this Leon Ursus..." Justin muttered in thought. He had long ago learned the name of Artorias and Serana's son, and since Leon checked all those boxes, he figured Leon was most likely his primary target. However...

"What should we do about this?" the stout man asked.

"... Give me an hour or two to think," Justin said.

The stout man nodded, then left Justin's office.

Justin wasn't averse to killing if the need required it. He didn't enjoy it, and he most certainly didn't seek it out if it wasn't necessary.

But even then, his mission was to kill Serana's son and husband. There wasn't much wiggle room in that regard. If Leon was willing to leap into the arena to defend a gladiator sentenced to death by a Prince, though, then Justin didn't particularly want to kill him.

The silver-haired man sighed as he sat down behind his desk and leaned back, his thoughts turning to about a decade and a half ago, when he had first begun his investigation.

Back then, he had little information to go on, and accessing Artorias' destroyed villa wasn't easy. Still, Justin had plenty of gold and silver from Lord Kamran, plus the assistance of powerful friends that he'd brought with him to Aeterna. Building a spy network turned out to be almost comically easy with a few silver coins in the right hands.

But his spies turned up nothing after two years of searching. In the end, Justin could only assume one thing, that Kyros was giving his son and grandson shelter. As he closed his eyes, Justin remembered everything that happened that day like it had only been that morning.

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Argent Palace was a beautiful palace complex, even to Justin. He couldn't help but feel terrible for what he knew he was about to do to it. He hoped that House Raime would be reasonable, but given what he was there for, he was certain that violence was inevitable.

Before that, though, he would need to establish his power.

The palace was in the center of Teira, with a private park encircling it that belonged to House Raime. The main administrative center of the palace complex was built on the highest point of the city, though given how flat the Great Plateau was, that wasn't saying much.

Justin and his two comrades, the stout man and the tall man, approached the front door of the palace completely unseen. There were hundreds of people on the road between the palace and the rest of the city, but when the trio was in their shadows, they might as well have been invisible.

It was only when they finally reached the door that they emerged into the light, startling several dozen people around them who were waiting to be granted entrance to the palace. They were dressed all in black and their faces were concealed, though, so this attention didn't bother any of them in the slightest.

Justin tried to use his magic senses to gauge how warded the door was, but his magic power was scattered as soon as it came into contact with the door. With a sigh, Justin began to channel his magic.

'I'll just have to go all out, then,' Justin thought to himself as the surrounding temperature suddenly dropped. With a wave of his hand, Justin summoned three ice-cold globes of water that hovered in the air behind him, and the people around the palace instantly scattered, the more faint-hearted of their number screaming in fear.

Justin lunged forward, his water cutting through the hinges of the door and the lock like a knife through butter, shaking the entire entrance hall and ripping the doors off their hinges. The doors collapsed inward, crushing a couple of people beneath them. The water was fired with such force that after slicing through the door, it almost exploded into the atrium like shotgun blasts, killing dozens more in the atrium.

The innumerable wards protecting the door from just such an attack had been almost worthless before Justin's magic power.

Almost instantly, the three were surrounded by the palace guards, but Justin's crew were so obviously powerful that the guards refrained from attacking or speaking.

"Please surrender, we're not here to kill you," Justin said, his voice echoing throughout the atrium, his aura towering and putting enough pressure on the guards to convince them that attacking these interlopers would not end well for them.

Mustering every ounce of courage he could, the sixth-tier leader of the Raime knights that guarded the entrance to the main palace building replied, "You surrender first!" His voice cracked halfway through his demand, though, making him about as intimidating as a yelping puppy.

Instead, Justin requested with as much politeness as he could express given the circumstances, "I would like an audience with Archduke Raime if that would be possible."

By now, almost all of the civilian survivors of the initial attack had fled, leaving Justin's crew alone with the guards.

"And what business, may I ask, do you have with me?" asked a deep, silky smooth voice from above.

The upper floors all opened up into the atrium, with a grand staircase leading up to them. When Justin looked up, he saw the handsome face of Archduke Kyros Raime staring back at him over the bannister of the third floor.

Kyros was an old man, though it wasn't that apparent just from looking at him. He had a full head of pitch-black hair with not a hint of gray, his skin wasn't any more wrinkled than any other middle-aged man, and his body seemed almost like it was nothing but corded muscle, which was apparent even when the Archduke was fully clothed. He was tall, but not unusually so, and his eyes were as black as night.

What was most striking about him was his vigorous aura, and when Justin sensed it, a broad smile broke out over his face.

"Isn't this a surprise," Justin said, "I heard you were only a seventh-tier mage!"

Kyros' mostly-stoic face betrayed no surprise, but rather, intense wrath that was kept under the Archduke's complete control. It wasn't that Justin could see through his power that angered Kyros, rather it was the attack on his home and the murder of his people that enraged him so.

"State your purpose," Kyros repeated with significantly less politeness.

"I'm looking for your son, Sir Artorias," Justin stated, his tone conveying how wide the smile on his face was behind the black featureless mask. "Or is it 'Lord' Artorias? I can't keep these damn titles straight!"

"Why do you seek my son?" Kyros asked, his smooth voice taking on a hard and dangerous edge.

"I seek not only your son but your grandson as well," Justin said. He then turned his head toward the atrium's second floor, where a young man had just exited the throne room and stood at the top of the first flight of the grand stairs. He looked much like Kyros, though his aura was much weaker, closer to the mid-sixth-tier if Justin were to make an educated guess, and his features were softer and younger.

"If you want to find my little brother, you'll be doing so over my dead body," Alexander Raime stated, his eyes expressing as much anger and hatred as it was possible to express.

"Come now, there's no need for such threats," Justin said. "Artorias made a mistake mating with that saurian bitch, all I want is to make everything right. Their child must die, but Artorias himself needn't." Justin had never met Serana, so his barbed comments were a little much, in his opinion. Still, he knew that marrying Serana had been the reason for Artorias' exile from Teira, so he used that language in the hope that it would raise Kyros' opinion of him.

"No one will lay a hand upon my blood, not while I yet draw breath," Kyros growled, the entire building shaking under the force of his words and dashing Justin's hopes. It didn't matter what language Justin used, he had still attacked Argent Palace and killed many of Kyros' retainers, solidifying him as an enemy in the mind of the Archduke. Besides, he was there to murder Kyros' son, and that was beyond unacceptable.

Justin's smile changed into one of understanding and appreciation, rather than confidence. He'd heard that Kyros had exiled Artorias for marrying Serana, so he'd hoped the Archduke would at least cooperate with him, assuming he wasn't harboring Artorias and Leon, which Justin felt was incredibly likely given his lack of results over the past two years.

"I understand your position," Justin softly said. "If anyone attempted to bring harm to my daughter, I think I'd wipe out their entire family. If this were normal circumstances, I wouldn't be here, but I have a duty to kill your grandson. Please, if he's here, let me do my duty and we will leave, we need not get violent."

Justin didn't believe that Kyros would agree. He didn't think anyone in their right mind would agree to give up their grandson to be murdered by anyone, let alone a stranger that broke down their front door. Still, he had to ask.

Just as Justin thought, Kyros simply said, "My son and his son are not here. If they were, I would never give them up. They are my boys, and anyone who would bring them harm will die by my hands."

The Archduke was done talking. Kyros reached into his soul realm and called forth a long silver spear. Below him, Alexander did likewise, retrieving a massive two-handed sword.

"Kill them," Kyros ordered, and the knights, having taken this time to compose themselves, charged at Justin's party.

With a wave of his hand, the stout man fired hundreds of small lights, like tiny stars, and killed half of the knights in an instant. The tall man called forth his own sword, and after channeling his light magic into it and coating the blade with a twenty-foot-long beam of golden light, cut down the other half of the guards with a single slash.

Alexander roared and charged at Justin. His body almost exploded with silver-blue lightning, and Justin, instantly seeing through the source of that power, was so stunned at the sight that he almost didn't defend himself. At the last second, Justin managed to summon a wall of ice between himself and Alexander, saving his life.

From above, Kyros leaped over the bannister and dropped to the ground with an earthshaking crash behind Justin's team. Justin spun around to face the Archduke while the stout man and the tall man faced Alexander.

Justin and Kyros were about evenly matched, both being eighth-tier mages. However, Justin's side was much stronger, as both of his subordinates were of the seventh-tier while Alexander was only a sixth-tier mage.

The battle that followed was quick and brutal. Justin and Kyros' fight launched them out into the rest of the palace complex, with blasts of ice and silver-blue lightning shattering the outlying buildings. Alexander's speed managed to keep him alive for a while, but he was eventually killed when said opponents brought the building down upon him.

It took the stout man and the tall man a few minutes to recover despite the power gap between them and Alexander; it wasn't for nothing that House Raime was considered the strongest in the Kingdom, only exceeded perhaps by the Royal Family.

When Justin managed to bring Kyros down, he didn't finish the man off right away. Instead, he stood above him, Kyros bleeding from a hundred wounds and Justin from almost as many, and said, "For what it's worth, I'm sorry it had to be this way. I truly do wish it could've been different. But I have no choice, I must do this..."

And Justin put his blade through Kyros' heart, bringing an end to the Archduke. Kyros' eyes never left Justin's, and the latter could see an ocean of rage and hatred within those pitch-black eyes. Justin deserved every drop of it, and it killed him to know that.

"My Lord!" the stout man called out as he and his partner caught up with Justin outside of the main palace building. "We have to leave right now if we don't want to have to deal with this city's peacekeepers!"

But Justin didn't move. He stood there, blood and mana flowing out of his body almost unchecked, and said, "These people had an Inherited Bloodline. I believe they are remnants of the Thunderbird Clan!"

That statement sent a shockwave running through the other two men, and they instantly knew why they had so much trouble with Alexander. No traditional lightning mage of comparable power could've held out so long against their combined strength.

"I *thought* their lightning looked strange," the tall man said with a look of disgust on his face.

"It doesn't matter if they're sub-human!" the stout man hurriedly replied. "What matters right now is to get away from here to maintain our cover!"

Justin sighed, knowing that his subordinate was correct. But even as he and the other two made their escape, leaving Argent Palace and everyone who didn't escape in time almost completely obliterated behind them, he still thought about Kyros' silver-blue lightning. It gnawed at him, knowing that now, he'd no longer be able to let Artorias live. All those related to the Thunderbird had to die, just as all those related to Serana's clan had to die.

Such were his orders, and they could not be disobeyed.

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Justin opened his eyes, his recollection over. Doing Lord Kamran's dirty work wasn't something he took any amount of pleasure in, so he had never told his Lord that the Thunderbird Clan still existed, even so diminished. That was a rebellion he could afford. To let Leon and Artorias live was not.

Justin was not a hammer, annihilating a problem along with everything around it. No, he was a scalpel, surgically removing problems with as little collateral damage as possible.

With that determination set, Justin's mind was made up. He summoned the stout man back into his office to pass along his decision.

"There is a possibility that Leon Ursus is not Leon Raime, correct?" Justin asked.

"There is a *possibility*..." the stout man conceded.

"We will not kill him until we have irrefutable evidence," Justin said, offering no further explanation no matter how long the stout man stared at him.

Of course, he could understand the stout man's questioning look, as they were only one or two murders away from going home, but Justin's mind was made up. Lord Kamran had his wife, but Justin still had his principles, and the two weren't necessarily opposites. He'd find and kill Leon Raime, but he'd spilled enough blood on the way.

"Keep Leon Ursus under strict surveillance," Justin said. "If we find proof that he's Leon Raime, then we'll capture him and interrogate him for the location of his father. Even if he doesn't tell us, we'll still kill him."

Justin hoped that if that scenario came to pass, that Leon wouldn't speak. If Lord Kamran didn't know that Artorias was of the Thunderbird line, then Justin wouldn't necessarily have to kill him.

But things rarely went according to Justin's desires. His current situation was proof of that.

"But, be careful," Justin replied, deciding to offer a much more compelling reason that he hoped would prevent any of his subordinates from doing something rash against his orders. "Timotheos went missing, and if this 'Leon Raime' is at fault, then we have to proceed with great care..."

"Yes, My Lord," the stout man replied, his face momentarily twisting in fear of whatever might have killed Justin's second-in-command. He knew that even after three years, he wasn't as strong as Timotheos. He turned and left Justin's office, wasting no time in getting to work putting Leon under surveillance.

Justin, too, got back to work, but in his case, it was drafting a few accounting documents for Prince August. It was a useful distraction from his other, more distasteful job.

Chapter 323: A Long Time Coming

After the opening day of the triumphal games, the capital descended into solemn silence, with many people confused and scared of what might be on the horizon after August and Octavius' public disagreement. However, by the end of the games, most people had returned to their usual behavior, though the possibilities of what might happen in the near future remained on everyone's mind.

In Leon's case, he hardly noticed anything was wrong, as Trajan ordered him to steer clear of the arena for the remainder of the games. He was more than happy to do so, so also didn't notice the fact that it was only the three Princes who were sharing the Royal box; none of the Paladins or high officials joined them.

Elise and her friends attended every day of the games, oftentimes with open invitations for Leon to join them. Since Valeria was there, however, Leon refrained, choosing to stay at Emilie's estate and train. None of them could fault him for his decision, given the public disaster at the end of the first day.

Even after the games ended and weeks went by, Leon and Elise continued to live in Emilie's estate, as Elise's realtor had yet to find them a suitable villa in the capital. Leon hardly left, since Trajan subsequently ordered him to stay at home, with the added comment that forcing him to go to the opening games was a mistake on his part.

Leon gratefully agreed, and so he spent almost an entire month in Elise's training chamber, only occasionally leaving to visit Trajan at the Royal Palace to keep up-to-date on the surveillance of Justin Isynos—the man had yet to do anything suspicious, so these quick visits were largely pointless. Elise

would join him in training for a couple hours every day, and Alix stopped by every now and then to spend some time with her friends, but for the most part, Leon's only company was Anzu.

Anzu continued to grow at a startling rate. After a month, he had not only grown powerful enough to be about on par with a fourth-tier mage, but he was now big enough that he could look Leon directly in the eye.

Normally, this would've been about the time that Leon should've started training Anzu to be his war mount, but Leon was focused completely on his own magical growth, so he pushed that matter down the line for the time being. He'd been told by the Heaven's Eye beastmaster that took care of Anzu in Leon's absence that Anzu wasn't going to be capable of flight until he was at least fifth-tier equivalent, anyway, so Leon figured it was fine if he delayed Anzu's training.

Leon's birthday came and went with little fanfare. Trajan was still busy keeping the peace in the Royal Palace and apart from Elise, who gave him quite a bit of affection on that particular day, no one else knew when his exact birthday was, not even Alix. For his part, Leon made sure to inquire with the estate servants when Elise's birthday was, as she hadn't told him, and discovered that it was only about a month and a half after his, so he had that long to make some plans.

Fortunately, neither he nor Elise cared too much about their birthdays, so he didn't feel too much pressure to make it incredible. Still, he couldn't let the day go by without any acknowledgment, so the only time he left the estate during that month apart from the occasional visit to the Royal Palace was to the Heaven's Eye Tower where he made some arrangements. He knew that her favorite flower was a Sun Lotus, a flower whose petals glowed red at sunrise, purple at midday, and blue at sunset, so he had a large bouquet of said flowers arranged to be delivered on her birthday.

Even that much took him quite a long time to decide on. Elise was inconceivably wealthy, so if she wanted something, she could typically purchase it immediately. Consequently, Leon didn't think she actually wanted anything that could be bought that she didn't already have.

'Shopping for a rich lady is damned difficult...' Leon had thought at the time. *'Hopefully, the flowers will be enough, because I have no idea what to do if they aren't...'*

After that, Leon went right back to training. When all was said and done, Leon left Emilie's estate a grand total of three times—once to Heaven's Eye and the other two times to the Royal Palace—and it was otherwise non-stop training for Leon day in, day out. And then the fateful day finally came, the day that he had been striving to reach since the first days of the Talfar-Bull Kingdom war.

He ascended to the sixth-tier.

It had been an otherwise quiet day, apart from the fact that Leon could feel how close he was to ascension and had been relatively on edge the entire week because of it. He went directly to Elise's training chamber after waking up and having breakfast, and since she had nothing better to do, Elise joined him. As it so happened, she was close enough to the fourth-tier that she had informed Emilie that she wasn't going to work until she had ascended. Understanding her daughter's determination perfectly, Emilie happily authorized Elise some time away from her duties in the Tower.

And so, the two lovers found themselves in the training chamber, Leon quietly meditating while Anzu dozed nearby, and Elise quietly practicing with a rapier.

Then it happened. Leon was working on his last bone, letting his magic power flow into his bone until that power took on its shape and that of his body around it. As soon as it did, Leon felt a sudden welling of power from his soul realm filling his body, and his aura went wild. Sparks and small bolts of lightning arced out of him and his hands burst into flame, startling Anzu, but curiously not bothering Elise. She was far too into her own practice to notice what Leon was doing.

Leon's eyes shot open as he felt this power rush through his body, spreading out from his heart and through his bloodstream. If he could see within himself—which he technically could do with a magic body but didn't yet know how—then he would've seen every drop of blood within his body glowing bright red with magic power. Usually, only about half of his blood at any one time was bright red mana.

This wave of power subsided, and Leon glanced around at the rest of the training chamber. His aura had been tempestuous enough that he almost expected to see some training weapons knocked off the walls, but instead, he saw something far more disturbing: he saw himself, still sitting in his meditative posture, about three feet below him.

Leon stared down at himself, it taking a moment or two for him to realize just what he was seeing. When he did finally process the sight before him, he became aware that he was floating above his body like a ghost above their corpse, completely invisible, but he could feel himself still breathing, he could feel his heart still pumping blood through his body, so he knew he wasn't dead. He was just disembodied.

Leon flailed around in the air, trying to reach back down and grab himself, but he was just out of reach of his body.

"Elise!" Leon called out instinctively, trying to get his girlfriend's attention, but she was in a meditative trance, and Leon immediately felt a bit terrible for trying to pull her out of it.

Taking another couple of seconds to calm down and evaluate his options, Leon fully understood what happened, even if he didn't know exactly why. He'd finished his magic body, that much was clear, though the reality of his situation dulled his joy somewhat.

Somehow, his magic body had been forced out of his physical body, taking his mind with it. A mage's mind was more firmly attached to his magic body than it was to his physical form, so wherever his magic body went, so did his awareness. How to move around and get back into his physical body, however, wasn't something that Leon knew how to do. All he could do was helplessly float around in the air.

[What are you doing, boy?] Xaphan asked from deep in Leon's soul realm. The sudden rush of power that Leon experienced after ascending had taken Xaphan's attention away from his recovery, and the demon was more than a little shocked at the sight that greeted him.

[Clearly, I'm hovering in the air,] Leon growled in response.

[Don't bite my head off, it was only a question,] Xaphan retorted. [Anyway, are you going to come back into your body anytime soon, or are you going to continue floating there with that stupid look on your face?]

[Once I figure out how to do so,] Leon said through clenched teeth. [And how are you able to see me? My body's transparent!]

[Your bodies are connected, it should be easy enough to return,] Xaphan stated. [And magic bodies are only invisible to the naked eye, they can still be detected quite easily with magic senses.]

Leon frowned, but he took a moment to stop and truly evaluate his condition, not just take stock of his surroundings. As soon as he did, he could feel a kind of tether that attached his magic body to his physical form that actually felt quite similar to the golden 'thread' that connected him and Xaphan. However, before he pulled on the tether between his magical and physical forms, he paused for another moment and looked around.

[I heard that magic bodies can be used like projecting my consciousness... or something...] Leon mentioned.

[A terrible, but not exactly inaccurate way to put that,] Xaphan replied.

[How do I move in this form?] Leon asked.

[You need only will yourself to move, and you will,] Xaphan explained. [No need to flail around like you're underwater, you'll only look like a fool that way. Well, *more* like a fool than you already do.]

Leon took a deep breath—even though his magic body didn't seem to need to breathe—and willed himself to move. Surprisingly, he immediately began to drift across the room.

[This is pretty easy...] Leon muttered.

[Be careful, boy,] Xaphan cautioned. [As your magic body is made up entirely of magic, it is incredibly fragile. Most demons don't ever use their magic bodies for anything other than accessing their soul realm, as the destruction of your magic body will kill you instantly.]

Leon frowned, then stopped floating around. The training chamber had enough enchantments to make him more than a little nervous with what Xaphan had just told him, not to mention Elise training nearby. Leon pulled on his tether, and his magic body was swiftly dragged back over to his physical form, where it sank right down beneath his skin and vanished.

Leon's eyes opened and he immediately rose to his feet. He wasn't that much stronger than he was just the day before in terms of raw magical power, but finally finishing his magic body indicated a major advancement in his powers and capabilities, with being able to access his soul realm at will perhaps the most profound of those abilities.

But this wasn't the time to fully explore what he could now do. He had a long list of things to speak with the Thunderbird about, and he wanted to get to that as soon as possible. Before he did that, though, he wanted to tell Elise what he was doing, as he would likely be gone for a while.

Leon's eyes turned to his lover; Elise was still quietly practicing a few basic thrusts and pivots, but it wasn't her swaying body that caught Leon's attention, it was her intense aura. To Leon's senses, it seemed like a halo of white light had surrounded Elise, and he couldn't look away. It took him a moment or two to realize what was happening, and when he did, he could only stop and watch, mesmerized.

About ten minutes later, Elise's aura changed, suddenly expanding and growing even more powerful, until it took on the characteristics of a mage that had ascended to the fourth-tier. It was only now that Elise finally got out of her meditative trance.

After taking stock of herself and her new status as a fourth-tier mage, she turned her head to the ceiling and laughed uproariously, exaggerating her joy because she saw Leon watching her out of the corner of her eye.

“Congratulations!” Leon said, smiling at her.

“I’ve taken a step closer to you, so don’t get complacent!” she said pointing half-playfully and half-imperiously at him from the raised platform in the training chamber.

“Well...” Leon said hesitantly before he described his own ascendance.

Elise stared at him in abject shock. She knew he was close, but for both of them to ascend on the same day was something she never expected.

But it wasn’t bad news at all, she may have been a little disappointed that she wasn’t as close to Leon’s power as she thought she was, but Leon ascending was good for them both. She happily laughed off her shock and leaped down from the platform. She intended to jump into Leon’s arms, but she underestimated her new strength, and Leon had to jump and catch her to keep her from crashing into the wall.

When Leon’s feet returned to the ground, Elise in his arms, the two were practically sharing a single set of lips. Elise had her arms around Leon’s neck, keeping him close, and when they finally separated after what felt like hours, she said, “I have to tell Mom.”

“I have some things to take care of, as well,” Leon said. “I have a Thunderbird in my soul realm, and I want to get some answers out of him. Or her. Or it. Maybe that should be my first question.”

Elise giggled, then hopped out of Leon’s arms.

“Be sure to be out in time for our celebration!” she said, giving him a radiant smile.

Leon smiled back and almost lost himself in her emerald eyes that seemed to be glittering in glee.

“I’ll do what I can,” he replied.

Elise laughed again, then sashayed over to the door, pausing only to give Leon a smoldering look before leaving the room.

Now, Leon and Anzu were alone, and Leon sat back down next to his sleeping griffin.

[Prepare yourself, demon,] Leon said to Xaphan, [for I’m on my way...]

Chapter 324: The Thunderbird Arrives

[Prepare yourself, demon,] Leon said to Xaphan, [for I’m on my way...]

[Oh no...] Xaphan responded sarcastically, [whatever will I do...? A young human is coming, oh woe is me!]

[Waiting there for my arrival is what you’ll do!] Leon responded, his mouth curving into an excited smile. He could almost hear Xaphan shrug; it wasn’t like the demon could do much else within his soul realm except wait, after all.

But then, Leon ran into a bit of a problem: he had no earthly idea how to enter his soul realm. He knew he had to use his magic body, but in that respect, he had yet to figure out how to control it. He couldn't ask Xaphan for assistance, either, given his declaration.

Leon quickly sat down and began to concentrate, to analyze his current abilities. If he concentrated, he could feel his magic body, but when he tried to move it, he ended up moving his physical body instead.

[Having some difficulties?] Xaphan mockingly asked, the smile on his face as clear as the midday sun in a cloudless sky from his tone.

Leon didn't respond; he just continued to experiment with his new magical form.

'There have been countless sixth-tier mages before me, this shouldn't be that hard!' Leon thought to himself as he closed his eyes in concentration and tried to throw the right arm of his magic body above his head.

This time, he felt something different, something a bit surreal. When he opened his eyes, he saw nothing unusual about his physical body, and the strange feeling quickly, though not immediately, vanished. It was almost as if something had peeled off from his arm and had been dangling in the air, though it clearly hadn't been anything physical when Leon inspected himself.

With a smile, Leon closed his eyes again and concentrated as hard as he could on his magic body. With as much willpower as he could muster, he commanded his physical form to stay motionless and his magical form to rise into the air.

When Leon opened his eyes, he found himself floating about a foot over his own corporeal head. After a few more minutes of playing around, he found that not only was he completely invisible to the naked eye—though not from magic senses—he could also fly through the air, albeit agonizingly slowly if he concentrated enough.

But these things interested Leon not a bit; it was his soul realm and the Thunderbird that lit his blood on fire. Or so it felt to him, at least.

Leon slowly floated back over to his fleshly frame and began to sink into it. It was more than a bit surreal, sinking back into his body like some kind of ghost, but Leon took in stride knowing what was to come.

He had an inkling of what to do now. Once he had returned to his physical body, he kept his eyes closed and tried to sink further down, essentially trying the reverse of what he had just done. And for the briefest of moments, he felt like he was falling into an endless pit; his stomach felt like it dropped through the floor. The sensation passed quickly, and Leon felt himself sitting in a position he hadn't been just a moment ago, upright as if in a chair rather than somewhat hunched over with his legs crossed and a griffin pressed up against his thigh.

Opening his eyes, Leon saw bright gray clouds almost as far as his eyes could see. He was sitting in the black granite chair in the center of his soul realm, the white marble steps just in front of him and beyond, the blazing inferno that perpetually surrounded his demonic partner.

Xaphan said nothing upon Leon's arrival, so disappointed was he that Leon figured this out so quickly. Leon, however, wasn't so reserved.

Rising from his throne, Leon raised his arms into the air and roared in triumph. This had been a long time coming, from the first time he'd been sent here during his bloodline awakening, his second due to Bran's attack, to his third following his fight with Lewis, and he let out every second in that one howl. By the end of it, he'd risen to his feet and dropped to his knees, but his arms remained raised and his fists closed.

"Hmm. Had to happen eventually," Xaphan said in mock derision. Leon, however, was so ecstatic that he was finally within his soul realm that Xaphan's words rolled right off him like water off a duck's back. He just knelt there, reveling in his achievement.

It took him almost ten minutes to finally stand back up and face Xaphan.

"I'm finally here, demon," Leon proudly stated.

"Really? I had no idea, I must've missed that somehow," Xaphan sarcastically replied.

"I recall making quite a few promises..." Leon said, his proud smile turning slightly sinister. "I seem to remember making a few threats, too..."

"Oh? Do you plan to do me harm in some way?" Xaphan asked with growing interest, his orange fire growing more intense.

"Don't bother flexing, you're still in *my* soul realm," Leon responded. He then conjured a silver-blue lightning spear and hurled it faster than Xaphan could react—he was still faster than the demon, and there were only about thirty or forty feet between them.

The lightning spear, however, only grazed Xaphan's cheek, parting the flames before it and revealing the demon's obsidian skin for a fraction of a second. The lightning itself did no discernible damage to Xaphan, merely giving him a few light jolts to the cheek that barely even made him twitch.

"Mm," Leon mumbled as he nodded in satisfaction.

"Are you done?" Xaphan asked in annoyance.

"I am," Leon definitively stated.

The two stared at each other for what felt like hours, then both burst out laughing. Xaphan was ecstatic as Leon's increased power meant he could heal faster and keep them both safer, and Leon was joyful for reasons that ought to be obvious.

Once they were finished, Leon said, "I have a great many things to discuss with you, demon, such as that technique for mental communication you promised to teach me way back when..."

Xaphan quietly cringed when this was brought up, as he'd completely forgotten.

"... but for now," Leon continued, "my priority lies with my ancestor. Where is the Thunderbird and how can I contact him?"

"Don't know," Xaphan confessed, for every admission of his lack of knowledge was a confession rather than a mere statement of fact. "Haven't seen that oversized pigeon since you last asked that question."

“Really...” Leon muttered as he turned away from the demon. He still stood atop the marble platform by the throne, and he glanced around at the island. The island itself hadn’t changed since he’d last visited the place, but he thought that his soul realm as a whole felt bigger. The mist that surrounded the place seemed much farther away from the edges of the island than Leon remembered, and the air surrounding the island was much denser with Leon’s stored magic power, all of it just waiting for him to call upon it.

Scattered around the marble steps were the various items that Leon had stored within his soul realm, making quite the large mess. Among these items were Leon’s repaired armor and his ring of invisibility, both of which had been finished and delivered to him about a week or so after the triumphal games had concluded. Leon had to spend some extra time re-applying his enchantments to his armor, though he took it as an opportunity to refine the enchantments a bit. He was about halfway finished with a number of enchantments that he estimated would double the armor’s effectiveness when dealing with most types of elemental magic, though actually quantifying that was essentially impossible to do, so his estimate couldn’t be easily verified.

But examining his property wasn’t why he was here; Leon’s eyes wandered around the island and its surroundings, taking in every detail they could, not that there was much to see—mostly just grey mist and the tiny island.

“So, then... what now?” Leon wondered aloud. He had no idea how to find the Thunderbird or if the bird was even still around. He couldn’t sense anything, and his magic senses could barely even reach the edge of the mist about a half-mile or so in the distance.

There wasn’t so much as a hint of black storm clouds within that mist.

“Wait,” Xaphan simply stated. “Nothing else you can do.”

Leon was a patient man. He accepted the situation and took a seat on the top step of the marble platform and waited.

‘The next step is the formation of my mind palace,’ Leon thought, taking the opportunity to consider what came next for him, magically speaking. *‘And then the expansion of my soul realm. From sixth to seventh, the soul realm grows from one mile in diameter to ten, then seventh to eighth ten miles to one hundred. Eight to nine one hundred to one thousand, and nine to ten one thousand to ten thousand. But first things first, the mind palace...’*

Leon had no clue how to construct his mind palace. His knowledge on the subject was mostly limited to philosophical discussions and practical information about what the mind palace *was*, but not so much on how to build one.

It was meant to symbolize him, to be the center of his soul realm and the nexus of power within him. It was the harbor of his magic body, and in more archaic times, it was believed to be the true resting place of the soul and a person’s real home.

Leon wasn’t sure how much of that he could believe, but it was a place to start, at least.

“Leon...” Xaphan suddenly muttered.

“What?” Leon asked, slightly annoyed at the interruption, but concealing it to the best of his ability.

When no answer came, Leon turned his full attention towards the demon. He saw the bright yellow eyes within the orange blaze, but they were not looking at him. Instead, they were turned a bit higher, somewhere over Leon's head. His curiosity piqued, Leon twisted to see what had captured Xaphan's attention and found the Thunderbird perched on top of his throne, staring back down at him.

The Thunderbird Leon now saw was only a fragment of what it had once been, but it was still more than powerful enough that when Leon's eyes made contact with the Thunderbird and momentarily felt its immense power, he froze in terror and almost fell down the marble stairs. The Thunderbird imperiously glared back down at Leon, like it was a proud god looking down at a petty human, which wasn't that far off from the truth.

Golden lightning flashing through the Thunderbird's gorgeous brown feathers, the thousands of gold flecks among its feathers glittering in the light of the mists around the island, and its yellow avian eyes locking on Leon. A powerful aura emanated from its body, pressing down upon Leon so much that he found it difficult to breathe, which, if Leon weren't currently distracted, would've raised some questions in his mind about whether he actually needed to breathe or not within his soul realm.

There had been no indication of the Thunderbird's arrival. No storm clouds, no thunder, no flashes of lightning, nothing. It had seemed to simply appear above Leon, and not even Xaphan saw where it had come from.

As he sat there desperately trying to maintain his composure, Leon heard a voice echo throughout his mind so deep and powerful that it felt like it had come from the depths of the underworld.

[YOU'RE LATE,] the voice neutrally stated.

Leon breathed deeply for a few seconds before mustering the will to rise to his feet. This was *his* soul realm, and here he was the ruler. The Thunderbird was his Ancestor, and Leon would afford it all the respect he could offer, but he wasn't going to be pushed around due to something as impractical as filial piety.

"I'm here," Leon croaked, his voice weak and shaky. But he managed to struggle to his feet despite the Thunderbird's towering aura and glared right back at the massive bird of prey that towered over him, at least as large as five grown men. After steadying his shaking voice, he then said, "If anyone was late, it was *you*."

As it wasn't human, the Thunderbird was unable to express emotion in the same way humans were, its eagle-like head seeming like it had been carved from stone for how little it moved. It didn't react to anything in any way that Leon could understand. However, Leon saying that it was late finally got something that Leon could recognize as a reaction: The Thunderbird clicked its beak and stood there, perched atop Leon's throne, and glared at him without making a sound.

The two stared at each other like this for almost an entire minute before the Thunderbird spoke again. It retracted its heavy aura, softened its gaze, and said in a far more relaxed tone, **[Good... good... I was afraid you might have set your pride aside after suffering a few losses, no descendant of mine should ever give in so readily...]**

Picking up on a tone of approval, Leon relaxed, but he didn't take his eyes off the Thunderbird.

Ignoring Leon's behavior, the Thunderbird quickly hopped down off the throne and onto the marble platform, and only once it had gotten settled did it turn back to Leon. It had no speeches planned, no explanations ready. Rather, it wanted to know what Leon wanted before beginning what was sure to be a long conversation.

[Now, then, I assume you have questions?]

Chapter 325: A Long Talk I

[Now, then, I assume you have questions?]

Once those words were spoken, Leon had to fight to not start salivating. This was it, the moment he'd been waiting for, the moment when he would finally get all the answers he wanted. And yet, for all that time he had spent waiting, Leon had no idea where to start. He stood there for several long seconds, staring at the Thunderbird while paralyzed with indecision.

'Should I start with magic? Or my family?' Leon wondered.

Seeing this, the Thunderbird, showing for the first time a human expression, rolled its eyes and growled in a most un-avian like way, **[Since you seem to be having so much trouble, why don't I start things off?]**

Leon raised an eyebrow in curiosity and nodded.

[What do you intend to do? What is your end goal?] the Thunderbird asked.

Leon answered immediately. "To kill my family's enemies and to find my mother."

The Thunderbird waited a moment for Leon to continue, but when he didn't, it asked, **[... Is that it?]**

"What do you expect of me?" Leon inquired.

[I expect you to fulfill your promise, to become the King of the Heavens!] the Thunderbird roared with such force that the island shook in response. Down below the two, even Xaphan's flames flickered and momentarily died down.

The demon had no intention of speaking, he just waited and patiently listened. This wasn't a conversation that he had any part of, and Leon would doubtlessly leave this conversation greater than he was before, so Xaphan held his tongue; they were partners, and Leon gaining strength would also indirectly strengthen Xaphan, just as the demon recovering his power would bring Leon greater power.

At the mention of the 'King of the Heavens', Leon's face instantly turned beet red, and he said, "Sooo... you know about that..."

[I know everything,] the Thunderbird responded, its tone giving Leon an impression of amusement.

In Leon's Mana Glyph, the collection of runes that could connect an outside object with his soul realm and give it unfettered access to his magic power, he had claimed that he was the future King of the Heavens. At the time, it had been nothing more than a statement of the heights that he intended to reach, of the heights he felt he would have to in order to find and kill his enemies and had meant

nothing particularly specific. Now that he was being called out for it, Leon instantly felt mortified that his mortifyingly arrogant claim had been witnessed.

[Don't be so embarrassed,] the Thunderbird said, **[it was quite comforting to see one of my descendants finally find some ambition. For too long the remnants of my family have languished in relative obscurity. For too long have they been content to rule a petty Kingdom and Archduchy in one of the most remote parts of the universe. Finally, after eighty thousand years, after my clan has fallen from the greatest of heights, has one who carries my blood both aspired to climb back to the peak from where we once stood, and shown enough potential that I can place some modicum of hope that it could be achieved.]**

The Thunderbird had turned its eyes toward the distance as it spoke, but as it paused, it turned its gaze back to Leon, causing the young man's heart to start beating like it was trying to break free from his ribcage.

[Has that determination wavered?] the Thunderbird asked as it made eye contact with Leon, its aura sending a bolt of momentary fear running through his body.

It took Leon a moment to compose himself and respond. "It hasn't," he answered. "However, I don't know how to get there... or even where 'there' is..."

[I will help you, I will show you what you must do,] the Thunderbird said.

Leon stared at his ancestor in abject shock, his eyes wide and his jaw slack. The Thunderbird had essentially invited him to speak with it the last time they had seen each other, but for it to actually offer to help him wasn't something he had ever thought it would do.

"Ok, all right, I'm game," Leon said, his heart racing a mile a minute in excitement. This was an opportunity he could never pass up.

[Have you no questions for me before we begin?] the Thunderbird asked.

"Right, yes, that's something... there's some things I wanted to ask..." Leon sputtered, a bit embarrassed that he almost let his enthusiasm get the better of him. He took another couple of seconds to think, and then finally settled on what he wanted to know first. "Have you been able to see everything that I've been doing?" he asked.

[If I so choose, I can see your surroundings,] the Thunderbird stated. **[However, I have little interest in your daily life, and as such I rarely, if ever, watch what you do.]**

"Makes sense, I guess," Leon said. "There's a family that rules the Bull Kingdom that's descended from an eighth-tier Ascended Beast, a bull... which I suppose is rather obvious given the name of their Kingdom. Anyway, I have been told that they are able to take on—or at least, *some* of them are able to take on the aspects of a bull, such as a vast increase in muscular strength and even sprouting horns. So, what I'm asking is can my blood, the blood that gives me the same power you once carried, do something similar?"

[An interesting question...] the Thunderbird muttered. **[Are you intending to transform into a bird?]**

"It is an intriguing possibility," Leon confessed. "I don't know about making it permanent, but maybe sprouting wings or otherwise being able to fly would be pretty fantastic..."

The Thunderbird suddenly began to brightly glow, quickly blinding both Leon and Xaphan with silver light. The light died as quickly as it came, but rather than the Thunderbird appearing from the light, a young buxom woman about as tall as Leon stood in its place.

She had long brown hair, the same color as the Thunderbird's feathers, that hung all the way down to the back of her knees. Her skin was smooth and tan, not quite as dark as the desert-dwelling people of the Samar Kingdom, but certainly enough to be obviously foreign compared to the pale inhabitants of the Bull Kingdom. Her face was gorgeous, perfectly symmetrical with an aquiline nose and full lips turned upward into a proud smile. She seemed completely human, save for her yellow avian eyes that were locked on Leon's surprised face.

"It's not impossible, I remember some members of a few powerful clans taking on certain traits of their Ancestors, the Phoenix and Great Dragons most notably. I've never seen any of *my* clan members pull off such a feat, though," the woman said, confirming what both Leon and Xaphan knew: she was the Thunderbird and this was her human form. "To put it simply, it's not impossible, and I'm sure I could come up with a way for it to happen if I were to focus all of my attention upon the problem. However, to do so would be a huge time investment, and I would require some assurances that you would be worthy of such a thing..."

Leon gulped and looked her in the eye as he wiped his confused expression off his face. "Anything," he said.

She smiled, understanding his mild confusion at her form yet offering no explanation. "I was going to impose these conditions upon you later, but now's as good a time as any. Every day, you will come here, to me, and I will train you. If you are to truly become the King of the Heavens and my truest successor, then I must make you more than you are now."

"Does that mean training me in water and wind magic as well?" Leon asked, remembering his father mentioning that their bloodline gave them some affinity for those elements in addition to lightning, despite him not seeing anything that would exploit that in his family's magical records. Granted, he didn't have much time to really poke around in his family's archives, but he figured that there would've been some mention of those affinities in the basic educational tomes he did possess, yet there were none.

"It does," the Thunderbird admitted, her smile growing wider in her appreciation of him bringing this topic up. "Ever since the fall of the Storm King, your ancestor that brought my clan to this plane, the clan has slowly lost much of what made it great. At this point, you are only marginally more powerful than an average lightning mage, and that will not do."

"So your power is more than just lightning?" Leon guessed.

"My power commands the sky and controls the weather!" the Thunderbird boastfully roared as she opened her arms in pride, and dozens of bolts of lightning thundered through the mist around the island in response. "No other power can compare!"

Xaphan's flames died down a bit in the light of this silver-blue lightning, and the demon himself seemed to shrink down a bit. As for Leon, his face split into a wide smile and he felt his blood begin to boil. To command the sky and control the weather was exactly the degree of power that he wanted.

"How do I get to that point?" Leon asked with shining eyes and a wild expression.

"You follow my instructions," the Thunderbird said, reveling in Leon's obvious enthusiasm. It had truly been a long time since she had last seen someone as full of potential as he was, though she also had to admit that it wasn't necessarily all her that gave Leon that potential. For a moment, her eyes turned out toward the mist, toward the being that she knew was out there, pretending that Leon didn't exist. She had once taunted it for its dismissal of its own descendant while Leon was dealing with Artorias' death, yet it still remained distant, far outside of Leon's reach and knowledge.

It didn't want to acknowledge Leon at all, and yet, she could feel its attention. No matter what it thought about Leon and the union of their bloodlines, it couldn't completely ignore what they were doing without making its own clan vulnerable—not that the Thunderbird actually thought that it would tell its clan about Leon, given what she knew about its aloof and distant personality.

The Thunderbird flashed a proud smile that being's way, then turned her attention back to Leon before the young man could suspect that she was doing anything more than letting her eyes wander while she paused to think.

"Before we begin, there are a few other things that you must be made aware of..."

"Such as?" Leon asked.

"How much do you know of this universe? If you want to achieve Apotheosis and ascend to the highest peak possible, then you must know where you have to go."

"I assume the 'Nexus'?" Leon asked. Xaphan had told him of that distant place beyond this plane, located not only in the center of the sky but also of the entire universe. Leon had only vague ideas of what the Nexus actually was, though.

"Yes, the Nexus," the Thunderbird confirmed. With a wave of her hand, she conjured a projection of light that showed all of Aeterna, from the Northern Vales to the most distant southern shores. "This plane, and the continent upon it, is part of a cluster of planes called the Divine Graveyard..."

As the Thunderbird spoke, the projection seemed to zoom out, showing the entirety of the plane. The continent of Aeterna was in the center, and it was completely surrounded by the Endless Ocean, which wasn't as infinite as its name claimed; surrounding the ocean was a familiar cloud of mist, and after that mist came the empty dark Void that existed between planes.

The scene kept zooming out until Aeterna was little more than a single dot joined by eleven other dots to its right from Leon's perspective, forming a small cluster of stars, moons, and planes. All of them 'faced' the same direction.

"In the center of every sky of every plane, the Nexus can be found," the Thunderbird explained, the light projection suddenly zooming out even further at blinding speed until the 'Divine Graveyard' had vanished into the distance, replacing it with a spherical object that Leon couldn't identify. Its surface shone with bright white light, and that was about all Leon could tell from the image, though he could

see countless planes around it, slowly orbiting the Nexus while their stars orbited them. "The Nexus is where all who achieve Apotheosis go if they wish for greater power."

Leon's head started to spin. *'Divine Graveyard? Apotheosis? What even are all these things?'* he wondered. Still, he wanted the Thunderbird to finish before he started asking more questions.

The scene then zoomed in, going right past the blinding white light and sinking below the surface of the Nexus. The sphere was hollow, though, and a moment later after they passed through the relatively thin shell, Leon saw what was within: an entire world existed on the inner surface of the sphere, and in the center of the place, what Leon might've called the 'core' if he had to give it a name, was a multicolored sphere of light, one side lit up like a star and the other much darker like a brightly lit moon. The light from the bright side shifted colors the farther away from the core the light traveled, which at the scale the Thunderbird had chosen to depict it, made it fairly obvious. The 'moon' side of the Nexus was blocked by a great curtain of black... something that Leon couldn't identify, but no light passed it. Within that curtain Leon could see millions of tiny pin pricks of light, glittering like stars.

It was like this brilliant core created an illusion of the sky around a plane, even though there wasn't really a sky within the hollow spherical Nexus.

"Every one hundred thousand years, the Nexus will destroy itself," the Thunderbird continued, and the projection showed the 'shell' of the Nexus shattering into innumerable fragments and exploding outward into the Void, leaving only the shining core behind. "During the following three hundred years, the Nexus will rebuild itself from scratch, with nothing more than the power given off by the Origin Spark in a process called Reconstitution. Once this process is complete, all the powers that evacuated when the Nexus shattered return to claim new land and resources."

Leon took a deep breath, and then stared at the Thunderbird.

"I hope you know that none of this is making much sense..." he said.

"I understand," the Thunderbird replied. "I'll be here as long as you need me. Besides, we have a lot of ground to cover, so settle in for a while."

Leon decided to do just that and sat down on the top step of the marble platform. He then turned his eyes back to the light projection and waited for the Thunderbird to finish her explanation.

Chapter 326: A Long Talk II

After being given a few minutes to process, Leon felt like he understood what the Thunderbird was saying, and it meshed well with Xaphan's much less detailed explanation from years earlier.

There were millions upon millions of planes within the universe, many smaller than the plane of Aeterna, some larger. And yet, all of them 'faced' the same direction: toward the Nexus. The Nexus was in the center of the universe and was in the center of the sky for every plane in existence, which formed a kind of incomplete sphere, with all the planes spread out around the Nexus.

On the inside surface of the Nexus was a massive world far larger than any plane, and in the center of the sphere was the 'star', which the Thunderbird later referred to as the Origin Spark, not that Leon knew what that meant.

The universe extended far beyond the 'sphere' of planes around the Nexus, though, and that was where Xaphan had come from, the so-called Void. Technically speaking, all the space between the planes and the Nexus was the Void, but when most people spoke of the Void, they spoke of the universe beyond the planes where the demons lived. Unfortunately, the Thunderbird was extremely light on the details of this place, much to Leon's disappointment.

"Now, what questions do you have?" the Thunderbird asked once her explanation was finished.

There were many Leon had, but the first one he asked was, "What is the Divine Graveyard?"

"This plane and the eleven others around it are one of the closest clusters of planes to the Nexus in existence, and these twelve planes are where the Primal Gods and Devils were buried following their extinction during the catastrophic war eons ago," the Thunderbird replied.

This one statement made Leon almost reel from how many more questions that gave him. Fortunately, the Thunderbird noticed and decided to launch into another long explanation.

"At the dawn of the universe, the Primal Gods and Devils came into existence," the Thunderbird explained, and her light projection shifted into two images.

One was of a quadrupedal creature that almost seemed to be made of solid white light, with a smooth metallic surface for skin and hard, sharp edges between these smooth plates. The being had few noticeable facial features, though it did have a recognizable mouth. Its brow completely covered the area where its eyes would be if it were human and extended out into a pair of huge curved horns, which were also made of up this white metallic substance. Its torso was human enough and had a pair of human-shaped arms coming out of its shoulders.

The other creature seemed to Leon to be made up of dark clouds edged with lighter clouds and red light, as if there were a red light source shining behind the black and dark grey clouds that bent around their edges. The creature had a vaguely human shape, though instead of a defined neck and head, the cloud simply extended upward like a steep hill. In the center of that long and shapeless bump was a single red eye—or what looked like an eye—blazing like a red star in the center of a dark nebula. The being had a pair of arms with two hands, and nine fingers on each hand, though no discernable lower body, save for more clouds.

The white metallic being was a Primal God, while the dark cloud-like being was a Primal Devil.

"These were the first forces in the universe, the first conscious wills," the Thunderbird continued. "For the most part, they got along well enough, without too many disagreements. If there were disagreements, the Kings of each of these beings would parley and arbitrate along with a leader of the Divine Beasts."

"Divine Beasts?" Leon asked.

"Indeed, in addition to the Primal Gods and Devils, there were also a number of beasts that sprang into existence with the formation of the universe," the Thunderbird said. "Some of them of cataclysmic power, able to easily contend with the strongest of the Primal Gods and Devils. Most were of more middling power, relatively speaking, so they weren't exactly treated like complete equals by the insanely powerful Gods and Devils."

“These beasts were divided, though there were enough to threaten the Primal Gods and Devils into leaving them alone, for the most part. The strongest of them were allowed to reside in the Nexus alongside the Gods and Devils as equals. The Great Black Dragon was the strongest of them all, and if there was ever a single ruler of the Divine Beasts, then it was him. However, his brothers—the other Great Dragons—the Celestial Scorpion, the Phoenix, and the Heavenly Wolf were all of comparable power. There were also at least a thousand other Divine Beasts of great power among their ranks that I don’t have the patience to elucidate upon.”

“Are you a Divine Beast?” Leon asked.

The Thunderbird smiled at him and instantly replied, “No. I was born with nothing, just an eagle from a worthless plane with no more power than any other good-for-nothing beast. I worked for my power, I shed blood and tears for every step I took on the road to claiming the title of King of the Heavens; it was not granted to me by the Universe, I took it with my own talons! Thousands of other beasts just like me did the same, and the Divine Beasts welcomed us into their ranks with only a bit grumbling, unlike the Gods and Devils who would simply ignore our presence.”

“‘King of the Heavens’, is that a real title or are you just messing with me?” Leon humorlessly asked.

“It was real. Or at least, the title that the Great Black Dragon appeased me with after I fought him to a standstill could be translated as such if you took certain liberties with its translation,” the Thunderbird flippantly said before proceeding with her explanation. “Into this world came humans, supposedly created by the Primal Gods alongside the mindless angels that served them as extensions of their will. However, the Primal Devils also claimed that they made humanity, alongside the beings that would later become demons.”

At the mention of demons, Xaphan visibly shook, though he didn’t interrupt.

“It was this conflict, the disagreement about who, in fact, created humanity that started the war eons ago that led to the downfall of the Primal forces, as far as I was aware. I had joined the ranks of the Divine Beasts at the time, so I was hardly in the loop regarding the goings-on of the Primal Devils and Gods.

“Regardless of who or what squirted humanity into existence, humanity had come into being, and when the Gods, Devils, and Divine Beasts were gone, leaving nothing but a few disparate bloodlines, humanity inherited the Nexus and the wider universe.”

“How convenient for them,” Leon muttered.

“The fighting was mostly confined to the Nexus, so humans out in the lower planes survived,” the Thunderbird said. “Remember, the Nexus was the domain of the Primal beings and they weren’t going to lower themselves by gracing the lesser worlds with their presence if they could avoid it, or allow beings from those lesser worlds in to join them unless they had the power to force the issue, as I did.”

“What about during this ‘Reconstitution’?” Leon asked. “When the Nexus destroyed and remade itself, what did they do then, if they weren’t keen on mingling with those they thought beneath them?”

“There were a few planes they created closer to the Nexus than most others, and these planes would be their safe harbors. In fact, the Divine Graveyard is exactly where those planes used to be located...”

"So the Gods and Devils created this plane?" Leon asked.

"Possibly, I didn't keep track of Divine creations, so I would hardly know. Still, the Divine Graveyard is the closest cluster of planes to the Nexus, so I would be willing to put money down on my guess being correct."

"... Ok," Leon said as he processed all of this new information. He had about a million more questions, but there was one thing that he wanted to know above all else. "How do I get to that point?" he asked. "How do I get to the Nexus? I assume that's where you're wanting me to go."

"That is, indeed, where you must go," the Thunderbird said. Then, after sneakily glancing over her shoulder into the Mists of Chaos by stretching a bit, she said, "In fact, that's probably where you'll find your mother, if you're lucky."

Everything happening within Leon's head stopped at that moment. He stared at the Thunderbird, and slowly repeated, "How do I get there?"

Fortunately, the Thunderbird didn't dramatically pause for long, and after reveling in Leon's surprise, excitement, and anxiety for a few seconds, she continued. "To reach the Nexus is a difficult thing to achieve. It wouldn't be a good idea to try below the ninth-tier. Around the tenth-tier or so wouldn't be the worst idea, but it would be much safer to do so after achieving Apotheosis."

"And what does that mean?" Leon asked.

"Beyond the tenth-tier, after your soul realm reaches a diameter of ten thousand miles, it's possible to condense your own Origin Spark, just like what is in the center of the Nexus. It wouldn't be incorrect to say that at that point, you would be stepping into the realm of the Divine. Your powers would be far beyond what any native on this plane would be capable of mustering, and you would be immortal. Or I suppose, *ageless* would be more accurate, an Origin Spark wouldn't make you invincible, though killing you would be a feat that none of this plane would be capable of performing."

"How would I do this?" Leon inquired, his heart racing and his blood boiling at the prospect of growing strong enough to defeat age. He was only nineteen, and he already had a lifespan of a few hundred years to look forward to, but agelessness was another thing entirely. It was something that had eluded even the greatest of Kings, but the Thunderbird said it was possible.

The Thunderbird considered the issue but then said, "It's complicated enough that there wouldn't be much point in explaining right now. When the time comes, I'll walk you through it, or failing that, you can likely find enough references to Apotheosis in the center of this plane to figure it out yourself."

Leon rolled his eyes, but he could recognize that the Thunderbird wasn't going to explain any further down this line of information. Still, this was a lot to take in, and it took Leon more than a few seconds of thought to decide on what he wanted to follow up on.

"So, this is the 'Divine Graveyard', then?" Leon asked, seeking confirmation. When the Thunderbird nodded, he asked, "If the Primal Beings are buried here, is there any possibility that there might be something they left behind that could benefit me?"

"Unlikely," the Thunderbird said. "If there was anything that could be gained from their corpses, then they wouldn't have been buried all the way out here. Although, since the Divine Graveyard was later

forbidden to enter, I suppose the possibility exists that you can find something to use among their corpses, but I wouldn't count on it."

"Got it," Leon said, only mildly disappointed. He wasn't too keen on grave robbing anyway regardless of whether it was a god or mortal he was stealing from. But if it gained him the power he both wanted and needed, then he'd do it without hesitation, divinity be damned.

"Regardless, this planar cluster was declared off-limits by the humans that took over in the wake of the Primal beings, but by then I was too dead to have first-hand knowledge of it," the Thunderbird said, her face momentarily sliding into one of pure hatred and wrath. The expression was gone as quickly as it had come, but it still chilled Leon to his core.

But that did nothing to alleviate his curiosity.

"What happened? I can't imagine something powerful enough to kill you if you were as strong as you say you were an equal to the King of the Divine Beasts," he asked.

The Thunderbird was quick with her reply, and her face contorted into an expression of unabashed, abject, almost passionate pride. "I was most certainly as powerful as I claim, the Great Black Dragon and I fought continuously for more than a month, and it still ended up a draw! The Great Black Dragon was certainly great, but his power was not greater than my own!

"But that has little to do with my death. My death was my greatest failure, and my greatest triumph, even knowing the heights I had reached and the clan I had built. I and several other Ascended Beasts fell that day, but we accomplished what we had set out to do. I will say no more."

Leon nodded, understanding as well as any living being could why the Thunderbird was reticent to speak of the death of her physical form.

At this time, Xaphan finally mustered the will to ask a question of his own before the other two dove into another deep discussion.

"I would like to hear more about the demons after the fall of the Primal Devils..." the fire demon said.

He was tall enough that the Thunderbird only had to turn her head a bit to look him in the eye from atop Leon's marble platform, and she spared the demon no more than a glance and a brief release of her aura, but that was enough to dampen Xaphan's flames and force the immense demon to his knees.

The Thunderbird didn't have to say anything for Xaphan to get the picture; she was speaking to her descendent, and he wasn't to butt in. Her current friendly demeanor was reserved for her last living descendent, not for him.

"You are the last inheritor of my power, of my *blood*," the Thunderbird said to Leon, her yellow eyes fixed upon him. "If I am to help you, you must commit to achieving Apotheosis and working to rebuild the clan. Have you the ambition to take this on?"

"I do," Leon said without hesitation.

"... Good," the Thunderbird said. She was slightly taken aback, having expected a bit more contemplation on Leon's part, but gratified in the speed and certainty of his answer, nonetheless.

“On that note,” Leon quietly began, his eyes narrowing as the image of black fire that he had seen in the wade of his fight with the vampire Lewis sprang into his mind, “is your power all I’ve inherited?”

“Is the power to make the firmament your own not enough for you?” the Thunderbird asked, her tone a mix of annoyance and amusement.

“I couldn’t ask for a better inheritance,” Leon said, eliciting a smile of approval and another glance out into the mists from the Thunderbird, “however, I have... at one point or another, felt like something was missing, like there was more within me that wasn’t... I don’t know how to phrase this, I guess I’ve just sometimes felt like something was missing, that there was something I was supposed to have but don’t. Does any of this make sense?”

Of course, it did to the Thunderbird. She knew exactly what Leon was talking about, but after a third glance into the mists, she said, “It doesn’t.” She felt like saying that statement was going to come back and bite her in the future, but at the moment, there wasn’t anything else she could say without poking a sleeping dragon.

Leon accepted her statement with only a bit of reservation—at least, for the time being—chalking his vision of black fire and red-orange light up to a strange dream brought on by a serious injury caused by demonfire. He decided to take the Thunderbird at her word and resolved to be more specific later.

“How about our clan, then?” Leon brought up. “What can you tell me about them?”

The Thunderbird smiled. If anyone else had demanded information from her as Leon was, they would be swiftly struck by innumerable bolts of lightning and rendered ash upon the wind. But it was Leon, her last living link to the world of the living, and in her pride of his ascension to the sixth-tier, she was more than willing to explain the clan’s history to him.

And to do that, she had to start with herself; hardly a difficult topic for such a prideful being.

“Our clan began with my birth, eons ago in the Primal Age...”

Chapter 327: A Long Talk III

“Our clan began with my birth, eons ago in the Primal Age...” the Thunderbird began with a tone of absolute pride and confidence, the impression that she was trying to give Leon only slightly mitigated by the fact that she was physically dead. Still, she got a bit theatrical, waving her tanned arms in the air and letting her wavy brown hair blow in the wind.

“... I was just a normal eagle back then, though perhaps significantly more beautiful, intelligent, and powerful.”

“Uh-huh. Beautiful and intelligent and powerful. Gotcha,” Leon said as he fought the urge to roll his eyes.

“I only speak the truth,” the Thunderbird boastfully stated, her smile proud to the point of arrogance. She waved her hands and began to project a new image, that of a much smaller version of her bird form.

The deep brown feathers of her projected form were significantly less groomed, being tangled and matted, and lacking the golden spots that were peppered throughout the feathers of her current bird form. There wasn’t a single spark of lightning coursing through her feathers, either.

'Just looks like a regular brown eagle to me...' Leon thought to himself, but he kept silent for the Thunderbird to continue uninterrupted.

"I clawed and fought my way to the top," the Thunderbird said, manipulating the projected image to show herself fighting various creatures, from things Leon could recognize like wolves and hawks, to stranger things that looked kind of like bears but weren't, to monsters that looked nothing like anything Leon had seen before. Notably, the Thunderbird only showed herself using wind magic rather than the lightning that Leon expected. "When I reached the eighth-tier, I finally reached the point of true sentience and I learned how to change into my human form."

"How did you learn that?" Leon asked.

The Thunderbird paused for a moment before saying, "I just knew. There was nothing else about it, I just felt like my body was malleable, like clay, and that I could change its shape into that of a human."

"Can you change into anything else?"

"No."

"You're sure? Sounds like you should be able to if-"

"I know, I tried!"

"That's a shame... Would've been cool if you could..."

"I agree, that would've been great. It worked out in the end, though, nothing else I would've chosen to transform into would've had opposable thumbs and so many fingers. Makes life so much easier when I can manipulate tools with the fine motor skills of a human, I never would've managed if I had transformed into a dragon or something of that nature."

"Transforming into a dragon would be pretty damn amazing, though," Leon stated with an almost longing look in his eyes.

"Indeed, they're powerful beasts, and perhaps the only kind of beast possessed of intelligence from the start of its existence without being Divine. Or at least, I'm fairly certain they were. I believe they were hunted to extinction millions of years ago. As far as I'm aware, only the human descendants of their most powerful kin, the Great Dragons, still live."

"That's a shame," Leon said with genuine remorse. He was all for hunting down dangerous creatures, but actually wiping out a species of animal didn't sit well with him, especially not something as conceptually incredible as a dragon. "At least wyverns still exist."

"Do they?" the Thunderbird curiously inquired.

"Apparently they sometimes come as far north as the Southern Territories in this Kingdom," Leon said. "Or so I've been told, they haven't done so in recent times, but they're still supposedly plentiful closer to the center of Aeterna. Several different species of wyvern, too."

The Thunderbird nodded but then decided to turn back to her story. Unfortunately for her, she only lasted for a brief moment before coming to another tangent she had to go on.

"I was strong, and nothing could challenge me. All that tried were defeated. But I wasn't anything remotely close to Divine, and it wasn't until I acquired the Storm Diamond that I even thought I was capable of achieving Apotheosis." The projected image then changed, the Thunderbird's form vanishing and being replaced with a dark diamond that seemed to have storm clouds swirling just beneath the surface, within which occasionally flashed a bolt of golden lightning.

"The Storm Diamond?" Leon asked with mild disdain at the lack of originality in the name. "What kind of diamond could help you acquire power enough to be considered divine and how can I get one?"

"What I found was a fluke," the Thunderbird said. "It was buried in the heart of a mountain that I happened to shatter during a fight with a particularly *determined* enemy... Its appearance and titanic aura attracted all sorts of other things to the site of our battle, but once I'd fought and killed everyone else, once I'd bathed that region in the blood of thousands of beings who thought themselves great enough to kill me, I found the Storm Diamond buried in the rubble of the mountain. I didn't know it at the time, but what I had found was a Universe Fragment."

"Sounds intense," Leon muttered.

"Objects and artifacts that are powerful enough to be considered Universe Fragments are, indeed, intense," the Thunderbird said. "They are things that, for one reason or another, generate stupendous, incalculable amounts of magical power, so much so that even the Primal Gods and Devils would wade through a sea of blood if they so much as heard a rumor of one's existence. They were powerful enough that they could cause lesser gods to explode if they tried to seize one without the proper preparations. It takes a great deal to impress a Universe Fragment enough for it to submit to you, but that doesn't mean they can't be stolen. They have a will of their own, but no intelligence, at least not as we understand the concept. They are not sentient, but they choose their own wielders.

"Possession of a Universe Fragment meant that one was one of the most powerful people alive, and in the history of this universe, I only ever heard of one or two hundred that were found throughout the millions upon millions of planes in existence, though I'm sure a few more have been found since my death. They can take many forms, but they're almost always something that can only be found in nature, so a sliver of iron, a gemstone, a leaf that never wilts, that sort of thing."

"You found one of these things and you didn't explode? You impressed it and it submitted itself to you?"

"Clearly I did."

'Doesn't sound so cataclysmically powerful to me...' Leon thought, but he wasn't going to argue, at least not until the Thunderbird's story was finished.

Sensing Leon's doubt, the Thunderbird said, "Do not underestimate the power of a Universe Fragment, the Primal beings did not give these artifacts such an illustrious name without cause. I learned to control the weather through the power that the Storm Diamond conveyed, and in the other Universe Fragment I acquired, the Iron Needle, I had the most potent weapon in all the cosmos.

"Universe Fragments contain cataclysmic power, and if one submits itself to you, you can unlock that power in time. It usually limits itself to its wielder, though, since it's even possible that a mortal can impress a Universe Fragment. They do not discriminate based on power, and they always hold back

enough of their power to keep their hosts from killing themselves, but they do not submit themselves to just anyone. And they're generally loyal, I've found. They do not often betray their masters."

The Thunderbird changed her projection once more, the dark smoky diamond being joined by a sliver of shiny grey iron, about the same shape as a sewing needle, and unremarkable save for the silver-blue lightning that constantly flickered along its length.

"Honestly, the only thing I heard just now was that it was the Storm Diamond that let you control the weather," Leon said with a sarcastic smile.

The Thunderbird wasn't amused. "Be careful, boy," she said in a dangerous tone, her eyes narrowing into a merciless glare. "I am willing to indulge your insubordination because you're the last member of my clan, but my patience has limits."

"Got it," Leon replied, not that he intended to suddenly be more respectful given all the information she was now dumping on him. He felt like he was beneath a waterfall, trying to catch as much water in his cupped as he could, but only managing to hold onto a few scant drops.

At the very least, if he forgot anything, he figured he could at least ask the Thunderbird to repeat herself later.

"With the Storm Diamond in hand," the Thunderbird continued, "I ascended past the tenth-tier and achieved Apotheosis. I stormed the Nexus and claimed my place among the Divine Beasts, eventually becoming one of the most powerful beings within that center of power. All but the Great Black Dragon and the Kings of the Primal Gods and Devils had to walk softly around me, especially after my acquisition of the Iron Needle.

"I started a family, taking ten thousand husbands and bringing three children into this world."

"Only three?" Leon asked with an eyebrow cocked in curiosity.

"We can transform into humans enough to reproduce with them," the Thunderbird said in reference to Ascended Beasts, "but that doesn't mean it's easy. That, combined with the drop in fertility—especially among women—that comes with vastly increased lifespans, meant few children for me. I had three sons, though, and they each had hundreds of children. My clan—*our* clan—numbered in the thousands by the third generation.

"We reigned supreme among the other Ascended Beasts! No other being could fly through the firmament and not fear me! The sky was mine!"

By now, the Thunderbird had raised her arms and let lightning course through her. The Mists of Chaos around the island began to grow dark, and Leon felt a few drops of rain land on his head.

Leon didn't say a word, but he pointedly put his hand on his head to feel the water and looked upward at the gathering storm clouds with his face darkening in annoyance. The Thunderbird, even in her prideful, boastful mood, took the hint and quickly calmed herself down.

"Excuse me," she said with enough politeness that Xaphan below, remembering how she treated him previously, couldn't believe his ears.

"If you were so powerful, how did you get reduced to such a state?" Leon asked, giving voice to one of the biggest questions that had been rattling around his and Xaphan's heads for a while.

"The war between the Gods and Devils broke out," the Thunderbird said. "I and several of my friends were killed after the Great Black Dragon and his brothers, leaving all the Divine and Ascended Beasts vulnerable. And to make it worse, it wasn't even a Primal being that killed me, it was—"

Here, the Thunderbird stopped with a look of such hate and fury and intense aura of killing intent that even Leon, who had been raised practically from birth by Artorias to be willing to kill and to be comfortable with death, who was now a veteran warrior of two wars, flinched.

"Never mind," the Thunderbird said as she quickly recomposed herself. "My clan lived on without me, thriving in the new paradigm. From what I could glean from my descendant's soul realms—keeping an eye on them through their bloodline connection to me—in the wake of the war, seven new titular positions were created, the seven Kings of the Elements."

"Sounds like the demonic Princes," Leon observed.

"It's a natural desire for the most powerful beings around to declare themselves the masters of their chosen element," the Thunderbird explained. "However, the demonic title of 'Prince' comes with actual political power and authority. The Elemental Kings are titular titles, seized by already powerful people as a way to increase their own prestige, the titles themselves convey no political power. My clan ruled as the Storm Kings from the moment the title was created until the death of the last Storm King eighty thousand years ago on this plane."

Leon nodded in understanding. These 'Elemental Kings' were essentially the opposite of the demonic Princes. Becoming a Prince gave a demon great power, while it was only through great power that a human would be able to seize an elemental kingship. One gave power, the other was the result of power already possessed.

"If the clan was so powerful, then why did they come here?" Leon asked. "Wasn't this place supposed to be a taboo? And if there was nothing to gain by pillaging the graves of the dead Gods and Devils, then why come here at all?"

"I'm not entirely sure about that," the Thunderbird admitted. "All of my original children and grandchild are long dead due to war or other harshness realities of life, so I only occasionally check in on you, I don't watch every moment of your waking life. I treated my clansmen at that time the same since none of my direct children were yet living, I left them to explore the Mists of Chaos when they were still in the Nexus and only returned when I felt Jason—the last Storm King—die. I saw the death of his children and the most powerful members of the clan. I did not see the reason for their invasion. Apparently, that was kept secret, and the only people who knew were those who were killed in this plane."

"The battle killed so many people that those who were left had no real leadership. They fought amongst themselves, weakening everyone to the point that the natives of this plane were able to kill them and reassert themselves upon this plane."

"My family survived," Leon said.

“Not all of Jason Keraunos’ sons were killed after their father, two managed to survive: Demetrios, the youngest and weakest, who would eventually rename himself ‘Raime’ to hide his identity, and Nestor.”

‘*So I am a descendant of the Storm King...*’ Leon thought to himself in wonder, thinking first of Demetrios and his change of name. It took a couple seconds for the pin of the second name to drop in Leon’s head.

“Nestor survived?!” Leon cried out in surprise.

“You’ve heard of him?” the Thunderbird asked in shock.

“I’ve encountered a number of his golems, and I found a place hidden in the mountains that he seemed to use to train.”

“He’s dead now and had no children, so it hardly matters if he survived the battle with the Planar Lord or not.”

Leon’s eyebrow perked up at the mention of a Planar Lord, but he let it slide for now; they were talking about his family, and that took priority.

“Anyway,” the Thunderbird continued, “a few other cadet families of the clan survived alongside the Raime family, but none were so powerful. By the time ten thousand years had passed, they had all been hunted down and killed, or stopped awakening their blood and letting it dilute until they were no longer of my blood.

“Jason Keraunos led his most powerful clan members to the Divine Graveyard during a period of Reconstitution for the Nexus. When the Nexus finally managed to reform itself several hundred years later and the weaker clan members who had gone to other planes to wait out the Reconstitution returned, they found nothing but old enemies waiting for them. Still, they fought hard and brutally, and they managed to survive, though they were no longer the Storm Kings, the Elemental Kings of lightning. In fact, as far as I can tell, that title has sat vacant ever since Jason Keraunos’ death.

“So, for seventy-five thousand years, my clan managed to limp on, but constantly attacked from all sides, constantly being worn down until they were all killed or had lost the ability to awaken their blood. This leads me to you, the last of my descendants who possess my blood, the only one yet living eighty thousand years after Jason Keraunos’ foolish invasion of this plane. Even the oldest and wisest, the ageless men and women of my clan died. All are gone, save for you.”

“Can no one else trace their families back to you?” Leon asked in curiosity, his asking of why they invaded momentarily forgotten.

“In the millions of years that my clan has existed, vast swathes of humans have been born that can trace their lines back to me if they go back far enough, including essentially every person living on this plane. Every Ascended Beast, Divine Beast, God, and Devil that left behind bloodlines can say the same, but these descendants, separated by so much space and time and lack the ability to awaken their blood, are not family. They don’t have my blood, my *power*, so they don’t count. A gap of three or four generations can prevent someone from being considered family, let alone hundreds or thousands of generations.”

“I see...” Leon muttered. If he were honest, he felt the same; he felt a kinship with Kyros and Alexander Raime, his grandfather and uncle who were killed years ago, respectively, but he felt nothing for the Raime branch families that were still alive. Those people were separated from Leon’s immediate family

by half a dozen generations or more, and so had long since lost the ability to awaken the Thunderbird's power within them, and as such, they were nothing more than ordinary people to Leon and the Thunderbird, completely unrelated to them.

"As I said, it's just you left, no one else can restore this clan to its former glory," the Thunderbird said, her deep yellow avian eyes fixed on Leon and her tone both demanding and challenging. She demanded he ascend to the Nexus, she was challenging him to take back everything that the clan had lost.

"You think I can do that?" Leon asked as he smiled at the challenge.

"I do," the Thunderbird said. "Honestly, I thought both you and your father would have been the ones, but in the end, all I have to work with is you."

"You could've revealed yourself sooner, surely you could've done something to help," Leon said.

"I *could've*," the Thunderbird agreed. "But I didn't. I got used to ignoring my descendants, and it was easiest to just stay the course and not reveal myself."

"So the clan died because you were lazy?" Leon asked, anger creeping into his voice. "*My father* died because you were *lazy*?"

"I... That isn't *inaccurate* to say," the Thunderbird admitted, once more shocking the listening Xaphan. "I told myself that I would reveal myself to your father one day when he became strong enough, but in the end, I never did. He was never strong enough for me to feel it was time. Regardless, I've learned from that mistake; I'm here now, and we have a lot of work to do."

Leon frowned. The Thunderbird had let the entire clan save for him die without doing anything. Still, he couldn't deny that he could use her help, and getting angry now would be counter-productive. For the sake of the future, he reluctantly decided not to focus on the past.

But he wasn't going to forget this. The Thunderbird, through inaction, destroyed her own clan, though the people who did the deed deserved far more blame. They were the ones who deserved Leon's wrath far more than the Thunderbird right now.

"Very well," he said. "Let's get started right now."

Chapter 328: A Long Talk IV

Leon swung his blade through the air, putting every ounce of skill and talent he possessed in the ways of the sword on display. Silver-blue lightning flashed along the blade, and Leon's movements sped up to the point that any mortal who tried to watch wouldn't have been able to track the blade. His speed and power were immense, beyond anything any other mage of comparable power might've been able to achieve.

"Not bad," the Thunderbird grudgingly admitted. "Not *great* either, but I can work with what you have."

She had taken a seat on the highest marble step, while Leon had gone down and grabbed his sword to demonstrate what he could do. If the Thunderbird was going to train him, then she had to see what he could do first; she didn't avidly watch him, after all, and so wasn't already aware of Leon's capabilities. Throughout all of this, Xaphan continued to watch, but the Thunderbird didn't appreciate his presence, and so continued to force the demon to remain silent—though she did so with her own presence rather

than using her power for something so mundane. She trusted the demon to learn from the past and keep his mouth shut.

“Take a breather for a moment,” the Thunderbird commanded. Though rest wasn’t needed, he complied.

The Thunderbird rose from her seat and walked over to him where he was training on the red and white stone tiles surrounding the marble platform. She stood opposite Leon about ten feet away with her hands behind her back.

“Attack me,” she ordered.

Leon cocked an eyebrow in confusion and didn’t move.

“Swing that sword and try to strike me,” the Thunderbird repeated. “Don’t worry, you’ll be incapable of harming me.”

Leon took a few hesitant steps forward, but with the Thunderbird’s look of utmost confidence spurring him on, he sped up and stabbed forward with significant force. He still held back enough to come to a stop if he needed to, but he acquiesced to the Thunderbird’s command and attacked her.

About a foot away from her, the blade stopped in the air. Leon kept pushing, but the blade simply wouldn’t move closer, as if there were some kind of invisible wall between the thunderbird and the tip of the sword.

Once the point was made, the Thunderbird gave Leon a proud smile and said, “That blade is mine. It’s made of Adamant metal and cannot harm me.”

Leon withdrew with slight confusion and waited for the Thunderbird to continue her explanation.

“Adamant metal is an alloy of metal and mana. My mana went into that blade, and so it can’t do anything to touch me.”

Leon held up the sword to examine it. He’d noticed long ago that there weren’t any enchantments upon it that he could discern. They could’ve been hidden beneath the deceptively simple hilt and crossguard, but he’d never tried taking them off to see for himself. If the blade was somehow made with the Thunderbird’s mana, though, then Leon could understand why it was so powerful despite the apparent lack of enchantment—with the Thunderbird’s divine power fused into the blade itself, it clearly didn’t need any enchantments, since the blade had existed for however many millions of years the Thunderbird had been gone, and for however many thousands or millions of years it had been alive, all seemingly without enchantment.

The blade needed no maintenance, Leon’s lightning magic could be channeled through it almost effortlessly and could even be amplified by it under circumstances that Leon hadn’t yet discovered. The blade itself was incredibly hard and yet wasn’t nearly so brittle that such hardness would imply. It was sharp enough to slice through mages like butter and didn’t weigh even half of what its size might suggest. All of this without a single enchantment.

What was more, Leon always felt more confident and fearless whenever he held it. It had felt warm and familiar to the touch, like the hand of a cherished lover or reliable brother, and that led to Leon quickly

picking up the habit of resting his hand upon it when he wore it at his hips. There had even been several times where his fear or anxiety almost got the better of him, and it was only the power and familiarity of the sword that kept him from losing control or composure. Of course, since he began to store the weapon in his soul realm, it hadn't been doing that so much, but simply remembering what it was like when he wore it at all waking moments, he could believe that it channeled the Thunderbird's power.

The more Leon thought about it, the more he believed it. Mana was simply the combination of blood and magic power. Blood and magic power were fused in the heart, using either stored magic that was taken from a mage's soul realm, or from the lungs where magic was absorbed from the air.

Alternatively, mana was produced in the bone marrow of higher-tiered mages. It was the medium through which magic power was channeled, and the Thunderbird's bloodline was what allowed Leon to call upon his ancestor's unique lightning powers. If the sword had been forged with the Thunderbird's mana, then it might share that unique power over lightning and be almost kin to Leon.

There was just one thing left that brought Leon doubt that the sword was made by the Thunderbird: the sword's appearance. The sword's aesthetic was quite simple, just a long straight sword that could be used with one or two hands, hardly what one might think appropriate for the Archdukes of House Raime, let alone the Thunderbird, a beast powerful enough to be considered equal to divinity.

"You made this?" Leon asked, his eyebrows raised in both confusion and curiosity.

"I made the blade, yes, but not the hilt," the Thunderbird said. "Give it to me for a moment."

Leon complied, handing over the sword to the Thunderbird. He didn't feel quite right handing the blade to someone else as the sword was so comfortable in his hand that he felt that the sword was *his*, but he wasn't going to deny the Thunderbird anything right now.

The Thunderbird casually swung the blade around, and Leon might've imagined it, but he thought he saw the sword light up as if the blade was joyful to return to the hand of its creator.

'That thing can't have a mind of its own, can it?' Leon thought to himself as he took in the sight of the Thunderbird holding the sword.

She wasn't there to show off, though, and the Thunderbird quickly stopped swinging the sword around.

"It feels great to have this in hand again," she said, looking down upon the sword like a mother upon her child. Leon could understand the sentiment, after three years of ownership, he never wanted to part from the blade again.

"Should we leave you alone with it for a while?" Xaphan couldn't help but ask from not too far away. He immediately regretted opening his mouth.

The Thunderbird responded with a wave of her hand, slamming the demon's face into the ground and all-but dousing his fires. He was still mostly obscured by orange flames, but it wasn't such a great conflagration as before. She then turned away from the demon, dismissively turning away from him to add insult to injury; he wasn't worth her attention.

"Now, let me see if you're still in there..." the Thunderbird muttered as the sword floated out of her hand and into the air to hover about four and a half feet off the ground.

Before Leon could even process his surprise, the hilt suddenly flew off the blade and hovered in the air a couple feet away, leaving the blade itself bare.

The Thunderbird closely examined the sword, but in the end, she simply smiled, shook her head, and said, "I thought not."

"What are you looking for?" Leon asked.

"Look at this," the Thunderbird commanded, showing the blade's tang to Leon.

Not sure what he was supposed to look for, Leon examined the tang. He didn't see anything particularly noteworthy, save for a long, thin cut in the metal, as if a sliver of metal had been carved out of it.

"I don't think I'm seeing what you want me to see..." Leon said.

"This little scratch is where the Iron Needle used to be," the Thunderbird said, her tone light and breezy as if she wasn't talking about her old superweapon.

"You had a Universe Fragment in this sword?" Leon asked, his mind struggling to comprehend what that truly meant in the light of everything the Thunderbird had told him. If it was as cataclysmically powerful as the Thunderbird had claimed, then it was huge.

"I did," the Thunderbird confirmed.

Leon stood there for a moment lost in thought. The Thunderbird had told him a lot over the past few hours, and he would probably need a few days to properly process everything that had been revealed. However, one thing did occur to him.

"So, the Storm Diamond could control the weather... What did the Iron Needle do, specifically?"

"It was possessed of immense lightning powers," the Thunderbird explained. "The holy lightning that I created—and you inherited—was derived from the lightning I could conjure with the Iron Needle."

"How strong was the Needle's lightning? And how much of it could it summon?" Leon asked, his face going white and his heart skipping a beat.

"Our holy lightning can banish all illusions and free the mind from any shackles placed upon it, as well as make regular lightning magic look like a few harmless sparks!" the Thunderbird boasted, her face lit up with prideful enthusiasm and her arms raised to the heavens, conjuring more silver-blue lightning from the Mists of Chaos. "The Iron Needle's lightning, in addition to that darkness-banishing quality, was more than capable of vaporizing just about any material in an instant, with the only possible exception being Adamant metals. And it could bathe a plane in this lightning with little trouble, assuming you were able to properly control it."

"And this thing was in your sword?!" Leon cried out.

"It was," the Thunderbird said, her face smiling as Leon began to understand just how terrifying of a weapon the sword used to be. The sword itself, as it was now, was strong, but it wasn't nearly powerful enough to do what the Thunderbird claimed the Iron Needle was capable of.

"Where is it?!" Leon demanded to know.

"No clue," the Thunderbird said. "All I know is that Jason Keraunos had it when he was killed, though it proved insufficient for dealing with the local Planar Lord, and when the sword next showed up in your family's hands, the Needle seemed to be missing, as the sword had lost most of the power it displayed when in my hands."

Leon stumbled backward, not only at the realization of the missing superweapon but also due to the Thunderbird's nonchalant attitude about it.

"How do I find it?" Leon asked. "I can't just leave it be..."

"Is that question motivated out of worry for everyone around you, or just because you want it for yourself?" the Thunderbird asked with a knowing smile.

"Both," Leon honestly replied.

The Thunderbird laughed at his instant reply and said, "I appreciate your candor, but there's no need to be worried about the Iron Needle. Universe Fragments are... temperamental, and it's a rare breed of people who can wield them safely."

"I remember you saying that they choose their wielders somehow? Like, you had to impress them... Does that mean they had minds of their own?" Leon asked.

"In a way," the Thunderbird said. "As I told you before, they're not intelligent in the traditional sense, not in the way you and I are, but they do have some kind of alien will. If you hope to master a Universe Fragment, you must prove yourself worthy of it, as I did for both the Storm Diamond and the Iron Needle. If you do not, then it will destroy you. Regardless of how powerful you may believe yourself to be, you will always be lacking compared to a Universe Fragment."

"How did you do that? Impress the Storm Diamond and Iron Needle, I mean?" Leon asked.

"I passed their tests," the Thunderbird replied, smiling at Leon in such a way that he knew he wouldn't get any further specifics from her.

"Ok. Missing Iron Needle. How about the Storm Diamond?"

"It was placed in the clan's vault before King Jason led the clan to its doom. It's probably still in there, protected by the only material that can withstand Reconstitution: Adamant."

"You keep going on about this Adamant stuff, could you be more specific as to what it actually is?" Leon asked.

"Metals infused with mana. Sort of like mixing blood with melted steel, just much more complicated and with much higher grades of metals. Wouldn't make much sense to actually try to make something as weak and pedestrian as steel into an Adamant metal..."

"Anyway, Adamant metals are much tougher, harder, and magically stronger than the normal metals that they are made from, to the point of being practically invincible. The only time I saw Adamant weapons fail and break was during the war between the Gods and Devils when such weapons were matched with Universe Fragments and other Adamant weapons. Weapons made from Adamant metals are incredibly powerful, assuming they're being used by someone who shares blood with the person

who used their blood to make the metal in the first place. It's typically impossible to harm someone with an Adamant weapon they share blood with."

"How can I make Adamant metal?" Leon asked.

"Through a process called Skyforging," the Thunderbird said. When Leon stared at her in expectation, she said, "It would be useless to explain further, you have little knowledge in forging weapons."

"If I can create powerful weapons that no one else can use, except maybe any future kids I may have, then I will take the time to learn," Leon said with absolute seriousness. "What other capabilities does this sword have?"

"It will never betray you—no one else can wield it save for you since you are the last inheritor of my power," the Thunderbird explained. "It is like an extension of your own power, it will respond to your will. Whatever you need it to do—amplify your power, block the power of your enemies, return to your hand if you and it are ever separated—it will do so to the best of its abilities. You are its wielder and you and it share blood, so it aligns its will with yours."

"What happens if someone who doesn't share our power attempts to use it?" Leon asked, his eyes narrowing a bit in excitement.

"The blade would respond to their will with thunder and lightning, and the hapless wielder would likely be rendered ash upon the wind."

"Sounds like it could be useful..." Leon said, a vicious grin appearing upon his face at the possibilities. If he could trick someone into attempting to use it, then surely the blade would respond by killing them? So, if he were to get a more powerful mage to pick it up, one whose power was beyond his capability to fight, then would the sword kill that person for him?

"Less so than I think you're imagining," the Thunderbird stated, sending the cold rush of disappointment rushing down Leon's spine. "It's not intelligent enough for that, and it can only display the same strength as its wielder."

"But if it was made with *your* mana, then doesn't it store your power?"

"My power has long since dried within it, now it draws its power from you, its wielder, and as such can only really display power on your level. Of course, if you were to find the Iron Needle and replace it, then things might be different..."

"So you're saying if I find something else for it to draw power from, then it would?" Leon asked. "And if that thing were horrendously powerful, then the blade would be just as powerful?"

"Yes," the Thunderbird confirmed.

Leon couldn't keep the smile of anticipation off his lips. It was like he had a key to immense power and he just had to find the door it went to. Unfortunately, he had nothing that could really be used as the sword's power source, any gem he might try to charge with magic power and put into the blade would still only provide as much power to the sword as he did under normal circumstances.

'However... there may be other possibilities...' Leon thought as he looked around his soul realm. It stored all of his power, far more than the blood in his body was able to—at his power, about fifty or sixty

percent of the blood in his body was mana, while all the rest of the magic power his body produced was stored within his soul realm. It was carried from his lungs and his bone marrow to his heart, where the excess mana his body couldn't handle was stripped of magic power, rendering it normal blood, and stored in his soul realm.

It was possible for an object to tap into that power by inscribing his Mana Glyph upon said object, though it presented sizeable risks. It would open that object up to the power of his soul realm, but it would also open his soul realm up to whatever that object came into contact with. It could potentially allow anyone who came into contact with his sword to hit him where he was most vulnerable. In other words, every time someone touched his sword, possibly even those who only touch his sword with their own weapon, his soul realm itself could be at risk.

Of course, Leon only entertained that idea because of what the Thunderbird told him; that the blade was made of Adamant metal and channeled their shared power. If no one else could wield it, then it took away a significant risk of connecting the sword to his soul realm. However, the risks were still great, and Leon decided to shelve the idea for the time being.

There was still something else that could greatly benefit him in that area, though, something that the Adamant weapon apparently didn't need.

"How about enchantments?" Leon asked the Thunderbird. "What can you teach about those?"

"Patience, boy," the Thunderbird said with some amusement. "It's fine to take things slow for a few days. We'll get to it, but for now, we need to get back to training."

Much had been just explained to him, and Leon still had more questions, but he nodded and prepared himself for whatever would come next.

"Keep in mind your goal," the Thunderbird said as she began to telekinetically put the sword back together. "You are to achieve Apotheosis, return to the Nexus, and seize back what rightfully belongs to my clan! Find the Iron Needle and the Storm Diamond and kill all who oppose you! The clan is in your hands, boy, so train with everything you have!"

"I will!" Leon shouted, letting himself get swept up into the Thunderbird's pace despite cringing a bit when he saw Xaphan trying not to laugh to himself out of the corner of his eye.

"Good! Then come at me again and let me taste your power!" the Thunderbird roared.

Leon complied, charging at the Thunderbird as his body became enveloped in silver-blue lightning. At first, he tried to use his exceptional speed and strength to land some hits on the Thunderbird, but she effortlessly blocked and parried every strike. He then threw himself back to get some distance and fired off some lightning bolts, none of which had any noticeable effect on his ancestor.

It was a short clash, barely even five minutes, and the Thunderbird was completely unfazed. Her absolute immunity to his lightning didn't take Leon by surprise, but he was still in awe that she didn't even block his lightning bolts.

'Then let's try something else...' Leon thought to himself as his arms erupted with bright red-orange fire. He punched forward, putting all of his strength into this attack, and let a gout of flame rush out of him toward the Thunderbird.

The Thunderbird simply smiled and waved her hand, causing the fire to halt like it hit an invisible wall.

Leon stopped at this point. They weren't properly fighting, the Thunderbird just wanted to see his power. However, as he saw his fire die down, one more question came to him that he had to ask. It was one he'd asked before slightly differently, but now he wanted to be as specific as possible. He didn't want the Thunderbird to brush it off by saying that it didn't make sense.

Leon straightened his tongue, taking a moment to think of the straightest way he could say this so that the Thunderbird had to give him a straight answer.

Besides, the Thunderbird had indicated that their conversation was mostly over, so Leon didn't expect to get distracted by his own curiosity again. He needed a definitive answer from his ancestor to this question.

"Did I inherit anything from my mother, like I inherited your lightning from my father?"

Chapter 329: Mind Palace

"Did I inherit anything from my mother, like I inherited your lightning from my father?" Leon asked, any joy on his face from testing himself against the Thunderbird quickly fading away.

The Thunderbird's reply was immediate. "I don't believe so. I would doubt that your mother could even pass down any kind of power, especially since you have already my power. The chances of two inherited powers existing in one person are... remote, to say the least."

Leon stared back at her, his mind filled with recollections of his vision of black fire. He had *felt* that something had been there, that there had been something or someone just out of his reach. Needless to say, he didn't buy her answer.

"Are you sure that there's nothing there?" Leon asked in a skeptical tone.

"I'm quite certain of that," the Thunderbird replied, keeping her eyes fixed squarely on Leon.

Leon frowned, but he pushed no more. He had no solid evidence other than Xaphan's word that he had a high affinity for fire magic and that he felt like there was something that belonged to him just outside his reach. The latter wasn't an omnipresent feeling, and Leon hadn't even realized he felt that way until the vision he had after the fight with Lewis. His own skill in fire magic did help his case, but that could just be a quirk of his own body rather than something he inherited.

"Very well," Leon said, choosing to accept the Thunderbird's disappointing answer, at least for the time being. He wasn't entirely convinced, but he at least trusted the Thunderbird to not lie to him for no reason. His vague feeling that something was missing didn't go away, but if the Thunderbird said there was nothing there, then Leon figured it was probably best not to investigate it until he knew more about what he might be dealing with. "What's next?"

"You have your long-term goal, to reach the Nexus and reassert our clan's dominion over the element of lightning," the Thunderbird said with a tone of expectation, "Right now, your next step on that road is to construct your Mind Palace. Once you do so, you will ascend to the seventh-tier and all you'll have to do after that is expand your soul realm."

“How do I get started?” Leon asked. “I’m not exactly keen on spending all my coin on building materials...”

“That’s not necessary, you already have all the building materials you need!” the Thunderbird replied, waving her hands around the tiny island. After Leon gave her a blank stare, she explained, “The Mists of Chaos surround every soul realm. The mists are the building blocks of everything within, you simply need to take some and use it to add to this island.”

“Oh? Is that all I have to do?” Leon asked, having no earthly idea how to seize some of those mists a half-mile distant from the edge of the island, let alone how the stuff could be used to create physical objects and building materials.

“No need for sarcasm, it’s actually not that difficult,” the Thunderbird said. “The Mists of Chaos are a part of your soul realm, and here, you are Lord and Master. You need only will the mists to gather, and they will gather. You need only direct them to solidify into physical material and solidify the mist will.”

‘You make it sound so easy...’ Leon thought to himself, but there was nothing stopping him from giving it a try, so he closed his eyes and began to concentrate. In his mind’s eye, he imagined huge clouds of mist floating closer to the island, but after that, he didn’t really know what to do.

“The mist becomes matter,” the Thunderbird whispered into his ear. “Imagine the mist congealing, condensing into dirt and stone...”

Leon did so, picturing the mist gathering and compressing into grey stone and brown dirt on the edge of the island in front of the throne, almost like a tongue or a lip. He didn’t hear or feel the wind from swirling mist, and neither did he sense any change in the magic power in the surrounding air, so he doubted it was working. However, when he opened his eyes, he saw a small cloud of mist right where he had directed it, but his surprise was so profound that he lost concentration and the mist instantly dispersed back into the surrounding clouds.

“A good start,” the Thunderbird said. “Not bad for your first try. Let’s try again.”

Leon nodded, then once more closed his eyes. He didn’t really need to do so, but it helped him concentrate on what he wanted, and what he wanted was for the island to expand. That would take time, but time was a resource that he seemed to have in abundance.

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A week passed after Leon’s ascension to the sixth-tier. As Elise ascended to the fourth-tier at the same time, Leon spent just about every second he wasn’t in his soul realm—which honestly wasn’t that much as his focus during this week was on laying the groundwork for his Mind Palace—celebrating with Elise.

Alix even joined them for a couple of days, but with the advisory council’s recent focus on combating demonic and vampiric activity, she didn’t have much time to spare. For the most part, Minerva was keeping her busy with her own training and learning how to manage the labyrinthine Legion bureaucracy, the latter of which she had gained little to no experience in when she was squiring for Leon.

During this time, Trajan didn’t call upon Leon for anything. The Prince had enough on his plate managing August and Octavius’ now public rivalry and dealing with the newly uncovered vampiric threat, and since

Leon had a tendency to upset things wherever he went whether he intended to or not, Trajan simply ordered him to stay at Elise's estate to not complicate matters.

Leon was happy to comply, and he no longer visited the Royal Palace to check in with Trajan. After telling and encouraging Leon to stay home so many times only to have Leon continue to come to the Royal Palace to check in, Trajan finally outright ordered Leon to stay home until he was called for, even if he were to stay away for months.

And so, for a week, Leon concentrated almost all of his efforts on using the Mists of Chaos to expand the island in his soul realm so that he would have more land to build upon, as well as training with the Thunderbird in the arts of magic. When that week was over and he took a step back to survey all that he had accomplished, he found his island had increased to about a quarter of a mile in diameter. His soul realm had also expanded a bit, pushing the edge of the Mists of Chaos back by an additional several hundred feet.

"Good, plenty of space to work with," Xaphan observed as he joined Leon in looking around at the small plain of bare dirt and stone that surrounded him. "Do you have any plans in mind for what to do with this space?"

"I've got a few," Leon said with a wide smile. "Do you remember that spell you used to use the Mists of Chaos to recover some of your power?"

"You want to build a more permanent version of that?" Xaphan asked, his own smile obvious from his tone.

As Leon nodded in confirmation, he said, "If it was capable of boosting you three whole tiers, then I wonder what it might be able to do for me..."

"Don't forget that I was *recovering* my own power," Xaphan warned. "It isn't as efficient when you're making that journey the first time..."

"Would it help me gain enough power to expand my soul realm?" Leon inquired.

"Without a doubt, though it might require some tinkering as you don't use fire as much as I do," Xaphan answered.

"I still want to build something like that."

"Very well..."

With that, Xaphan used his connection with Leon to send him the relevant information regarding that enchantment. It was an incredibly complex enchantment and its image alone gave Leon a momentary migraine.

"Ugh..." Leon moaned as he stumbled backward.

"Don't be such a baby..." Xaphan chided.

After the pain disappeared, Leon straightened up and said, "While we're on the topic of you teaching me stuff, why don't you fulfill your bargain to teach me that mental communication technique?"

With a sigh as if Leon had asked him to hold up the sky, the demon said, “Fiiine.”

“From the guy you just called a baby, you’re being childish...” Leon replied.

“Yes, that was the point,” Xaphan said. “I’m glad my partner is intelligent enough to pick up on it. I almost thought it would fly right over your head.”

“So you’re not trying to get out of a promise like a whiny brat?”

“My word is my bond, boy.”

Despite what both were saying, neither of their tones were in any way hostile. In fact, they were both having quite a bit of fun poking at each other like this, but they both went silent as the Thunderbird came flying out of the mists in the distance. She came flying in without the lightning and thunder that had usually accompanied her, and when she set down at the top of the marble stairs, she did so with extreme gentleness and care.

However, when she looked around at the land that Leon had created, she said, “Are you going to stop here? Is this tiny island enough space for you to begin construction of your Mind Palace?”

“It’s enough to get started, there’s some things I need to build first before I continue,” Leon testily replied. She may have been his ancestor and the source of the power he inherited, and he did respect her for that, but he wasn’t going to take such a dismissive tone lying down. “Although I think I’m definitely going to need a lot more land later, I’m taking a break from that, at least for now.”

“No need to get touchy, kid,” the Thunderbird replied. “I’m not disappointed, but I was hoping for more. Personally, I would recommend building more land before you begin, just so that you have it when you need it.”

“Is there anything in particular I need to do from this point?” Leon asked just to be sure, but he knew that there wasn’t. “Got any training for me to do right now?”

“No,” the Thunderbird confirmed.

“Good, then I’ve just been given an enchantment to utilize all this mist around us, and I intend to build it!”

“Enchantment?” the Thunderbird asked, suddenly glaring at Xaphan. “Of what does my descendent speak?”

Hearing the Thunderbird’s tone turn dangerous, Leon froze in the middle of walking out into the middle of the plain, and Xaphan’s flames flickered in fear.

“... This...” Xaphan muttered as the enchantment appeared on the ground around him.

It took but a moment for the Thunderbird to survey it in its entirety, and she immediately said, “You won’t get much use out of that, Leon, build something else instead.”

Leon cocked an eyebrow in confusion and said, “But I can get *some* use out of it, though?”

“Wait until you’re stronger. As you are now, it would be incredibly dangerous for you to attempt to use the Mists of Chaos in your training. Focus on your actual Mind Palace, not on this enchantment.”

Leon frowned in disappointment, knowing how quickly the enchantment boosted Xaphan's power and that it might be used on him to similar effect had truly excited him. But, in this matter, he deferred to the Thunderbird and set aside his plans for a permanent version of that enchantment.

"You know, I could still use it if you build it..." Xaphan mentioned, eliciting a sharp glare from the Thunderbird.

"My descendant has just completed his magic body and begun construction of his Mind Palace, but you want him to pause in that most critical of endeavors to cater to you?!"

Once more, the weight of the Thunderbird's wrathful aura caused Xaphan's face to hit the ground.

"Your descendant also has a name!" Leon said, not bothering too much that his demonic partner was eating dirt; he could sense that Xaphan wasn't being seriously injured, just seriously humiliated.

"I'm fully aware of your name!" the Thunderbird replied.

"Then use it!"

"You're hardly in a position to be ordering *me* around!"

Leon glared at the Thunderbird, but he didn't continue that particular topic. Instead, he looked around the island again, with everything he'd stored within just sitting on the ground. He'd organized everything a bit so that it wasn't strewn all over around his throne, but he still didn't have anywhere to put it.

"I'll build a vault first," Leon finally said after a few long moments of silent contemplation.

"Good choice," the Thunderbird said as she clicked her beak in appreciation. "That's the same choice your father made, back when he first completed his magic body."

"Oh? I thought you didn't watch us puny mages," Leon said.

"I have little interest in watching your daily lives, but when I only have two descendants left, then I tend to notice things like magical ascension! And now that I'm down to one, I'll be paying much closer attention, so watch yourself, boy!"

Leon twitched a little at the Thunderbird's refusal to say his name, but once again, he didn't pursue it, he just filed it away for later if he ever got the opportunity to throw it back in the Thunderbird's face.

"What was his soul realm like? My father's, I mean," Leon asked as he turned his gaze around at his island again, thinking about what he could do with all that space.

"Artorias built a magnificent palace, one befitting a man of his rank and ambition," the Thunderbird said.

"Ambition?" Leon inquired.

"Indeed, he may have seemed quite humble and content to you when you were living in that forest, but I could tell how much he wanted to find your mother and gain vengeance for everything that happened afterward. You remind me of him, actually, keeping things calm and collected outside, but within you're a raging maelstrom of hate and anger, just ready to explode at the appropriate time..."

"You know me so well, don't you?" Leon dismissively muttered.

He was done with that conversation. He had no interest in being analyzed by the Thunderbird.

However, just as he was turning away to begin working on his storage solution, he turned back to the Thunderbird and asked, “Why did you never present yourself to my father? Really, why not?”

The Thunderbird looked around Leon’s soul realm for almost half a minute, looking everywhere but into Leon’s eyes.

“That... that was a mistake. I’ll admit it, I should have shown myself much sooner than I have. But I didn’t, and now all I have left is you.”

“We could’ve used you...” Leon stated, his tone both mournfully resigned and accusatory.

“I know...” the Thunderbird said with genuine remorse. “As the progenitor of your Bloodline, your direct ancestor, and as the King of the Heavens, I’m sorry.”

The Thunderbird said no more, pausing only to glance at Leon one last time before taking off and vanishing into the mists.

Chapter 330: Subjugating Vampires

Roland sighed as he wiped the blood from his sword, his eyes not straying from the young woman at his feet that he’d just killed. Her skin was deathly pale, her canines sharpened to fangs, and while she had been alive, her aura had been polluted by demonic power.

She had been a vampire.

He, a number of his own knights, and a few knights from Trajan’s retinue had been sent out to wipe out a vampire nest that had been discovered about a week before, but they had run into a small party of vampires that attacked them on the road.

One of Trajan’s loaned knights, a man named Adalgrim, who had been attacked and nearly killed by the vampire Lewis in the same battle that had cost Leon his left arm, swore and asked no one in particular, “Where are all these things coming from?”

Roland couldn’t help but silently ask the same question. After the incident with Lewis and the advisory council’s subsequent focus on vampires and other sources of demonic activity, it had seemed like vampires were coming out of the woodwork. There had only been five vampiric incidents prior to Lewis’ attack, but after it, there had been more than a dozen. Roland had been informed of the claim that it was one demon behind all of this—he didn’t know the claim was from Leon—and he was starting to believe it. To him, it felt like they had kicked an anthill, and now all the ants were coming out to defend themselves.

The vampires were being killed fairly quickly by Legion forces, but there hadn’t been a single vampire above the fifth-tier that showed itself. Even the dozen vampires that attacked Roland’s party had been sub-fifth-tier, and with a sixth-tier Paladin and numerous fifth-tier knights, the vampires had fallen in short order.

“Everyone all right?” Roland shouted to his twenty-strong force. His eyes finally separated from the young woman that he’d killed and swept over his people, looking for any sign of injury. Roland had focused on techniques to help in battle, but as a light mage, he had some skill in healing magic.

Fortunately, it seemed both squads following him were fine.

"We must be getting close," Grim said. "This must be a sizable nest, though, if it can send out half a dozen vampires to slow us down..."

Roland agreed, not that he'd argue with Grim in this matter. Roland was a Paladin, but he knew he got that title because he was friends with Prince August. Grim was a knight in the service of Prince Trajan, and one of the most knowledgeable experts on the subject of monsters that Roland had ever met. The Paladin felt no resentment in the slightest about deferring to Grim on this matter at all.

This particular nest they were traveling to had been identified by a ritual performed by the Legions in the capital and pointed them to a nest about a hundred and fifty miles north of the city. From what Roland understood, it was mostly just a ritual that could find missing things, and when combined with a demonic core, it could point to the closest instance of that power. It could only identify certain amounts of that power, though, and the ritual would struggle to find even a single vampire unless it was quite close. A sizable nest within three hundred miles of the ritual, however, was fairly easy to discover.

It was deep in the wild forests of the Central Territories, at least twenty miles from the closest human settlement of any note. A strange place to build a nest given how far away the vampires would be from food, but it made them quite safe from discovery. It also cued the Legion into realizing that there were probably powerful vampires there since they'd have to carry their food such a long way home.

The vampires could, of course, have some kind of transportation for their food, but the threat of powerful vampires was deemed too costly a wager to gamble the operation on, and so a Paladin was sent to eradicate the nest. However, since the Brimstone Paladin was already out destroying another nest, Sapphire and Earthshaker refused to leave Octavius' side, and Penitent and Bronze likewise didn't leave the King, Roland, the weakest of the Paladins, was all that could be sent.

'At least Prince Trajan sent some help with me...' Roland thought to himself as the squad got moving again. Roland's own retinue wasn't that powerful compared to those of the other Paladins', with only a handful of fifth-tier knights under his command. Most of the knights that Trajan sent with him, though, were fifth-tier, along with Grim and several others who Trajan held in high esteem for their abilities to combat vampires and other such monsters.

These were fast knights, fast enough that before too much longer, they began to approach their goal. They didn't need to stop once, because as they approached, Grim was able to sense the incredibly powerful demonic power and lead them closer than the Legion maps in the capital were able to.

The vampire nest was a cave dug into the side of a short hill, surrounded by forest. It was largely invisible to anyone who wasn't looking for it, even though it was so far from any human civilization.

"This is it?" Roland asked. He had little experience dealing with demons and their worshippers, so he couldn't properly identify demonic power.

"This is it," Grim confirmed, and the other experts nodded their agreement.

"This place is *covered* in demonic power," one of them added as he wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Very well," Roland said. "Stay on your guard, they obviously know we're coming, otherwise they wouldn't have sent those weaker vamps out to ambush us."

The knights nodded. None of them were below the fourth-tier, and they had all done this sort of thing before. None of them lowered their guard even for a moment, not even before Roland and Grim confirmed their location.

“Let’s go,” Roland said, and the party advanced into the cave. There was a door just deep enough inside to not be obvious from the outside, but it barely even slowed Roland down; he swung his sword twice, extending it with golden light and cutting the doors from the walls, sending them crashing to the floor.

The knights advanced, their footsteps light and their heavy armor making little noise. All of them that were capable of it projected their magic senses. They sensed nothing out of the ordinary and continued onward, though they maintained their professionalism, and none dropped their guard.

The lack of traps and defensive enchantments was a little disturbing, but all were grateful for it. There wasn’t even so much as a single flare or fire mine, despite the air becoming choked with fire magic.

They moved on, eventually finding another small door. This proved about as much an obstacle as the first set of doors, though, and Roland sliced through it like a knife through warm butter. The knights then poured into the room beyond, quickly securing it.

It was just an entry hall, devoid of anything of note. It did branch off with three more doors, though.

With a few quick hand gestures, Roland assigned the five knights from his squad and five from Trajan’s squad to follow him while the remaining ten knights secured the entry hall. Then, he picked a direction and began moving through the cave system.

It wasn’t extensive, a fact that Roland quickly realized after moving through a barracks room, a kitchen—which had a dedicated ice room with dozens of jars of blood—a long living space, bathrooms, a few small recreation spaces, and a separated living space for whoever was the top vampire around. There was enough space and enough amenities for about twenty people to live quite comfortably. The rooms were laid out like a grid, and eventually, Roland made his way through the entire cave system save for a few rooms at the end which were at the end of another long hallway.

Roland grabbed five more knights and made his way to this hallway. Everyone was on edge; they were in the middle of a vampire nest and they had yet to encounter a single living soul within, let alone a vampire. They all came to the unspoken realization that if there were any vampires within the caves, then they would be within these last few rooms. However, Roland and the knights hadn’t been careful when they moved through the caves, so there was no need to be slow and gentle.

Wasting no more time, Roland burst through the door at the end of the hallway, and the knights spilled into the room beyond.

Again, they found no living person. Instead, what they found was a long round chamber with terraced seats sinking into the ground. There were enough seats for about a hundred people, and at the center of the chamber, at the bottom of the seats, was what Roland could only assume was a sacrificial altar. The stone below the altar was blackened like many fires had burned upon it, and the altar itself was wide and long enough for a person to lay upon it. It had grooves carved into its surface that led back into a deep ‘bowl’ on one side of the altar, which had been stained brown with dried blood.

There were no more rooms to find. The caves were empty. No vampires, no corpses, nothing for the knights to find.

"Where in the hells are they?" one knight couldn't help but ask aloud.

"If you heard that two squads of the Kingdom's finest were about to break down your door, would you stick around?" Grim asked. Vampires rarely stuck around if their cover was blown in his experience.

"Whatever, they're not here," Roland said. "Secure the caves just in case they come back and look for any information we can use."

The knights followed his order, scouring the caves for any scrap of information they might be able to find. In the end, though, Roland only found two things of note.

The first was that the rooms hadn't been cleared out as if the vampires moved, and neither were they messy enough to look like the vamps had left in a hurry. The second was a set of long, thin tracks just outside the cave mouth that looked suspiciously like the wheels on a cheap, unenchanted carriage.

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"This is absolute bullshit," a young, inhumanely pale man said as he stared out through the crack in the curtains covering the window of the cheap, unenchanted carriage he was riding in.

"Bullshit it may be," the middle-aged woman sitting across from him said, neither of them thinking twice about using a curse word that insulted the entire Bull Kingdom, "but when our Lord says to do something, then we have little choice."

"We make sacrifices to him for his power, a fair exchange, we're not his slaves!" the young man complained.

"So you don't want the power he promised?" the woman asked as she raised an eyebrow in amusement.

"Of course I do, I just don't like cleaning up after other people's messes," the man replied.

The woman was the sire of the nest Roland was attempting to subdue. The demon she and her nest sacrificed to would send his power to her, and then she, in turn, passed that power onto those she recruited, turning them into vampires as well. The man across from her was one such 'lesser' vampire, a sixth-tier mage that she turned about a decade ago.

"I'll admit that this is a little strange, though," the woman said as she, too, peered outside through the curtains. "I've never had to find and kill someone for our Lord..."

"Lewis never failed to kill someone before," the man retorted. "I guess the old man finally went off the deep end if he managed to get himself killed by such a young cub..."

Outside, the carriage was being pulled through the streets by a pair of small, somewhat sickly-looking horses. Around them were about a dozen others on foot, armed with shortswords and dressed in thick clothes to act as armor and to hide some of their more obviously vampiric traits, like how thin and pale they were. If they didn't open their mouths and reveal their fangs, then few would be able to tell at a glance that they weren't entirely human.

Around them, the people of the capital went about their daily lives, parting for the carriage and its escorts as they did for all the other vehicles that passed by, forgetting about it as soon as it left their sight.

“Whomever this ‘Leon Ursus’ is, I can’t help but pity him for killing Lewis and arousing our Lord’s anger,” the young man said as he closed his curtain.

“Indeed, I’d wager this means a great deal to him,” the woman replied. “He didn’t say it outright when he spoke to me, but he did imply that this is such an important matter that he sent others within this Kingdom after this boy in addition to us...”